



KNOT THEIR TOY PART TWO

AJ MERLIN

WICKED GIRL

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*Y*ou might as well just go back to the empty dorm for the last week of your break.

The words echo in my head, ping-ponging around wildly until some of them lose their meaning and the others get louder and more persistent. They've been here, in my head, since the fight I had with my mother this morning before I'd gotten myself a ride to the airport and flown back to Winter Grove with all the dignity I could muster. At the same time, I've been trying not to cry.

I'm past letting my mom make me cry because she doesn't like my choices. Is it *my* fault she thinks I should give up my Winter Grove dream? No. Is it *my* fault she thinks I should settle for a pack closer to home, instead of chasing after boys that will—in her words—only hurt me?

No. But that thought stings and is way too close to what I've thought of in the hours before morning has truly started. When I'm lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling, and my phone is silent from the group chat messages the boys still send semi-frequently, it's easy to think of all the possibilities I'll come back to.

The most likely, of course, is that Dorian's pack doesn't care anymore. That they were only interested when I was present and when it was fun to bother me. Now that I'm not afraid of them so much and I might possibly like them...

Will they have any time for me anymore? Or will they just be bored and find another omega girl who isn't as middle-

class, or one who knows what she wants from a pack?

Maybe they'll find someone who fits in better than I ever could.

The bus I'm on slows, dragging my attention from my own dark thoughts as my eyes open so I can look outside. We're in front of the campus center, in the loop for buses and cars, and even though I've been seeing the increase of snow since I landed in Syracuse, New York, this is just wild to me.

There has to be four feet of it on the ground. In Chicago, we'd probably die if the ground ever looked like this. Sure, it's cold in the windy city. And we definitely can get snow dropped on us.

But not quite like this.

I file off the bus with the two other passengers, shouldering my backpack and going to where the luggage compartment is being cracked open to wait for my duffel bag. I'm sure my face is just as neutral as always. Not quite resting bitch face, but close enough that I definitely don't look friendly.

Not that I want to look friendly. It's too fucking *cold* to be talkative. My boots seem to sink into the snow as I stand on what I think might be the sidewalk, watching for my black duffel bag with the cat-shaped tags hanging off of the straps to emerge from the darkness so I can get them and go. At the same time, I listen to the chatter around me, most of the voices are unfamiliar, while I wonder if the snow is done for the day or the week.

Finally, I see my bag. As it's tossed into the snow, I walk forward to grip the straps in my hand, throwing it over my shoulder as I turn toward my dorm.

There are very few footsteps in the snow along the sidewalk, but I do my best to follow them. Hopefully, the path stays true to the walkway, instead of ending up in the road, because I'd rather not topple into the street and risk being covered by snow there. That sounds like a shitty way to die,

honestly, and I like to think that my day's been bad enough that I don't need that kind of crap today.

Technically, the dorm is only open for international students who couldn't leave or needed to come back by a certain time. Thankfully, however, they'd agreed to open it up to me as well. Probably because I got shot on school grounds last semester and they feel bad about it, but who can say? I'm definitely due some allowances, and I'm glad for this one.

There wasn't any possibility of me staying home with my mom.

And I'd much rather be alone in my now-empty dorm, than back with her and the comments she makes in the name of 'helping' me. Her words, not mine, since I'm pretty sure being shitty to your kid who's worked her ass off to get into the best college in the world isn't helpful.

I pass the library slowly, now safely on level ground instead of having to worry about the different heights of road and sidewalk. This deep into campus, the courtyard is flat except for the large, square planters that just barely make a stand above the snow. In theory, there are benches between them, but they're so buried under snow that I can't see them.

Another thing I'm grateful for are the footprints. It seems that the library is a popular place to be, even with there being no classes and the dorms mostly closed. The snow has been shoveled into large drifts here, and when I stare at one I can't help but think if I were ever going to murder someone, putting their body into one of these while I made my escape would be the best course of action.

After all, according to what I've read, the snow here doesn't melt until March, at the earliest. That's plenty of time to relocate, get a new ID, get a job—

“—cy?”

The muffled, barely-a-word doesn't make it to my brain the first time. Or if it does, I just discard it. I'm too caught up auto-piloting toward my dorm. Too busy in my stormy

thoughts to even bother with the fact that maybe someone wants something or just to talk.

My zombie-like trance is broken, however, when my duffel bag is grabbed, yanking me to a stop quickly enough that I nearly fall on the slick, packed snow under me. I yelp, arms wheeling as my backpack drags me off balance as well, but manage ultimately not to go down.

It's a victory, no matter how small.

"Why are you..." The words die in my throat as I turn around, eyes widening slightly as I look at the person behind me who'd grabbed my bag.

Though, in retrospect, I should've realized it was Foster. Nearly killing me in a death by slipping on snow accident definitely seems like something he'd be into, but the concern in his eyes is... confusing, to say the least.

"Foster?" I blink at him, surprised more than anything. "What are you doing here?"

His brows shoot up in surprise. "Me?" he retorts, a hand going to his chest. "What am *I* doing here?"

"Yeah, that's definitely what I just asked."

"I'm using the library."

"Are you back in your dorm?"

"Of course not. The dorms are shut down unless you're an international student."

"Or... a displaced scholarship student who just had a fight with her mom and needed to get away," I add, my voice wilting and soft as I look away from him. "It's really nice of them to make an exception, huh?"

If I wasn't sure that it couldn't be true, I'd swear he looks... worried. Sympathetic, at the very least, though he's problematic enough that I don't think sympathy is on the table for Foster.

"You fought with your mom?"

“Yeah.” It’s so cold here I could probably die. Especially when the sun goes down, and I’d like to get back to my dorm and my blankets and my *heater* before that happens. Thankfully, the one still-open dining hall isn’t too far from my dorm, and even though it’s not connected to my building with a tunnel, I’m willing to brave it and stock up on enough food for the night.

“About what?”

About you. And me. And here. I don’t want to tell him why. He doesn’t need to know, but more than that, I don’t want him to change his opinion of me.

And maybe I don’t want him to know how I feel about his pack.

So instead, I shrug my shoulder, forcing a smirk to my lips. “About me getting an A minus last semester. It’s quite a problem for someone with my intelligence, you understand.”

He looks me over, his eyes searching my face and looking for something that I try not to give him. “It’s going to snow again,” he says finally, reaching out and tugging on my duffel bag. “It’s going to snow all week.”

“It’s winter,” I agree, letting him take it with a little bit of surprise that I don’t show on my face. “I could definitely assume it would snow.”

He rolls his eyes in that very Foster way of his and turns to walk the other way with my duffel bag.

The only problem is, he’s going the wrong way.

This isn’t the way toward my dorm at all.

“Uh...” My stomach twists, plummets, and I take long strides to keep up with him. “Foster? My dorm is—”

“Probably not that warm, if I have to guess. Sure, they turn the heat on, but it’s not great. And the food during break sucks. Especially winter break. They’re letting you know they don’t *love* that you’re here. Why would you want to stay on campus?” He shakes his head, still marching in the direction of

the parking lot behind the library so determinedly that all I can do is follow him.

“Cool, well, literally most of my spare money went to changing my flight back here. I don’t exactly have the money to stay in a hotel for a week or whatever.”

“Pretty sure I never suggested that.”

Pretty sure he makes me want to punch him.

A sleek grey car sits in a close spot behind the library, and he stops beside it to fish out his keys from his fancy grey wool coat. I wait, my insides twisting with anxiety, until finally he unlocks the car, pops the trunk, and chucks my duffel bag in like a sack of potatoes.

“You want to keep your backpack with you on the seat?” he asks, sparing me a look. “Or do you want it in the trunk?”

“I want it somewhere I can *sleep*,” I reply crisply. My heart pounds. *What is going on?* Not only that, I’m surprised to see him here in Winter Grove. Does he not have somewhere else, some fancy mansion, that he lives in?

“Sleep in the car, but it isn’t that far of a drive.” His smile is wolfish. It’s cocky, and I let out a breath at him.

“Is this a trick?” I ask, unmoving. The sky is starting to darken, and I’m terrified it’s going to snow again. “Because, like, it feels as if you’re going to trick me. And it’s really cold, so I don’t want to end up somewhere, umm... bad.” I can’t help the flat way the word comes out.

“Can’t be worse than where you just came from though, can it?” he asks lightly, sliding into the driver’s seat and starting the engine. “While you stand there and pretend like you aren’t getting in the car, I’m going to warm it up for you and get the heated seats going,” he tells me sweetly, a mocking smile twisting his lips.

“Feels like you’re kidnapping me.”

“I might be. Are you into that? That’s definitely a kink I’m willing to explore with you, and there might be handcuffs in the back seat.” He says it just so... frankly. Like he’s not

afraid anyone is going to hear or that I'm going to run screaming.

It's definitely shock that makes me get into the passenger seat, sighing as my butt comes in contact with the heated seat he mentioned.

"There really are handcuffs in the backseat if you want the kidnapping to feel more legitimate," he says as I close the door and hold my backpack on my lap.

I crack my eyes open and stare at him, perplexed. "Why are there handcuffs in the back seat, exactly?" I can't help but ask.

Foster looks at me like I'm an idiot, and maybe I am. "Because I handcuffed August to the door and took a ride on his lap," he explains slowly, so I understand every word. Unfortunately, I can't decide if I believe him or if he's just making shit up to bother me.

How very *Foster* of him.

No matter what I'd said, I didn't mean to fall asleep in his car.

But it's just so easy to do, with the music on just loud enough for my hearing aids to pick up every few seconds and the heat wrapping around me like a blanket. Foster doesn't speak. He focuses on the drive, his thumbs tapping occasionally on the steering wheel as I peek at him intermittently.

Just in case he's going to suddenly swerve onto the interstate and kidnap me to somewhere far away. Not that I have any idea where. Or why he'd go to the trouble.

Needless to say, it isn't long before I doze off.

A hand touches my thigh, curling over my sweatpants gently as fingers dig into my skin enough to be felt but not hurt. I barely stir, my brain cocooned in sleep.

Lips brush my ear, moving like the person is saying something, but I definitely don't hear them when I'm so out of it. No hearing aid in the world would bring that sound to my brain, and I can't say I'm upset about it.

The hand on my thigh tightens, becoming almost painful as it drags up my body toward my stomach.

"We're here." It's a tragedy that I'm awake enough to hear Foster's voice in my ear at last, and I let out the most long-suffering sigh that I can manage. "That's dramatic of you, Mercy." He nips my ear lightly and I grimace.

“I’m sleeping.”

“Sleep inside. On a bed.”

“Where are we?”

He sighs and leans back, the clink of his seatbelt coming undone, a low sound in my ears. He moves to do the same to mine, and I barely move as the strap thumps against my chin.

I only scowl, refusing to give up my hold on sleep. “Fuck you,” I say, gathering all the energy in my bones for those two words.

“Since I’m the only one who hasn’t gotten to, I would love to take you up on that,” Foster assures me, the door opening and then closing behind him. But not before letting in a gust of cold air that brings me back to wakefulness faster than his hand on my thigh ever could.

Fuck Foster.

The passenger door opens quickly, and my eyes flick open so I can glare up at the beta before I slowly get to my feet, leaving the warmth of the car behind when I shoulder my backpack and close the door behind me. He already has my duffel bag, and gestures for me to follow him.

Finally, it hits me that we’re at a house. A one-story ranch, and Foster’s car is sitting in front of one of the garage doors, a second car to the left of his in front of the other in the wide driveway.

The house itself is painted dark green, and whatever landscaping that frames the walk leading up to the porch is buried under four feet of snow, invisible.

“You live here?” I ask, half surprised that the house is so... normal. Sure, I’ve never lived in something so new looking in my life, and since there’s a sprawling backyard and woods behind it, I have a feeling there’s more acreage on the house than my entire neighborhood back in Chicago.

But still. It’s not a multi-million dollar mansion with security guards and high-tech cameras, so I’m surprised.

“Sometimes,” Foster admits, pushing open the front door. “I lived here last year, when I wasn’t enrolled yet.” He moves to open the door for me, gesturing me inside. It’s nice of him, and so very *not*-Foster that I turn to give him a suspicious glance like he might slam the door on my hand or the floor is going to drop out from under me when he flips a switch on the wall.

Neither happens. Instead, he walks in behind me, closing the front door. “We live here on breaks, but since it’s forty-five minutes from campus and there’s a rule that all freshmen have to stay *on* campus for their first year, we all moved into a dorm.”

What must it be like to have a *house* outside of your dorm?

“Wow.” It’s all I can say as I walk through the living room, looking at the furniture that decorates it. The kitchen is next, and I barely peek down the hall before coming back to where Foster has dropped my bag on the living room floor. The place smells like the pack, all of their scents mixed together like their dorm, though the scent of Dorian seems older. Like he hasn’t been here in a while. “So, did you bring me here to show me how great you have it while I sleep in the shitty dorm?” I laugh, the sound maybe a little brittle. I can’t believe that he’s inviting me to *stay*, and it’s easier to set myself up for whatever else he has planned.

This is *Foster*, after all.

“Umm. No. I brought you here to stay.” He narrows his eyes, gazing at me like I’m stupid. “Why would I go out of my way just to show off, Mercy?”

“Because you’re Foster.”

“She absolutely has you there.” August’s voice is soft, and I don’t expect him to just walk up to me and run a hand up my spine to lightly grip my neck. “It really *would* be a Foster thing to do. But he’s not going to.” The alpha smiles at me, his scent assaulting my nose in the best way possible. I lean in without thinking, tilting my head up like I’m going to scent his throat before I drag myself back.

Down girl, I remind myself. Still, his hand is warm on my neck, and the look on Foster's face is priceless.

"You don't have to let me stay," I assure them, though I want to. "And it seems like something Dorian might take issue with. Even though I did take a bullet for him, and all."

"I hope you keep using that against him until the end of the year," Foster laughs, kicking off his shoes by the door and going to the kitchen. "And he already knows. He agreed. Enthusiastically." The emphasis isn't lost on me, but I still feel awkward.

We aren't besties. We aren't even that close, no matter that when I was home, I'd totally fantasized about all of them on more than one occasion.

"If you want to stay, you're more than welcome to," August adds, his voice softer than his beta's.

"Yeah, umm. If you're offering? I don't have a blanket, though. Or anything—"

Using the light grip on my neck, he leads me down the hallway, more politely than he needs to, but still *leading* me all the same. I should probably protest, but my breath catches in my throat and it's hard to think of anything but his fingers and how much I like them there.

"Here." He pushes open one of the doors, showing me a modestly sized bedroom.

I don't have to ask whose it is.

Not when Dorian's scent assaults my nose so thoroughly.

"Dorian's room?" I swear I'm not squeaking, but the surprise has my voice higher than I intend it to be. Clearly my throat, I roll my shoulders and try to remind myself that I have the best grades at Winter Grove, except for maybe August, and try to look important. Or at least unbothered. "Does he uh, know?"

"He offered." August leaves, his hand disappearing from my neck as I walk further into the room to look at the dark grey walls, large bed, and peek into the closet that's slightly

ajar. There are two huge windows on one wall covered by dark curtains that filter out most of the light, giving the room a dark, comfortable feeling that I instantly love.

When August comes back with my bag, I take it from him and throw it at the foot of the bed on the floor. “Is Dorian not here?” I ask, recalling the faded scent from most of the house except here.

“He’s with his dad on a trip. Every year his dad takes him and his mom to Europe, saying it’s a vacation. Really though, it’s just his father going over business details there. Dorian takes it as an opportunity to explore cities he’s never been to.” August goes to sit on the edge of the bed, watching as I pull out my laptop and charger to set them on the desk.

“And you guys don’t go?” I hope the question isn’t rude, but I’m surprised that they’re here without him. Packs are normally forever, and they definitely seem like they aren’t going anywhere without each other.

“We do, most of the time. But after the semester ended, Foster ended up getting the flu. He was pretty sick until last week, so I opted to stay here with him.”

I stop, looking at him, my eyes narrowed.

August, in turn, tilts his head to the side. “What?” he asks, a small smile on his face. It’s impossible not to just look at him for a moment, appreciating his dark curls, dark eyes, and the look on his face that feels a lot nicer than his packmates.

Well, most of the time. Though my mind drifts back to him holding me while Dorian had buckled a collar on my throat. And when he’d pinned me against a shelf in the library and threatened to do really great things to me.

With Dorian.

Blinking, I drag myself out of my thoughts to see August is still just sitting there, reminding me of a puppy, and I want to reach out and curl my fingers in his hair, drag him to me, and kiss him.

Instead, I yawn, covering my mouth at the last second as my eyes close automatically, jaws cracking wide.

“What time did you leave Chicago?” he asks, leaning back on his hands on the bed. His scent isn’t strong enough to break through Dorian’s in the alpha’s room, not that I’m surprised. August is the most mild-scented alpha I’ve ever met in my life.

“Umm...” I blink, thinking about it. “Maybe seven or so?” I sweep the rest of the morning under the rug in my mind. I don’t want to think about the argument from last night, or anything my mom chose to say to me this morning.

“Did it cost a lot to switch your flight to an earlier one?”

Yeah, that’s definitely one of the things I’m working to *not* think of.

I press my teeth together, a muscle in my jaw tight as I try not to grind in frustration. “Doesn’t matter.”

“They didn’t make you buy a whole new ticket, did they?”

“*Doesn’t matter*,” I grit out, turning to glare at him. Is it not obvious I don’t want to talk about it?

“Why’d you leave?”

The silence stretches between us until eventually, I move to sit beside him on the bed. Finally, I can scent him when I suck in a breath, only to let it out with a sigh. “My mom,” I admit. “Our relationship isn’t the best, but she got drunk two days ago for New Year’s and said some stuff I, uh, slightly disagreed with.”

“Like what?”

“Like, mind your own business, August.” I don’t mean to snap at him, but I’m just so tired and I don’t know what I’m going to do. My chest hurts, like someone has been sawing at my heart with a wire and I’m just now starting to feel the pain.

I don’t expect August to reach out once more, hand curling around the base of my throat. At this point, I’m willing to believe it’s his version of a hug.

“I don’t know you well enough to say the right thing to make you feel better,” he admits, thumb stroking over my pulse. Honestly, he’s doing a pretty good job of shoving my

problems to the back of my mind with just this, but I'm not going to tell him that. "Wish I did, because I so would." His smile is crooked, but there's no malice on his face.

It's such a different side of him than August the Bully that I really wish I was brave enough to just launch into him and pin him to the mattress like Foster would. But I just sit there, breathing in his scent, and wonder what he'd taste like with my mouth and tongue on his skin.

"It's okay," I dismiss, shaking my head to clear it. "She's always pretty shitty these days. Since you know. Winter Grove. Murders. Me being an omega. Your—" I swallow the last word, but August isn't stupid.

"My pack?" he guesses, his eyes shrewd. "Your mother doesn't like my pack."

"My mother doesn't like anything," I counter lamely. "And she thinks..." I suck in a breath, my heart pounding. I'm sure that my face is getting red with embarrassment and frustration, and the feeling burns in my cheeks. "She thinks that I'm just making you pay attention to me so I can give myself a sure-thing when I graduate. She says if I was just going to settle for the first pack to pay attention to me that I could've stayed home and saved her the trouble." There's bitterness in my voice, and God, I really hate admitting what she'd said to him.

Especially when it makes my eyes burn with frustrated and hurt tears.

I may not have the best relationship in the world with my mother, not by a long shot, but that doesn't mean I don't love her deep down. Still, things like this make me wonder what I'll do when I graduate.

And if I'll ever go back home to her once I have a real choice in the matter.

"Don't cry." There's a purr in August's voice, and he cups my jaw in his hand. That only makes me want to burst into tears even more, but I just look at him balefully, eyes wide to keep any from falling and giving me away.

“I’m not,” I assure him. “Foster would probably take pictures or record it so he can blackmail me with it later.” My voice is as steady as I can make it.

But I do feel like crying.

August snorts, his grip comforting, and I can’t help the yawn that breaks through my gritted teeth. “It’s Foster’s turn to cook,” he informs me, getting to his feet. “He’s making nachos. Are you okay with nachos?”

“Is anyone not okay with nachos? And if they aren’t, are they okay?” I ask, causing him to snort. “Hey umm.” I reach up and grip his wrist before he pulls away completely. “Thanks for letting me stay with you. If you need any help or want me to like, chip in for food or chores or—”

“Mercy.” He sighs, pulling his hand from my grasp, and rests it on my head. “We don’t need your money. And we’ll figure out everything else. It’s ten days before we move back in. You’re fine. Take a nap. You look exhausted.”

It’s so nice I want to throw up. He doesn’t let me say anything else, and just leaves me confused as he exits the room, the door still open.

I don’t think to close it. Instead, I just flop over onto Dorian’s bed, shoes chucked to the floor along with my hoodie, and drag the blankets over myself, up to my chin.

But I hadn’t thought of just how much it would smell like Dorian. My insides curl, and I press my legs together to try to stifle the pleasurable tingle that creeps between my thighs like fingers. Every time I inhale, however, that becomes harder and harder.

Especially since Dorian’s scent mixes with August’s perfectly, and it isn’t that difficult to imagine Foster’s in there as well.

If I end up burying my face in the pillow and inhaling before I fall asleep, I’m definitely never going to admit it under any circumstance. Not even for fear of Foster handcuffing me in his car.

3

I don't mean to sleep all the way through the night. Not when I'd thought to stay up and look over the emails already being sent by my professors for the semester. I'd wanted to read them, maybe do a little bit of studying just to refresh myself, and stare at my phone, pretending that my mom is going to text me with an apology.

Not that she is, of course. Since I left, she's been radio silent. It should bother me, but this isn't new. I know her tactics well by now, and this is one of her favorites. She thinks she can guilt me into an apology and into admitting that it's all my fault with no exception. Unfortunately, she's been right before.

But I'm physically so far away this time that I'd prefer she's *wrong* on this occasion. Maybe the distance will help, and the fact that I have three very poignant things to distract me.

Barefoot, while wearing my pj pants and a black tee, I walk out of Dorian's room to see August in the living room, a textbook open on the coffee table and his laptop there as well. He isn't using them, however. Rather, he's looking over a spread of cards, his eyes heavy-lidded and drowsy. His curls look tousled, and as I get nearer to him it's impossible to miss Foster's scent heavy in the surrounding air.

"Did Foster leave?" I ask, sitting down on the sofa. I still can't quite believe I'm staying here, and last night I'd come up with three compelling arguments about why I should leave. Though they were all to convince *me* instead of them.

“No,” August hums, flipping a card and placing it on another one. It occurs to me he’s playing clock solitaire and I lean forward, my eyes on the cards.

I’m pretty sure he’s losing.

“He’s asleep. Foster had a, uh.” A smile touches his lips and I really don’t need to be a psychic to know what he’s going to say.

“Long night?” I assume. August dips his head in agreement. “So you tired him out, but he didn’t tire you out?” Sinking down to the floor, I rest my elbows on the table, still transfixed while watching him play. I’ve never been good at solitaire. Memory has always been my preference. But watching August do this is almost mesmerizing.

Absently, I tuck my hair behind my ear, managing to catch my hearing aid on it and jerking it out of my ear before I can stop myself. It clatters to the table, August pausing as if he’s going to pick it up for me, but he stops himself before he can.

Feeling a touch embarrassed, I snatch it up and readjust it in my ear, sighing. “So I slept on this side of my face when I was on the plane. And I guess I kept rubbing against the seat or something,” I admit, frowning. “For some reason, it just doesn’t feel right today. I’ve tried bending it back and all. But it’s still just not quite there.” I shrug and smooth my finger over it again. Worst-case scenario, I’ll look for a new hook to go over my ear.

“Is that an earring hooked into your hearing aid?” August’s gaze is fixed on my ear, and I stare back at him before reaching up and flicking the small diamond charm.

“No. It’s a charm. They’re made especially for these, and they can’t come off. Plus, they don’t hang somewhere that bothers me.” I take my hearing aid back out, laying it in my hand so he can see. Meanwhile, I bend the hook that goes over my ear, trying to re-mold the plastic. “See? I have a few different ones, but I usually forget to change them.”

“I don’t remember those last semester.” He shrugs as I put it back in my ear. “That’s all.”

“You were probably too busy trying to make me feel like shit. Or threatening me. Or holding me captive while Dorian *accosted me*,” I point out dryly, and August rolls his eyes.

“Or fucking you,” he points out. “Or telling you how much I want to fuck you, *darling* omega.” He purrs on the last part, sending a shiver up my spine that I try to ignore. Not that I’m very successful, but I do keep my reaction off my face as I just look at him.

“You’re losing.”

“I lost about five moves ago.” He flicks his hand dismissively at the cards before gathering them up in his hands. “Do you want to play something?”

“I don’t know,” I scoff, sitting back and crossing my legs under me, elbows on the coffee table. Glancing up, I look at the television that’s on and playing some court show, though the sound is either muted or so low that I can’t hear a damn thing. “Last time I played a card game against you guys, I lost big time.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” There it is again. That soft, low tone that’s too close to a purr for comfort. “I don’t think it was so bad in the long run, do you?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“Besides, you picked the game Dorian is best at. That was a *you* problem.” He says it just so matter-of-factly, like it was destined for me to lose by picking memory.

“No one’s best game is *memory*,” I scoff in dismissal. “It’s barely even a game.”

“Isn’t it your favorite?” God, I hate that he knows just how to respond while still being so cool and collected.

“Well, yeah, but...” I shrug my shoulders. “I’m not like you.” Before he can remark on that, I add, “Can you teach me to play something I can beat Dorian at?”

“Probably.” He shuffles the cards between his hands, drawing them up in an arc and letting them fold back down loudly while they mix together. It’s a skill I’ve never learned,

but it sure is entertaining to watch. “Do you know how to play rummy?”

I squint, having to dig deep in the memory pit. “Yeah, I think so. That’s the uh... matching and playing off the other person’s hand game, right?” I’m pretty sure those are the terms, though I haven’t played since my dad died.

God, I miss my dad. Especially at times like this, when my mom is being an absolute bitch to me and I don’t know what to do to make it better.

“Yep.” August deals, giving both of us ten cards, before creating a stockpile and a discard. I stare at the ace on the pile, trying to remember if it’s high or low. “Do you need a refresher?”

“I can match when I have three of a kind or a run of a suite, right? Three cards minimum?” I look through my hand, noting two jacks and a four and five of diamonds.

“You’ve got it.” He trails his fingers over his own cards, thoughtfully. “You really want to learn how to beat Dorian, Mercy?”

That’s a strange question. But I nod anyway, giving him my full attention. “Yeah. Don’t think I’m weird, but I’d kind of love to rub his face in it if I can beat him.”

“Then you have to play me like him.”

I definitely don’t know what that means. I’m sure my confusion shows on my face, because August grins and sits back, leaning on one hand while his eyes dance in amusement. “Dorian doesn’t play without stakes. He loves them, because he feels like it brings something extra to the game. If you want to learn to beat him, you’re going to play me for stakes.”

“Are there collars involved?” I ask, heaving a sigh. “The one you gave me is in my duffel bag, by the way. So if that’s what you want—”

“Dorian’s the one who’s into pet play,” the dark-haired alpha dismisses easily. “Not me. Same idea though.”

It doesn't take a genius to figure out what he means, and my stomach twists in anticipation and maybe just a hint of fear. It isn't that I'm afraid of August, exactly...

But I'm kind of afraid of August, if I'm honest with myself. He's quiet and unreadable. Even his scent doesn't give much away, no matter how much I want to bury my face in his throat.

"Do I actually get something if I win this time?" I ask, leaning back as well. My hair tickles my arms, the mostly straight mass falling almost to the floor when I sit like this.

"Of course you do. It's good practice for playing against Dorian when you aren't desperate." He lays his hand down on the coffee table, his eyes on mine. "What would you like, Mercy darling?"

You, I don't say. Not because it isn't true. I want a lot of things from August, but I don't know what he likes or what he wants from me. I don't want to push my luck with him, or get him irritated with me. So I say the easy thing instead, "What do *you* want?"

His smile lets me know that he's most likely onto me, but he doesn't call me on it. "Your mouth on my cock. I wanted to watch a movie after this. I want you between my knees the whole time."

The *whole* time? That seems... long. And he can't possibly want me to blow him for an entire fucking movie.

"Okay," I reply, head tilted to the side. "If that's what you want."

"So then what do you want?" he urges, still watching me while his fingers stroke the edges of the playing cards. "Don't be shy, Mercy. Ask me for anything. Want me to cook your favorite meal? I can fuck Foster for you and keep his mouth shut or full. He's great when he can't insult you."

I can't help but snort at that.

"Yeah, you know what? That one. I would *love* to see you fuck Foster and make him shut up, because it doesn't seem possible."

“It’s possible,” August assures me, picking up his cards. “If you need clarification on anything, just let me know. I’ll help you without actually winning for you.”

“All right.” I stare at my cards again, and the discard pile. “This can’t be that hard. I mean, my dad and I used to play. It’s basically the same.”

August just chuckles and reaches into his hand, producing a straight of four clubs that he places on the coffee table closer to his side. “Yeah, Mercy,” he agrees. “Just like when you and your dad used to play.”

It is not like that at all.

August is cutthroat and brutal. His eyes glitter with joy when he throws down another match, or when he plays cards on ones I’ve done. It feels like I never catch up, or that he snatches up whatever I lay on the discard pile, until finally he lays his last card on the pile and I bury my face in my hands with a groan.

“Double or nothing?” he asks, swooping the discard pile and stock into his hands. “We could count these up, but...” He raises his brows, looking between my few stacks and his. “Do you really want me to?”

I shake my head, face still cradled in my hands.

“Want to go again? Like I said, double or nothing.”

“How very Dorian of you,” I mumble, the words muffled against my skin.

“Well, you’re trying to win against him, right? I’ll take that as a compliment. If you win, I’ll fuck Foster, gag him, *and* make whatever you want for dinner plus dessert.”

God, that sounds too good to be true. It’s easy to get lost in a daydream of slurping up the inside of lava cakes while watching August and Foster together with the latter gagged into oblivion.

But if that sounds too good, then I have a feeling he’ll want something just as great for himself.

“If I lose?” I prod, peeking at him from between my fingers.

“Sleep with me in my room tonight.”

“Are we actually going to be *sleeping*?”

His grin curls like the Cheshire cat’s, and he can’t help the satisfaction or intention on his features. “Probably eventually. And you still let me fuck your mouth while I watch my movie and do some work.”

It’s not like he’s offering up any bad options. And my body whole-heartedly agrees with that statement. I suck in a breath, then nod. August gathers up the rest of the cards, shuffles, and deals again.

Objectively, my hand is a lot better this time. I match, play off of him, and do generally better than I had the game before.

I’m getting the hang of this. To my eye, our scores are even, though conversation is mostly lost as I try to focus and not miss any move or card I should snatch up to prevent him from playing.

“Hey guys.” Foster’s voice is drowsy, his scent drifting into my nose as I gaze up at the shirtless beta. He looks tired, and his hair is tousled like August was pulling on it all night.

It’s a great look for him.

“Hello there,” August purrs, the words having the unintended effect of sending shivers down my spine. He snags Foster’s hand and drags him down, the latter kneeling until he can slot his mouth against August’s with a satisfied sigh.

That’s... really adorable. My heart twists, just a little, but I chase the envy away with a mental broom.

“What are you playing?” It’s August’s turn again when Foster asks, and he picks up a card from the discard pile.

Then he looks at me.

No. Oh no.

Oh dear God no.

“Don’t you dare,” I whisper, frantically looking over our cards again. I’m winning by a little bit, I think. But if there’s something impressive in his hand, then—

“Rummy,” August announces, laying down four kings and discarding his ace.

I slam my elbows down on the coffee table, cards rattling, and bury my face in them again. So much for double or nothing. I’ve never hated a card game so much in my life. It isn’t that I don’t want August to fuck me. Though, I’ve had enough experiences with him to think that it’ll be... interesting, to say the very least.

“You want to watch a movie with me?” August asks Foster as he whisks away the cards, flashing me a winning smile. “Mercy will be here too, but she’ll be kind of busy. I just need to do some reading for one of my math classes, but that shouldn’t take long.”

He’s really doing this *now*? Before I have a chance to pep talk myself into this?

Foster gives me a bemused look, then glances at the cards. I can see it when the pieces fall into place, and when he looks at me again, his mouth is pressed into an unimpressed line. “You bet him at rummy, didn’t you?”

“He’s teaching me to beat Dorian,” I reply with a sniff, scooching up onto the sofa behind me. “It’ll be great.”

“*If* you can,” Foster points out. “Though, rummy is the best game to do it. Dorian *hates* it. He’s crap at it, from what I’ve seen.”

“So I could probably beat him?” I ask, brows raised as I look up at August. The alpha walks over to me, stretches, and twines his fingers in my hair so I have to gaze up at him.

“Probably not yet,” he admits, and it’s the last thing I want to hear. “But you’re so smart. So good at learning new things. You’ll get the hang of it and kick his ass. I’m excited to see what you make him do.” He scratches his fingers against my scalp sweetly, then tugs. “I’m grabbing a water. You’re getting

on the floor when I come back.” He moves away, thankfully not noticing the way my breath catches in my throat.

But Foster notices.

He always notices.

“Poor Mercy,” he coos, sitting down beside me and wrapping an arm around me before I can move.

“Don’t ‘poor Mercy’ me,” I reply, glaring at him. “You wanna know what I was going to get if I won?”

“Something you like for dinner? I can’t imagine you asking for—”

“August fucking you with a gag in your mouth where I could watch. *And* a really great dinner. Plus dessert.” It’s a win in my book that he just stares at me, seemingly impressed, before looking away and giving a soft ‘*huh*’ like I’ve shocked him.

“I wouldn’t have any objections,” he admits, letting go of me. “So what did you lose? Dignity? Pride? Your clothes for the week? That would be what I’d bet you. I’d love to see you walking around with nothing on until school starts.”

August returns, setting three bottles of water on the coffee table and looking at us with interest. “Next time?” he asks, a smile on his face. “Or you could play her. You’re just as bad as Dorian is, so it might actually take you some effort to win.”

Foster scowls, leaning onto his knees as I stare at the tanned expanse of his back and try not to think about how much I want to lick him or lean over and scent his throat. “So what did you win, August? Please tell me it’s something better than dinner.”

“I won her mouth for the entire time we’re watching a movie.”

“I’ll find *The Shining*,” Foster offers instantly. “Or *Amityville Horror*.”

“Fuck you,” I snap, shoving him. It isn’t lost on me that he’s trying to find the longest movies possible. “You’re such a dick.”

He grins wolfishly at me. “Yeah, wish he would’ve put that in the terms.” He looks up at August, his eyes widening, and he suddenly looks so pathetic that the switch is unreal. “*Can you switch with me? Just for a little bit? Come on, August. I want her mouth for five minutes. Ten.*”

“Fifteen if you can refrain from your shitty commentary of *Oceans Eleven*,” August agrees. “I don’t need to hear your thoughts on it. It’s a good movie.”

“It’s an okay movie,” I reply, and Foster smiles approvingly.

“Well, you won’t get a chance to tell me your shitty thoughts,” August reminds me, gesturing for me to get on the floor. “And she has to sleep with me tonight.”

“She know what you’re into?” Foster asks, moving as I do, though a lot faster than me.

“It can’t be that big of a deal,” I say, without thinking about my words.

Foster just snorts, and seconds later, August is sitting on the couch in front of me, his thighs on either side of my upper body.

“We’ll talk about it,” he assures me, crooking his fingers in my direction as *Ocean’s Eleven* starts to play behind me. “I’ll tell you what to do,” he promises, jeans unbuttoned. “If you need to stop, just curl your hand into a fist and tap my thigh. I’ll stop, darling omega.” His voice drops to a purr, and finally my brain realizes that this is really actually happening.

My breath catches in my throat as I look at him, eyes fixed on his.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he chuckles, pulling his length free from his underwear. “You look like a deer in headlights. I’m not going to hurt you, Mercy. I’d never hurt you.”

Foster gives him a quick look, but I don’t have the extra brainpower to think about it.

“Lean into my lap, Mercy.” When I do, he reaches out to grip my hair, pulling me forward until my arms slide up his thighs, nearly to his waist.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know what he wants. I lick over his tip while he holds his cock, though it’s not long before he slides the head into my mouth, past my teeth, and lets out a soft sigh.

“It’s not a sprint, darling,” the alpha purrs, and when the sound is all for me, it does a lot towards heating up every part of me that matters. “It’s a marathon. Don’t get worked up.” With his hand in my hair he guides my head back, then forward, until he’s brushing the back of my throat. “Right there. So good for me. Tap my leg if this is comfortable enough for you to stay for a little while. If not, you can move to the sofa.”

I hesitate. How long is ‘a little while’? This isn’t what I had in mind, but I’m not exactly calling the shots here.

Tentatively, I tap his leg.

“Thank you, Mercy.” He picks up his iPad from the sofa beside him, prompting Foster to fall over, head on his thigh, and close his eyes with a sigh. “I’m reading through our math syllabus. I think you and I have the same class this semester for it. And bio again.” He lays the iPad on the arm of the sofa, one hand in my hair, allowing me to occasionally pull back before sliding back down his length again.

It’s... strange. That’s the only word I have for it, though it’s not *bad* strange. Part of me feels like I could start snoring, but it’s just so intimate to have his hand in my hair and his occasional comments about my mouth or how good I’m being that I can’t help but lazily enjoy it, and him.

It’s not long before he puts the iPad away, moving so he can rest his other hand in my hair. His now-free left hand finds Foster’s head, and the beta gives a soft murmur of approval as August runs his fingers through his hair. The alpha responds to him with a purr, drawing his hand down as much of his chest as he can reach.

“It’s not so bad, right?” he asks, drawing my attention up to him. I blink up at him and he lets me pull back, my eyebrows raised in surprise.

“I mean, it’s kind of weird,” I admit.

“Only because you’ve never done it before,” Foster murmurs from his spot on August’s lap. “It’s better when his cock is in your ass.”

“If anything, I’d want it in her cunt,” August replies. “But that wasn’t part of our deal.”

“I mean. It could be,” I reply, unable to get the idea of how that would feel out of my head. I’ve wanted August to fuck me for *weeks*. There’s no denying that. Why in the world would I pass up the opportunity when I can already feel how wet I am for him?

He stares at me, finally tugging Foster up. “You might not get to play with her after,” he warns, and the beta grins.

“Then I’ll play with her during. You’ll let me, right?” He switches his gaze to mine as I get to my feet at August’s urging.

“Depends on if you’re going to like, *hurt* me,” I reply.

Foster snorts, his eyes never leaving mine. “Do you really think I’d hurt you without your consent, Mercy?”

“Uh, depends. You’ve hurt me emotionally quite a bit. I’m not going to pretend I don’t think you’d do it again if you really wanted to.”

He rolls his eyes at me, unimpressed. “Yeah, whatever. Want me to apologize?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’m sorry.”

It’s unexpected, and while brief, it sounds surprisingly sincere. His eyes soften, and any retort I had on my lips just evaporates.

Am I even mad at him anymore? I don’t think I have been for a long time.

“Well... I might forgive you.” That’s the best I’m going to give him, and I say it with as much imperiousness as I can manage.

“Can I play with you now?”

“Yes, Foster.” Immediately he’s on his feet, and it occurs to me that August has paused his movie as he watches Foster yank me to him with a finger in the waistband of my shorts.

“You don’t really need these,” he says, pushing them down over my hips. When they fall, his eyes dip to my thighs, taking in my lack of underwear. “Oh,” is all he says, and I can’t help but be the one to smile.

“This is really what surprises you about me? That I don’t wear panties under my pjs?” He rolls his eyes at my words once more.

“You can keep your shirt until you warm up,” he says, like it’s the most gracious thing in the world.

“Why don’t you finger her?” August suggests lazily from his spot on the sofa, lightly running his hand up and down his hard length. “Make sure she’s ready for me.”

Foster’s grin is immediate. “Bet I don’t need to,” he growls, taking a step forward and flooding me with his scent. He tilts my head back, leaning forward to nip at my lips. “I bet she’s so wet you could just slide right in. I bet she’s a *slut* for your cock, August.”

My heart misses a beat as he says it, and my breath stutters in my throat.

“C’mon, Mercy. Let’s show him. I don’t even need to put my fingers in you. Not when I can smell it. You’re aching for it, aren’t you?” His words are certainly doing nothing to diminish the arousal that’s heating up my body, that’s for sure. He grabs me by my hoodie and turns me around so that I can see August leaning against the arm of the couch, lying lengthwise on it now instead of just sitting. He’s lost his shirt at some point in the last few minutes, not that I’m complaining, and my eyes fall to the gorgeous expanse of *him* on display.

When I'm in arm's reach, it's August's turn to grab my hoodie, pulling me forward until I'm on my hands and knees above him, leg shoved between him and the couch. With his head and shoulders on the arm of the sofa, he pulls me down against him until my upper body is flush with his.

"Same idea, darling," he sighs in my ear, his length brushing my slit. "You're just going to lie here and if I want to fuck you, I will. Otherwise, you're just letting me use your pretty cunt however I want."

I bury my face in his throat, half to hide my face at the words and half because I've wanted to scent him since I got here. I inhale, the smell of him heavenly in my nose and, as always, just so mild.

I'll never get over the scent of August, or any of them.

Slowly he moves, forcing me down his body until the tip of his cock parts my folds and I wiggle my hips for more. His hand on my thigh stops that, and at his urging, I move until I'm settled against him, his length sliding deep into my body.

"Foster was right," August groans in my ear, one hand up under the hoodie to press against my lower back and hold me still. The other is holding the remote, and he presses play once more. "You're such a slut for my cock, Mercy. And so ready for me without me having to open you up." His voice is just above a whisper against my ear, just loud enough for me to hear him without problems. When I try to move, the hand on my lower back stops me. "Ah, ah—that's not what we're doing, gorgeous."

"I thought you were going to fuck me," I reply, just the slightest bit frustrated. He's *right there*, literally inside me, so this is starting to feel like torture when he could just fuck me.

"I see we've never heard of cock warming, have we?" Foster snickers at my shoulder, draping himself over me.

Oh. Well, I have. But it's never something I've encountered in the wild. Foster's hand moves up my thigh, though he's wordless as the movie plays.

Not that I'm really watching. My face is still buried in August's neck, still scenting him, so I don't pay much attention except that Foster's hand on my thigh feels good.

His touch wanders, going between my thighs and tracing my slit that's spread around August's thick cock. It causes me to shudder, but it's not like I can really help it.

"Foster..." August warns, causing the beta to scoff.

"I can't help it if she tenses up, August."

"Well, just don't do anything to *make her*."

"Too late." The beta's hands come up to my hips, then my ass, and he spreads my thighs so that there's no way he can't see *everything*.

It makes me tense, causes me to squirm a little, though August's arm locked over my waist stops me from going too far.

"You can tell him if he's hurting you, or if you want us to stop," he tells me gently. "All right?"

"Yeah," I reply against his shoulder, eyes closing as I hyperfixate on what in the world Foster is doing.

"But you could also just relax," the beta replies mock-sweetly, his thumb finding my empty hole and brushing over it. I tense again, and he chuckles. "Yeah, I get it. You've never done this. Throw me a little trust, won't you? I'm not going to hurt you, Mercy. I think I know what I'm doing well enough to know how to help you enjoy it."

I'm not so sure, but I don't argue aside from a soft mutter of disagreement.

It's hard not to focus on August's cock in my pussy, but the feeling of the lube Foster drips against my hole makes me flinch and pay attention.

"Foster..." His thumb is back, and he hums a response to my unasked question.

"You're fine, Mercy," August assures me, his other hand coming up to massage my scalp. "He won't hurt you. And

you're doing so good for me. Such a sweet omega, letting me use your perfect cunt like this. *My sweet omega.*"

"Ours," Foster corrects, dipping his thumb into my hole before pulling back to grab my ass. He drags my hips back and forth, just slightly, and kneads into my flesh once more, almost like a massage. One of his hands leaves me, the other still holding me where I am and digging into my skin. Seconds later, I feel his finger against me, and my hand goes up to grip August's hair at the base of his skull.

"There you go," he praises. "You can absolutely hold on to me like that, Mercy." He turns to brush his lips against my ear, nipping lightly and drawing my attention to him just as Foster's finger sinks into me.

I gasp. I can't help it. Not when the sensation is so strange and, honestly, not unpleasant.

It's just new. And different. And even just his finger makes me feel full as it sinks in before he pulls nearly out and pushes it into me again.

"It'll feel so much better when it's my cock," Foster promises. "Not today. I'm so good at being patient. Especially when I want to fuck your ass so bad, Mercy. I'll take my time with you. I *love* taking my time." It almost sounds like a threat when he says it like that. "Just relax for me. *Ocean's Eleven* still has a good hour left." He says it with a snort, but I nearly sit up. I would, if August wasn't holding me right where I am.

"An *hour*?" I reply, unable to even glare at Foster. "You're not going to do this for *an hour*. Either of you."

"We aren't?" Foster sounds utterly amused. "Wasn't that the plan, August?"

The alpha chuckles. "Yeah, Mercy. Maybe you didn't get the memo, but..." He thrusts slowly up into me, torturing me. "That's definitely the plan."

It's impossible to do anything except focus on what they're each doing to me. I'm counting the minutes, and when my

mental timer hits about fifty, August suddenly shifts under me.

“I want to fill her up,” he says, and I stir, turning my head so I can peek up at him. This has definitely been some kind of torture, I’ve decided, and I don’t know how much more I can take before I just drop dead. “Want to finger her while I do?”

“Of course I do,” Foster replies with enthusiasm. *Taking his time* was an understatement. I don’t understand how anyone has this much patience. At all. His finger slides in and out of me easily now, and I’ve felt the brush of a second against my hole. “Think you can take two fingers for me, Mercy?”

“I’m not sure—”

“Yeah, I think you can too. It’s going to feel so good to come with him when I’ve got my fingers in your hole. Next time, it’s going to be my cock in your ass while August fucks your cunt. It’s going to feel *so good*.”

“What if it doesn’t fit?” It’s the question that’s been on my mind this whole time. The question that makes my heart thump uncomfortably in my chest.

Foster leans over, his body blanketing mine. “Oh, it’s going to fit,” he promises. “I’m going to teach you to take me so well. They can have your pretty cunt, Mercy. But your cute little hole here?” He presses his finger into me and curls it, prompting me to gasp. “This is mine.”

August doesn’t say anything in reply, but he does roll his hips into me, using his hand in my hair and the one against my lower back to pin me in place.

“Good girl,” he purrs in my ear. “Let me use you just like this. Such a perfect omega.”

“Gorgeous omega,” Foster echoes, both fingers pumping in and out of me. It’s nearly too much, and it burns just on the right side of painful. Though, it isn’t enough to make me want to stop.

I don’t think I could voice that, anyway. I’m so overstimulated, and I’m nearly crying with how much I need

to come. August's cock feels so good sliding in and out of my pussy, and whenever he buries himself deep, I lose my breath.

Foster is just edging it along as well. His hand kneading my ass encouraging me to rock against him, the fingers inside me scissoring and curling until they're a delicious compliment to August.

It's too much.

It's too much, and my fingers tighten once more, nails scraping against his neck.

"I'm gonna come," I whisper, and he laughs breathily.

"I know. And of course you are. I want you to, my perfect omega. You're going to come while I fill you up. And while Foster fingers your ass. It feels so good, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Say it again."

"Yes."

"Better than you thought it would." It isn't a question, and he's fucking into me roughly, though I still can't really move. "And it's going to be amazing when he can work his cock into you as well. You want that, don't you? Want both of us filling you up until you can't walk straight?"

"Fuck! Of course I do."

"Beg me to fill you up."

I don't even stop to think about it. His thrusts slow and pleas fall from my lips like rain. Some of the words are muffled in his throat, but as I keep going, he starts fucking into me even harder.

"*Fuck, August.*" Foster's just as breathless as me. "Look at how she takes you. So greedy. God, you just want so fucking much, don't you Mercy?" His fingers kneading my ass dig in, and I gasp. "Come for him. Come for us." His fingers slide in and out of me faster. "You're so hot. And you smell so fucking good."

“Come all over my cock like the perfect omega you are,” August growls, and that does it. I fall apart with a gasp, my cunt fluttering around his cock as my orgasm slams into me like a truck. Foster’s fingers somehow make it better, dragging out my release as August slams into me and growls his own release in my ear.

Seconds later, Foster’s fingers are gone. He leans over me, his length sliding up between my thighs, against my hole. “I’m not going to fuck your ass today,” he promises, inhaling against my throat, his body a hot line against my back. “You’re so hot. I want you *so badly*.” He growls, nipping at August’s jaw. “Just let me fuck her pussy, August. I’m so close from just watching. I want to fucking come in her too. Let me help you fill up her cunt.”

August chuckles, and the next thing I know I feel empty and I’m missing his length in my body.

It only lasts for a second. Foster growls, reaching up to grab my hair as he thrusts into me to the hilt, causing me to yelp.

“I’m stealing all your clothes,” he promises. “I want to see you so full of us you can’t walk without dripping.” He hammers into me, making me see stars, while August holds me still for him. “God, I’m going to come in your cunt. You’re so *tight*.” He suddenly lunges forward, his teeth finding the side of my neck as he buries himself into me and comes.

I cry out, my free hand snaking up to grip his hair, urging him onward. His mouth *burns* against my throat as he sucks a mark onto my pale skin, but I’m not going to stop him. Not when it makes me see stars and drags another, weaker orgasm out of me.

Finally Foster is done, and he collapses onto me, both of us resting on August, who only chuckles at our double sigh.

“Play another card game with her,” the beta mutters drowsily, leaning forward to nip at August’s jaw. “I want to fuck her again.”

Even though I didn't win, dinner is amazing. Especially after a day of doing nothing else except playing rummy, watching August print out syllabi that he offers me copies of for classes we share, and making surprisingly funny jokes with Foster.

Mostly about Dorian and August.

With a sigh, I sit back, staring up at the ceiling and the way the fan spins in lazy, dizzying circles. "I bet Christmas dinner here was way better than Christmas at my house," I remark unthinkingly. "I can't cook, and Mom goes crazy cooking lean meat and vegetables only."

"It was just the two of us," Foster comments. "In case you were expecting some big, multi-family thing."

I shake my head from side to side. "I wasn't. I just meant I bet the food was great. Next time we play cards, I'm betting that you teach me how to cook, August." I grin at the alpha, who finishes off a bottle of water.

"What about fucking and gagging Foster?" he asks, the scar on his lip pulling when he smirks.

"Can't you multitask?"

Foster snorts, nearly spitting out the mouthful of water he's drinking. "You can multitask enough to do that," he assures August. "And anyway, Mercy, I have a fix for your Christmas problem." He rests his elbows on the table and meets my eyes, expression surprisingly mild.

“Yeah? Is it to order a secret pizza? I tried that two years ago.”

“No, you idiot. Spend it with us.”

The suggestion rings in the sudden quiet. August doesn't bother to speak, though he does look my way with raised brows like he's in silent agreement with Foster.

But I just stare at the beta, perplexed.

“Err...” I blink. “You really think you'll still want me around in a year?”

This time it's August's turn to nearly spit his water, but he doesn't succeed as well as Foster and the table gets misted with droplets.

“That's hot,” Foster comments, eyeing him. “God, it's no wonder I knew I was in love with you the first time we met. He totally does that on a first date.”

August coughs again, glaring up at Foster as he mops up the water with his napkin. “Fuck off, Fos,” he growls, and the sound is enough of an alpha-sound that I would be apologizing if I had any sense of self preservation and it was directed at me.

But Foster just flips him off before turning back to me and running his fingers through his perma-tousled hair. “Mercy...” He trails off thoughtfully. “I don't know. Maybe this is a Dorian conversation.”

“Because you need his permission to invite me for Christmas dinner?” I joke, trying to make light of a situation that has my heart thumping and my fingers up at my ear, fiddling with the already loose curve.

“Because he's better at this than I am, and August is too polite. Besides, you're used to listening to him when he puts you on a leash. So, why mess with that?” He leans his chair back on its rear legs, prompting a glare from August.

I wonder if I should be offended by his words. Is he insulting me? It doesn't feel like it, but with Foster I never know.

“I’ll clean up,” I offer, to get myself out of the awkward conversation. I swipe my plate off the table along with August’s, and Foster’s before taking the dishes to the kitchen and placing them gently in the sink so I can start wiping off the worst of the remaining food before they go in the dishwasher.

I’m surprised when August’s scent is the first thing I notice about his arrival. He dumps pots and pans in the sink as well, and one arm curls around my waist. “About the rest of our bet,” he says, nuzzling into the side of my face.

I like it.

Scratch that, I love it. I know that a soft purring approval leaves my slightly parted lips, and at that August leans in and does it again. This time he scents along my throat as well, and I clench my fingers on the plate.

“You let me fuck you, and Foster did, too. So, we’re square. You don’t have to sleep with me.” He sighs, like he’s a little disappointed, and before he can leave, I reach out and grip his arm.

“Do you want to?” I ask, before I can think *not* to.

August meets my gaze, his dark eyes heavy-lidded and heated. “Do I *want* to?” he repeats. “Are you really asking me that, Mercy?”

“Yeah.”

“I want to help Foster lock up all your clothes so I can make sure you’re always ready and wet for me.” I’m not expecting the growl in his voice. Not one bit, and my stomach falls through the floor in surprise. “I want to go put on the entire Ocean’s movie series, and say that I clearly meant you would be paying attention to my cock during all of it. Does *that* answer your question on whether I want to, darling omega?”

“I don’t know. You might have to do a better job of spelling it out for me. Talk to me like I’m not the smartest student in Winter Grove.” I know there’s a dare in my voice. Possibly a challenge. But I’m just so *interested* in the

dominating, strict August I've seen flashes of that I'll do anything to bring it to the surface. Just like I want more of the desperate, needy Foster who can't keep his hands off of me.

In reality, I just want more of *them*.

“Want me to talk to you like the perfect, absolutely delicious omega that you are, then?” His words are deliberate and tinged with promise.

That's so not fair of him. Not when I have to suck in a breath and try not to come apart right here in the kitchen. “Fuck,” I mutter. “Yeah, uh. Not what I had in mind, but—”

“I want to show you all the things I'm into. I bet you'll love them, but I don't want to overwhelm you, either. I want to take all night to fuck you and play with you and have you begging for any amount of attention I'm willing to give you.”

I swallow heavily, still unsure of what's going on. “Yeah, I ___”

His hand comes up to my throat, gripping the base of it lightly. “*Shhh*... I wasn't done, my darling omega. I want to play with you and have you so exhausted that you can't *leave* my bed in the morning. Not that you need to. You just need to be there, ready for me to come play with you again.”

That'll do it. That's the only thought that goes through my head. “You go to bed late,” I point out, my voice a squeak. “Won't have that much time, you know?” There's no way I sound casual. Not one bit.

But damn if I don't try.

He's awake when I let myself in. That's obvious when I see him sitting up and leaning against the plush headboard of his queen-size bed with its curtains that hang around the posts on the corners.

My heart flutters in my chest. I'm *nervous*, even though I know he'd never hurt me.

August glances up, a rewarding smile on his face. “Hi,” he greets, laying his iPad on the side table.

“Funny meeting you here,” I say, trying for humor and failing. Instead, I just stand there, staring at my feet with my hoodie sleeves hanging over my hands and obscuring my fingers. “I thought this was—”

“Come here, Mercy.” There’s no way to *not* do what he says. Not when he purrs at me so unfairly and waits for me to sit on the bed with him. Glancing up, I’m surprised to see anticipation on his face, and the grin he wears is nothing short of sexy. “Do you have a safeword?” he asks out of the blue.

I look up at him, studying his face, and think about the question. “No,” I admit. “I’ve never needed one.” I hesitate for a moment before adding, “Do I need one with you, August?”

“Yeah, you do. Foster has one. It’s not just you. I like to play rough, that’s all. I want to know what your limits are, too. Things you would never, ever consider doing in the bedroom.”

“Don’t hurt me,” I say without thinking. “Not... I don’t mean it like *Foster* means it. I mean...” God, why is this so hard to explain? “Don’t hurt my feelings sounds lame.”

August moves to sit beside me on the edge of the bed and kisses my forehead. He’s shirtless again, dressed only in his black sweatpants and no shoes or socks. “I’d never hurt you like that, Mercy.”

“I don’t want to bleed. I don’t want to *hurt* physically to the point where I’m crying.”

“I understand. Can you give me a safeword?”

I think about it for half a second, then say, “Pineapple.” It’s boring and probably overused, but it’s not easy to think of something on the fly. “What, uh. What are we going to do?”

“You can’t think of anything else, outside of more extreme things, that you won’t be able to deal with, Mercy?” he repeats. I think about it. Outside of obvious things that would be more *extreme*... no.

So I shake my head.

“And you’re confident you’ll remember your safeword?”

I nod.

“Thank you, darling girl.” I love it when he calls me that, even if it makes me squirm when he compliments me so openly.

But I don’t have time to think about it. He reaches out, gripping my throat harder than he had earlier. “Every time we played, I’ve always had to be so *gentle* with you. Either Foster wants a turn or Dorian wants to *save* you from us. But my little omega...” He pulls me flush against him with a jerk, his mouth against my ear.

“There’s no one here to save you from me.”

My heart lurches, stomach flipping into knots. “August?”

It’s like he melts back to his normal self, and he gently kisses my temple. “I like to play *rough*, Mercy,” he reminds me. “Do you want to play rough with me? If you say your safeword, I’ll stop. No questions asked. But other than that, I won’t stop unless something’s wrong. But if you don’t want to do this—”

“I want to do this,” I breathe. I’m scared, but the excitement outweighs the fear. “I’ll pineapple if it’s too much, I promise. But I want to.”

He kisses me, the thanks evident on his tongue, before he gets to his feet and drags me up too.

“Like I said, Mercy. There’s really no one here to save you tonight. And I’ve been wanting to play with you for so fucking long. Foster thinks I should be able to get a chance to. And he gave me something to play with.”

“What?”

“Why should I tell you?” His smile is condescending, and he reaches out to twist his fingers in my hoodie. “Off. *Now*. I don’t know why you’d wear clothes in here, anyway. How many times do we have to tell you that we’d prefer you without, hmm?”

“Well, I can’t really—”

“Why can’t you?” He yanks my shorts off, and with my hoodie already on the floor, it leaves me bare for his eyes and

his hands, and August wastes no time pressing me back down to the bed, though my knees go together instantly and instinctively as he sinks down in front of me.

“There’s no one that lives around here to see.” He runs his hands up my thighs and I shiver. “And you’re our omega, aren’t you?”

That’s something I’m going to have to look into later, but for now, I just shudder at the words. August grabs my knees, his grip harsh but not quite painful. “Be a good omega for me, Mercy,” he purrs, the grin on his lips anticipatory. “What are you hiding? I’ve seen your sweet cunt already and fucked it full of my cum.”

“No,” I reply, and the word sends a thrill through me as I flex my thigh muscles to keep my knees together.

“Let me in, little Mercy, or you’re going to regret it.” Somehow I don’t believe his warning.

He isn’t going to hurt me.

He’s just *August*.

“I have a theory.” He works slowly to pry my knees apart, moving his hands up my inner thighs until finally he can *shove* my legs down to the bed, pulling a gasp from me. Easily he pins them, sinking down between my thighs, though he still meets my gaze. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Is it a nice one?”

“No, it’s not, unfortunately.” His attention flicks down to the apex of my thighs, and one of my hands wanders down my body, as if I could hide myself from him. Though at this point, I think we both know it’s because I want to see how far he’ll take this.

“Is that how this is going to go? You’re just going to be so difficult for me, Mercy? But you haven’t even let me tell you my theory as to why you’re so opposed to forgoing your clothes here.”

“I can listen and move my hands. I can *multitask*.” My heart pounds in my throat, obscuring my words slightly.

“I think you’re afraid because you know how much of a slut you are for my pack. And you don’t want us to know it too. Imagine if you couldn’t hide that we have you dripping all the time, huh? Imagine what we’d do, how often we’d have you in our laps to fuck this perfect cunt. But,”—he strokes one finger down my slit and I shiver—“that’s pretty dumb of you.” He lines his fingers up with me, and I meet his eyes as he grins. “Because you belong to us, no matter if your bet with Dorian has technically ended. You belong to my *pack*, and we want *all* of you.”

He suddenly slides three fingers into me, causing me to gasp, and my hand flies down to grip his wrist. Instantly his hand is gone, but when he grips both my wrists and gets to his feet, I feel like I might have fucked up.

“Bad girl,” he chides, going to the bedside table and opening the drawer. I can’t see what’s in it, but he eyes me with a grin anyway. “Get on your knees.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

It’s a good reason. A great one, even. But I take my time, eyeing him just to see what he’ll do.

Dorian would’ve let me take my time and punish me later.

August isn’t Dorian. The dark-haired alpha reaches down and helps me, shoving me onto my stomach and urging me further up the bed.

“Don’t move,” he says, my face in a pillow. “It’s a surprise.”

“Can I *see* the surprise?”

“You’re so *mouthy*, Mercy. So fucking mouthy, it’s unreal.”

I want to tell him I can’t help it. But in the next moment my hands are up over my head, and the cool silk of a tie yanks them together and forward as August secures them to the bar that runs at the top of the headboard.

“Fuck,” I say, trying to pull back, only to find the knot is surprisingly sturdy. “August, this is really—”

“Snug? What’s wrong, baby? Did you think you’d be able to just get out?” He runs a hand up my spine. “We have a couple options here. I can blindfold you. I could gag you. But I want to hear that mouth while I play with you. *Or* we can use Foster’s toy that he gave me for you.”

“Foster’s... toy?”

“It isn’t that hard to figure out. I think he just wanted me to fuck you with it a little. Probably not slick it up and slide it into your pretty ass and let it stay there to get you used to the idea of him filling you up. That would probably be a little mean of me. Especially if we didn’t start with the smallest one.”

My heart jumps in my chest. “Blindfold,” I say instantly. “Absolutely the blindfold.”

“Yeah, I figured,” August hums, but he doesn’t blindfold me.

Instead, he sinks down onto the bed behind me and runs his nails up my thighs. “Don’t make me get creative with keeping you open for me,” he threatens with a snicker. “I can do it, but I’d rather you be on your knees like this while I breed your pussy.”

The words make me feel like someone has just sucker punched me. Not because they’re unpleasant. It’s the opposite, in fact. But I’ve never heard anyone say that to me, except for him in the library.

“Fuck, August—” He rubs a thumb up my slit, passing over it until he gets to my so-far unfucked hole. “Wait. I thought. I literally just picked blindfold—”

“I never said *you* get to pick,” he reminds me, and I can feel cold wetness dripping down from a bottle onto my overheated skin. “Like I said. He gave me two. A smaller one that’s about the size of his finger... and something bigger for you. He got these *just* for you. *Just* so he could make you love

every instant. I'm merely helping him along. Take a breath, Mercy. And you'd better relax."

"Is... is that the smaller one?" I ask, a touch of uncertainty in my voice. My hands flex, pulling at the tie. "August, wait. I'm not sure—"

"*Breathe*, Mercy. Just breathe for me, darling." I can feel the rounded edge of the vibrator at my hole, and I suck in a gasping breath. "Well, not quite. But that's okay this time. It's going in you either way, my darling. So you might as well just relax."

"But I—"

"I really didn't ask." He presses it in slowly, my heart hammering every step of the way as the toy sinks in deeper than Foster's fingers had. "There you go," August runs his hands up my thighs, nails digging into my skin. "You look so pretty like this. You'll look even prettier when I'm as deep as I can be in your pussy, you know?"

"*Fuck*," I whimper. It doesn't hurt. Thanks to Foster fingering me earlier, it just feels like a slightly too-far stretch. It burns, drawing my attention to it, and it's hard to think about anything else.

"Don't worry, Mercy. I know what I said earlier, but I've already fucked you once today. I don't want to wear you out. I don't want you to get tired of me."

Fuck, if this is just a toy, I can't imagine what it would feel like with Foster actually inside me. Especially with August or Dorian in my pussy. My back arches as he pumps the toy in and out, until finally pressing it as deeply as it'll go.

"We can just leave that," he purrs. "It's not hurting anyone, is it?"

"Leave it for how long?"

"However long I want." He grips my hips with a sigh. "You look so good on your knees for me like this. And fuck, I've wanted you just like this for a while. No Dorian. No Foster. Just you and me... you don't need me to open you up

for me, do you, Mercy? No. Not *you*. Not when you're so wet from me just being here."

"I don't know. August, you're big. It was a lot earlier, and we'd been—" My hands twist again, though my voice trembles mostly from excitement.

"Excuses. Come on, Mercy. We both know you're just dripping for me." Then, as if to prove it, he shoves two fingers into me, pulling a yelp from my mouth.

But in the next second they're gone, only to reappear at my lips. "Open your fucking mouth," August orders, shoving his fingers between my lips the moment I do. "See? Don't you taste yourself, and how turned on you are?"

I can't believe I'm doing this. My eyes are crammed shut as he rubs his fingers over my tongue, murmuring for me to clean them off and taste myself on them.

It's kind of embarrassing, but something about that just makes this hotter.

"Like I said, Mercy..." He grabs my hips and thrusts into me, until I can feel his hips against the backs of my thighs. A cry leaves my mouth as he shoves me forward on the bed, my head buried in his pillow. "You're just made to take my cock. And my pack."

August isn't gentle. Not in the least. He slams into me, his thrusts unhurried but thorough. One hand keeps a hold of my hip, but the other plays with the toy in my hole, teasing me with it just enough to keep me on edge.

"I can't handle both," I whine, back arched. "Take one out, August, please."

"No."

"August—"

"Ask me again and I'm going to drag this out as long as possible. And I won't untie you before I go to sleep. You'll just have to stay there like that all night, and every time I wake up you'll be right there, ready for me to fill you up again. So

be a *good girl*, Mercy, and tell me how much you love my cock.”

“I...” I’m still sensitive from earlier, and his voice and his scent do a good job of pushing me into being more aroused than I should be. “I love your cock.”

“You love it when I fuck you.”

“I really, really do.” It’s not a lie. Not when I’m literally *swooning* and I asked for this.

One hand curls in my hair at the base of my neck. “Then beg for it. Come on, my slutty little omega. Why don’t you beg for my cum? *Beg* for me to use you how I want and convince the others to do the same? You need it so bad, don’t you?” His thrusts speed up, until he’s nearly shoving me up the bed.

“Fuck, I’ve literally already said how much I love it.” It’s hard to do anything with him behind me and my hands tied in front of me, trapping me against the headboard. But I’m getting frantic, and when pulling at the tie does nothing, I groan. “Let me touch you, August. Please.”

“No.” His grip tightens. “No, I like you right here. Under me and on your knees. You feel so good, darling omega. We’re going to lock you up and never let you go again.”

His half-threats are so hot it’s unreal.

“You want to come, don’t you?” I hear the sound of something I can’t identify, at least until August presses a vibrator against my clit. He presses the button of the one inside me, and I jump as it starts vibrating as well.

“Holy *shit*. Damn. Holy *fuck*,” I shriek, nearly levitating. “Oh my god, August please that’s too damn much—”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes it is, *I’m going to come—*”

“Then come. You know how much I want you to. Come on, Mercy.” He presses his fingers to me with the vibrator, rubbing it against my clit until I sob. “Come like this with both of your holes filled. You look so fucking hot. I want you to

come for me. Right now, be a good girl. You don't really have a choice here, and I'm not letting you move until you come."

I already am. I bury my face into the pillow as a sob tears through me, made worse by the intensity of the vibrator on my clit.

August isn't far behind, either. I feel him tense, and he drops the vibrator so he can grip my hips and drag me to him as much as he can so he can ride out his own release inside me. Absently, he removes the vibrator from my hole and reaches up to pluck at the tie at the headboard.

I go to move, only to be stopped by his hand around my waist.

"No," August says, dragging me onto my side as he lays on the bed as well.

"No?" I repeat.

"No." He loops an arm around my waist. And turns off the light switch that controls the dim light over the bed. "You proved to me earlier you struggle with just letting things be. So you're going to go to sleep like this. With my cock in your pussy like a good girl."

"That's..." I don't know if I can, honestly. And surely he'll roll over or get up soon. "I don't know—"

"Yes, you do. And you can." He reaches up to tease my nipples playfully, causing me to shiver before he drags the blankets over us. "Perfect, gorgeous omega."

I do fall asleep. Somehow. And when I wake up, it's to see that there's snow coming down outside again, silent as the giant flakes stick to the window.

But that isn't what wakes me up.

It's August.

He's hard again, and slowly thrusting in and out of me. "August," I breathe, as he buries his face into my neck, allowing me to reach up and tangle my fingers in his hair. "*August.*" I'm so turned on, and still so wet, that it surprises me.

“You’re so warm,” he purrs against my throat, licking and nipping at my skin. “So warm for me. Shhh, Mercy. Don’t go anywhere.” His fingers wander down my body until he can finger my clit in time with his languid, lazy thrusts. “Told you, didn’t I?” he purrs against my ear.

“Told me what?”

“Told you I’m going to fill up my pretty omega’s pussy like she deserves.”

The words twist my insides, and I suck in a breath. God, it shouldn’t be so hot to hear him say that, but it is.

“I can move—”

“No. You’re not going to move. You’re going to come for me again, and you’re going to let me breed you how I want. Then you’re going to go back to sleep, and when I wake up, we’re going to do it all over again. I want you dripping for me, Mercy. I want you to be unable to stand up because of how full you are, just so I can do it again and again and again.”

It’s not long before I come with his name on my lips and his fingers on my clit. I’m still so sleepy, and my orgasm is just another source of relaxation as August buries himself into me and murmurs praise against my ear.

And somehow, again, I fall asleep with him inside me and his arm wrapped around my body so that I’m not going anywhere at all.

Due to the extra snow, it takes three days before Foster and I can leave, though August promises that he's content to stay behind, do dishes, and prep for dinner.

"He's such a good house husband," I joke, dropping into the passenger seat of Foster's car. The beta snickers at my remark.

"Why do you think I wrangled him? I'm a shit cook. Pretty sure that's why Dorian hunted him down, too."

His words have me curious, so I ask, "Who came first? You and August, or August and Dorian? Or you and Dorian?"

"August and I came first." Foster backs out of the driveway slowly, and then onto the carefully maintained street that will take us into town. "We were together before Dorian ever found us. Then he did, and it was love at first sight."

"Really?" I'm skeptical of that. Foster's so good at being subtly sarcastic that I'm not sure I believe him. "Are you bullshitting me?"

He shakes his head, glancing at me with his blue eyes ever so earnest. "Nah, Mercy. I'm not. Actually, Dorian showed up when August was in a fight."

"Over *what*?" I can't help but interrupt. It's hard to imagine August fighting with anyone. He's so even-tempered and sweet that it's strange to think of him as violent.

"Me, obviously."

“Did someone tell you that you weren’t the fairest of them all?” I tease, leaning back more comfortably in the seat and closing my eyes. Seeing all the snow piled at the edges of the road is unnerving, especially when I can’t stop thinking about how there’s probably black ice all around us that I can’t see. It isn’t that I don’t trust Foster’s impeccable driving, but it is a little nerve-wracking.

“Someone tried to hurt me. Really, really badly. And I was such an innocent teen back then. I didn’t want to hurt a fly.”

This time when I look at him, I know that part of that statement isn’t true. I have a feeling it’s the innocent part, but I don’t say anything. Instead, I wait him out, and he snorts when I just look at him. “Okay, I wasn’t that innocent. But someone did hurt me.”

I want to ask him how. I’m itching to know, even though it’s none of my business.

“But I’m not telling you how.”

Never mind then.

“So August was in a fight with this guy and Dorian swooped in and helped him. They beat the *crap* out of him, but August was still pretty worked up.” He grins at the memory. “So he told Dorian to fuck right off, and well... you know them by now. Do you think he fucked off, Mercy?”

“Uh, that would be a no,” I reply, a small smile on my lips. “Did they take off their shirts and fight it out? Seems a little primeval of them, if they did.”

“Just a little. And unfortunately their shirts stayed on,” Foster chuckles. “August was pretty worn out anyway, and Dorian wasn’t. He pinned my alpha to the ground and kept him there, telling him how good he smelled and how all he wanted was to get to know him.”

I turn to look at him, eyes narrowed. “Foster, can I tell you something?” I ask him slowly, trying to think of the right words.

“Yeah?”

“That sounds like the lead up to a really intricate porn video. Like, did they fuck after? Was there lots of growling? Did Dorian, I don’t know, throw August into a chain-link fence and keep him there with his belt?”

“Unfortunately, he did not.”

“And where were *you* during all of this, exactly?”

“On the ground with a cracked skull and a broken nose.” He says it just so easily. Just... casually. Like it isn’t a big deal and doesn’t have my jaw dropping in sympathy and shock.

“I’m... sorry.” I definitely feel bad for joking about it, but Foster just shakes his head. He doesn’t look the least bit bothered, like this happened to someone else instead of him.

“It’s fine. Dorian scooped me up, even though August was growly about it, and brought both of us to a hospital. Paid for it, too. All in all, I’ve been on worse first dates.” He turns to grin at me for a moment, before his attention goes back to the road.

“Worse first...” I trail off, blinking in surprise at the joke. “Shit, Foster. I don’t know. How does a date go worse than that? Sure, I guess the whole Dorian part was kind of cool in a swoop in and save the day kind of way? But you were *concussed*, I’m assuming?”

“Very,” he assures me.

“Then how can any date be worse?”

“Easy. When they chew with their mouth open.”

“Can I ask you something?” It’s always so hard to know what he’s thinking, or what his questions will end up being.

I look at him over my shopping basket that’s got only a few things in it, like shampoo and conditioner, my eyes narrowed. “Depends if it’s grocery store appropriate,” I ask, my voice quiet. I step closer to him, close enough now that he doesn’t have to talk any louder than normal for me to hear him.

“Are you still upset with me?” Yet again he says it with a blasé, easy attitude that doesn’t tell me how he feels about the question.

“About what exactly?” He can’t still mean stealing my backpack and the *Video Valhalla* crap. That’s been months, and I don’t actually believe that Foster feels guilty for anything he’s done.

“About last semester. Maybe, perhaps, I wasn’t very nice to you.”

“I’d consider that an understatement.”

“Well, I think you should be happy I’m willing to admit any wrongdoing at all,” the beta sniffs, nose in the air. “Instead of being picky about what I *am* willing to admit to and apologize for.”

Apologize?

I blink at him. He’s really going to apologize to me?

“Why?” I can’t help the word escaping my lips, even though it draws a small eye roll from him. “Look, if you’re just going to roll your eyes at me if I say anything, this feels a lot less sincere—”

“Because I don’t want you to be mad at me.” His voice is frustrated, and when he looks at me again, his eyes are narrowed and just as irritated. “I know that I’m the one you hold a grudge against. *I get that*. I’m not very nice, okay? And I’m not going to start being some nice, princely, white knighting—”

“I’m not asking you to. I literally just don’t want you stealing my shit or getting me arrested for theft, Foster.” I shift my weight, my heart thumping against my ribs uncomfortably. This is so strange. Especially in the middle of a damn grocery store. “I don’t treat you differently than I treat August or Dorian.” *Do I?*

He levels his gaze at me. “You don’t trust me. Maybe you don’t quite trust them, but you *really* don’t trust me. Maybe I deserve it, a little. If you haven’t noticed, Mercy. I like you. We all like you, but I mostly care about how much *I* like you.”

That's not what I'm expecting. How can it be, when this is *Foster* I'm talking to? My heart continues to pound, and my hands feel clammy on the handles of the basket.

"I don't want you to change. And I don't need you to apologize again." He's done it more than once, and it isn't what I'm looking for. "But this is kind of hard. I didn't come to Winter Grove to find a pack, you know?"

"I know."

"In fact, I came here explicitly to put it off. To make sure that if I wanted a pack, it would be *my choice*. Not that I'm saying you want me in your pack, or that *we're* pack or something like that. I barely know you, and—"

"Right, okay." His voice is sarcastic, and it makes me want to roll *my* eyes to hear it. "We totally haven't been giving off *pack vibes* towards you or anything, I get it."

"Shut up."

"Yes *ma'am*."

"You make me nervous. All three of you. You're such a good pack for each other. Anyone can see that. But..." I trail off, letting out a harsh breath through my nose. "This isn't the conversation we were having. I'm not still upset with you. You make me nervous sometimes because you're hard to read. And you like to be mean." I expect him to scowl, but he nods along in agreement, sweeping a hand through his auburn hair. "And you can't expect me to just forget about last semester."

"That's fair," Foster admits, reaching out to touch the remains of the hickey on my neck that he'd put there before prying the basket from my fingers. "Want to go warm up the car? I'm done, and I'll pay for this."

The offer takes me off guard. "Why?"

"Because I'm nice."

"Don't lie."

He flashes me that trademark Foster grin, but it's belatedly, like he has to think about it. "Because I want to. A lot."

It's not that I don't believe him, but... I don't.

Still, it isn't like I'm not grateful. Saying my bank account is drained is an understatement, and it's a damn good thing the meal plan was included in my scholarship. I just won't be getting many smoothies on the side or snacks outside of the dining hall.

But being here is more important than that.

"Thank you," I reply, taking the keys he holds out for me. "I really appreciate it." Foster barely replies, only shoos me towards the doors of the store while he walks in the direction of the self-checkout lines.

I dig my hands into the pockets of my hoodie, careful not to slip on the patches of ice while I walk back to his dark grey car. With my hood up, I can maintain just enough warmth to not die before I get there, but it's definitely going to be a close call.

Especially when a girl moves to lean on his trunk, taking a drag from a vape before shoving it in one pocket.

Her hood is up as well, and she's wearing black jeans with boots and fingerless gloves. She's taller than me, with blonde hair peeking out from under her hood, and I'm sure that I've never seen her before in my life.

At least, until she turns to face me fully and my brain slingshots her identity back into my head.

It's *Amelia* from Royalwood. The archer who I'd managed to beat in my first competition last semester.

The one who'd been so interested in me after the competition that it had made me more than a little nervous.

My steps slow, and I wish she'd get her ass off of Foster's trunk. Not that she makes any move to do so, even when I'm right in front of her, barely a foot away, with my brows raised. I'm not impressed by this showing off of hers.

Amelia doesn't frighten me, I don't think. Especially when she doesn't even attend the same school as me.

I sigh, hands leaving my hoodie pockets as I look at her. “This is really weird,” I say, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Do you lean on people’s cars often?”

A smirk catches her lips, and her eyes glitter with dark amusement. “No,” she tells me easily. “It was just such good luck that I saw you inside and decided I’d wait for you. Where’s Foster?”

“Still buying shit?” I assume, though, I know what he’s doing. I just prefer to be vague with her. She makes me feel a little nauseous, and her scent doesn’t help. It’s acrid and burns my nose worse than any other alpha’s ever has.

She’s the exact opposite of anyone I’d ever want as my alpha.

“What are you doing in Winter Grove?” I can at least try to be nice, right? “Do you live close to here?”

“I do now. My parents bought me a house in town.”

She doesn’t say anything else until it becomes apparent she’s waiting for me to speak.

“Okay, I’ll bite. Why do you live here now, Amelia?”

“Because I transferred to your school, dollface.”

The nickname makes me want to vomit. I grimace with all the disgust of a thousand house cats on my face, suddenly wanting her to be anywhere but here. “Don’t call me that,” I request, before I can think of processing the rest of that statement.

Then it hits me.

She’s transferred to Winter Grove?

“Why come here? I thought Royalwood was almost as great? Is it that much of a difference?”

She’s a sophomore like Dorian, from what I understand, but I can’t imagine why she’d want to transfer for the spring semester.

“A few of my friends came too. My mom can be really persuasive with things like that.” She watches me like a cat

might watch a mouse. “I just wanted to tell you something, that’s all.”

“Okay,” I sigh. “I’m not really interested, but go on. Hit me—”

“If you don’t find a new pack to go sniffing after, *dollface*,” she sneers the nickname. “Then the murders and the dead bodies? That bullet you took for Dorian? They’re going to look like the sweetest things you could imagine compared to what you’ll get for being with them.”

It’s... certainly the most eloquent threat I’ve ever heard.

I open my mouth to respond, sucking in a breath, but Foster’s scent finds my nose before I can speak. Evidently, Amelia notices too, because she turns to look behind her, where the auburn beta leans against the driver’s side of his car, blue eyes on her.

He grins when he has our attention, and all of that malice is fixed on Amelia’s face. “No, don’t let me stop you,” he urges, never looking at me. “Go on. Keep threatening her. Keep threatening my pack. Give me more details of how I should arrange your ‘welcome to Winter Grove’ party, Amelia.”

She scoffs, nearly spitting at him as she pushes away from the trunk. “Fuck off, Foster. If any of you are going to threaten me, it had better be someone who could back it up.”

Somehow, I don’t think Foster would have any issue backing up his words. I look between them, but Amelia’s the only one who looks upset.

Foster just looks... maliciously amused. Even when she flips him the bird and walks away, shoving her shoulder into mine hard enough that I nearly stumble, he just watches her.

When she’s gone, I toss him the keys, sliding into the passenger seat with a sigh moments before he gets in on his side with a groan and starts the engine.

“What a fucking problem,” he moans, thumping his head back against the seat. The tension melts from him as I watch, until he turns to look at me, taking in my worried face. “What,

really? She's really getting to you with her crap? She's just trying to get to Dorian, Mercy."

"Why?"

"Because she hates him, the ground he walks on, the air he breathes, and anything he touches." He shrugs. "She's just a bitch, all right? Seriously, her threats are empty and she's blowing hot air."

I don't reply, but I'd have an easier time believing him if there wasn't a bitter edge to his scent that makes me think he's not too sure of his own words, let alone hers.

6

I've never cared about a routine before now. I've never *liked* a routine, unless it involved me studying or working on something that I enjoy. Sure, I like planning out the time to get better at something, but doesn't everyone?

But this is different.

There's a lull when I stay with them. A nice thing that feels very constant around the boys. I've never envisioned myself in a pack before, but it's becoming harder and harder to pretend that this one isn't as appealing as it gets for me. Which probably says something about me, if I think about it too hard, so I try not to.

I know I'm the last one awake tonight. August had gone to bed early after beating me at rummy, though this time the only stakes had been who would do the dishes. He'd been tired, and it had shown on his handsome face. Foster was up later, but around two am he gave in as well, flopping over on the sofa and moaning about the bed being too far away.

Well, I certainly hadn't been able to carry him.

Even though I'd gone to bed after that, I hadn't slept. Not for a while, anyway. Reading emails and looking over things for the new semester was starting to become unavoidable, as I like to read over everything at least twice to prevent being taken by surprise when classes actually start. Even though so far, Winter Grove's curriculum hasn't challenged me, that doesn't mean things might not change.

My grades can't slip. Not unless I want to end up back in Chicago, away from the best school in the world.

Away from Dorian's pack.

My eyelids eventually get heavy as I read through the calculus email, and when I start seeing double and stop comprehending what I'm even reading, I let out a sigh and drop my arm to my side. It's probably time to give up. I'm so tired, finally, and I don't want to be asleep until noon.

Not that I have any pressing engagements or that August and Foster wouldn't let me sleep.

"Do you like sleeping in my bed?" The words are a soft purr beside my ear, and I wouldn't have heard them if I hadn't drifted off with my hearing aids in.

Still, it's hard for them to put themselves together in my brain so that they make sense, and it gives the person above me time to press the long length of their body to mine, one knee pressing between my thighs.

Confused, I try to move. My head is still fuzzy with sleep, and this doesn't make sense to my brain just yet.

A hand curls in my hair, nails scraping my skin. Finally my eyes open, though it's too dark to see much in Dorian's room. I inhale, opening my mouth to speak, but as the scent hits my nose, I don't need to.

Dorian has always smelled like leather, cloves, and cinnamon. Under that is the feel of *alpha* that he wears so well, and I've never, ever not been able to recognize his scent.

How can I, when the first time I scented him, I'd choked on it?

"Dorian," I breathe, turning my head. "You're home."

"And really happy to have come home early enough to find you in bed." He moves, urging me onto my back so he can splay a hand against my stomach, fingers spread. It's hard to see him in the darkness. He's just a figure above me, but I can still imagine his lazy smirk.

"Would you prefer me to sleep on the couch?"

“No, sweet girl. I want you right here in my bed.” He hooks his fingers in the waistband of my sleep shorts, sliding them off my legs before kneeling between my thighs once more with his hands on my knees. I stare up at him, as much of him as I can see, my breath catching in my throat.

It doesn't matter that I can't see his face. Dorian is just as gorgeous as the other boys of his pack, and I know that well enough to be able to imagine his face.

“Barring what happened at home, how has the rest of your break been with my boys?” His hands slide slowly up my legs, fingers dragging against my skin as he talks.

“It's been, uh, better than Chicago,” I reply, voice just as soft as his.

“August says you've been having fun. He says he's teaching you all about his kinks. Are you having fun with him?”

“When he actually *fucks me* instead of dragging it out while he's inside me, yeah.”

Dorian chuckles. “See, I heard you like that part, too. Especially when Foster plays with you.”

I shudder at the memory, eyes closing. I'm hyper aware of his hands. Especially since they aren't where I want them.

“Foster apologized to me for last semester. He... doesn't want me to be upset with him,” I murmur conversationally.

“He thinks he's done worse than the rest of us. Though, I've tried to tell him that I'm pretty sure I'm still in the lead there. What did you tell him?”

“That I'm not mad.” His hands are so close, massaging the inside of my thighs while my legs tremble from anticipation. “You're starting to remind me of August,” I gripe, sitting up enough that I can reach for his shirt and twist my hand in the fabric.

“Because I'm having a conversation with you instead of fucking you?” Dorian teases, letting me pull him down as I sink to my back once again.

“Dragging things out, you sadist.” He isn’t really, but I’ve missed him. The realization hits me like a ton of invisible bricks, but I stash that thought in the back of my head instead.

“Have you really missed me?” Dorian braces himself with one arm on the bed beside my face, his mouth inches from mine.

“Just a little,” I breathe, and I’m so close that I can feel the faintest brush of his lips when I talk. “What about me?” My heart jumps at the question. Would he have? Does he have a reason to miss me? “Did you miss me?”

“So much that I considered sending August and Foster on a kitten-napping caper in the midwest just so I could see you when I got back.”

They aren’t the words I’m expecting. But thankfully I don’t have to search my suddenly empty brain for a reply. Dorian’s mouth finds mine in the darkness and he leans into me, his body warm and solid as he kisses me sweetly.

But Dorian’s sweetness never lasts. Tonight is no different, either. His kiss deepens, his tongue pressing to mine seconds before he jerks my hips up so I’m pressed against him. A cold, smooth sensation presses against my tongue, and I realize with a jolt that he’s wearing his tongue ring. I’ve never kissed him with it before, and I can’t help but chase his mouth, trying to explore it with the edges of my teeth. He chuckles, realizing what I’m doing, and presses his tongue to mine again so I can feel and taste the metal more clearly.

It’s unfortunate that he’s still wearing clothes. He nips at my lips as my hands twine in his hair. I don’t want him going anywhere for a little while. Not until I can remember how good he tastes on my tongue.

“*Mercy,*” he breathes, and whether it’s my name or the plea, I’m not sure. “I love kissing you. But I want to fuck you. I’ve wanted to fuck you ever since I knew you were here in my bed.”

“If you weren’t wearing pants, and you weren’t trying to tease, you could already be fucking me,” I point out, knowing

just how that must sound to him.

He growls. That deep, soft alpha growl that Dorian's so good at. It reverberates in my ears, filling my head with wicked promises while Dorian pulls away, just enough to slide out of his jeans and chuck his shirt to the floor along with them.

I take the opportunity to get rid of my shirt as well, just as he falls back into me, his hips pressing between my thighs as he grips the base of my throat to push me back into the pillow and kiss me again.

I feel his other hand at my folds, sliding along my slit, and shudder as small tingles work their way through my body.

“You're wet for me.” It isn't a question, and it isn't wrong. “My perfect, sweet little omega is already wet for me in my bed. Such a good girl, aren't you?”

If I hadn't been wet before, I would be now. Two fingers slide into me, scissoring open before curling upward.

“Dorian...” I turn my face into his cheek when he nips at my neck. “As much as I love the thought of you fingering me, you really don't have to.”

“I'm not going to fuck you until I know you're ready for me, Mercy,” he argues, now pumping three fingers in and out of my body.

“I've literally been ready for you to fuck me since you woke me up.”

He chuckles, mouthing at my neck again. “Patience is a virtue, you know. You're so smart and so good at everything. You should know that better than me.”

The surprise compliment fills me with warmth. It makes me have to catch my breath and curl my fingers tighter in his hair.

“I don't remember you being this nice,” I can't help but say dryly.

“How could I be anything *but* nice when the most perfect omega I've ever met was waiting for me in my bed, her nose

in my pillow so she could scent me while she sleeps?” His fingers speed up inside me, dragging a soft sound from my mouth.

“You don’t really mean that.” I don’t know how to feel when he says things like that.

Dorian purrs. “Sure, Mercy. If that’s what you want to believe. Would it be easier to swallow with a collar around your throat?”

My breath catches once more, and I can’t help the way I tense at the anticipation of the idea. It occurs to me that I *want* him to put a collar around my neck again. And this time, I don’t want to look for ways to take it off.

Fuck, I’m so screwed, it’s unreal. My mother would be disappointed in me. She’d tell me that all those plans were a joke. That I just wanted a rich, influential—

“You’re thinking so hard, sweet girl.” He runs his pierced tongue up my neck, the metal dragging sweetly against my skin. “Don’t think so hard right now. Let me do it for you. Let me take care of you, Mercy.”

I’ve spent my whole life rehearsing what I’d say to some alpha-asshole who said that to me, but when push comes to shove, it makes me feel like I’m melting.

I can’t help the soft sigh as he finds my mouth again. I can’t help the way my body instinctively relaxes for him. He pulls his fingers away, hand on my hip, urging me to move just a little for him until his cock brushes my slit.

“I’ve missed you,” he tells me again, and rocks forward, all the way, until he’s as deep as he can go and my thighs are pressed tightly to his hips.

The choked sound that leaves my lips is swallowed by his mouth, his purr sounding like it’s inside of me instead of coming from outside of my body.

“Still so perfect, aren’t you?” He’s slow as he fucks me, lazy, like he’s taking his time. “All for my pack.”

The words twist something inside of me that's already so close to breaking, and when I take a deep, shuddering breath at the words, he licks my lower lip.

“You don't have to do that when I say things like that, Mercy. You don't need to worry, I'm going to make you. I've always liked to play with you, but I'd never make you do something life changing.”

“You made me wear a collar,” I point out, my body arching into his thrusts.

“You liked it. I don't see the problem.” There's a hint of confusion in his voice. Just a little falter of his hips follows, like he's unsure.

“Yeah, that's the problem right there.” I can't help my grin, even though he can't see it in the dark. “I really, *really* fucking liked it. I think that's pretty life-changing, don't you?”

He's silent for long enough that I'm afraid I've pissed him off. At least until he laughs quietly and buries his face against the side of my neck, inhaling my scent as he picks up his movements again.

“When are you going into heat again?” he asks conversationally, like he isn't focusing on how deep he is inside of me.

For me, there's not much else I want to focus on.

“Next month. Middle or end of next month, I guess.” I've always hated going into heat. It's a waste of my time when I could be doing literally anything else.

“Will you spend it with my pack?”

“Do you *want* me to?”

He lets out a soft, growling snicker. “Mercy, the list of things I want to do to you is longer than I'm ever going to admit to.”

I don't know how to reply to that seriously, so I don't even try. “Is ‘going to a pumpkin patch’ on the list?” I try not to let him hear the uncertainty in my voice. I don't want him to know that his words make me nervous.

“Why a pumpkin patch?” he questions, his hand finding the base of my throat as he sits up to rock deeper into me, his thrusts feeling like he’s close to making me see stars. It also feels like he’s starting to move faster.

“I don’t know.” I’m slow to answer, and it sounds like I’m unsure. *Damn it.* “Why *not* a pumpkin patch?” My hands move, fingers gripping his wrist that’s against my throat, holding me under him. I love him fucking me like this, when he feels in absolute control of both of us and only lets me go where he wants me to. Not to mention, I’m close. Just from this, without him even touching my clit, my thighs are starting to tense around his hips.

“It’s okay, sweet omega.” He doesn’t answer my question, but he probably doesn’t need to. It wasn’t even a real question. “I won’t hurt you. I’ll play with you, I’ll tease you, and I’ll watch my pack take you apart, but you don’t have to hide from me.”

“I’m not trying to—”

“There’s not a question you need to answer. You don’t have to worry about that, all right?” The hand I haven’t felt in a while presses against my lower stomach again, dragging downward towards the apex of my thighs. “I just want you to come for me. That’s all. I just want to feel you come around my cock. You’re such a good girl. My good little omega.” His thumb finds my clit, circling it as he continues to thrust into me. “Just like this. You’re perfect like this, you know?”

I’m not perfect at all, and I doubt he’d say it if he wasn’t as deep into me as he can be.

“Come for me, Mercy. Come all over my cock. I want to feel you.” He circles my clit faster, and when I try to move, even just to writhe under him, his hand on my throat stops me. “No, you can stay right there. Right where you should be. Come on my cock, so I can fill you up, Mercy.”

“Dorian...”

“I know, sweet girl. I’m basically torturing you.” There’s wry humor in his voice as he continues, not changing his pace.

“Do I really need to tell you again, Mercy? Or do you just like hearing the sound of my voice while I fuck you?”

“That one,” I pant, my head tilted back on the pillow, nails digging into the wrist of his hand at my throat. “Definitely that one.” His fingers flex, grip tightening just enough that it’s a promise.

“Come for me, Mercy,” he growls in the sweetest, most threatening way.

I tumble over the proverbial cliff, his name on my lips as I gasp and dig my nails deeper into his skin. He follows me after a few more thrusts, lunging forward to brace himself up on one arm again while he plays with my clit.

And I swear I hear my name on his lips as well. It’s hard to make out. He’s too quiet and my breathing is so loud, but I can feel the movement of his lips against my ear, and it feels like he’s saying my name while he comes.

Instinctively, my hands go up to tangle in his hair, dragging him over for another kiss. It’s sharp, as Dorian himself is, and he nips my lower lip to be contrary before allowing me to explore his mouth as he’d explored mine.

“Can I sleep here with you?” he asks drowsily, moments later when he’s rolled onto his side and dragged me with him, my face close to his.

“It’s your bed,” I point out. “I should probably be asking *you* if I can still sleep here.”

His arms encircle my waist, pulling me more comfortably against his chest. “I don’t want you sleeping anywhere else. I mean, I guess you can sleep with the others if you want. But not tonight. They’ve had you to themselves for a whole week. I think I deserve you for a day or so.”

Again, his words have my heart twisting into a nervous spiral. But there’s nothing I can do except exhale, my mouth close to his collarbone.

“Do you want to take your hearing aids out before you go to sleep?” His fingers brush over my ear, over the band that hooks over it.

“You won’t be able to talk to me anymore if I do,” I point out. They aren’t really comfortable to sleep in, but I’d do it if he wanted me to.

“Take them out, Mercy. Whatever I want to say can wait, I promise.” Even though he says it, I still hesitate, my mouth finding his pulse point as I work first one, then the other free and lean over him to set them on the bedside table. I’m not spending the extra time to put them in their case tonight. They aren’t going anywhere.

In the absolute quiet, I run our conversation over and over on a loop in my head. Even if he knows I can’t stop thinking about the things he said, it’s not like I’ll hear his displeasure or his concern.

So I drift off with his words in my ears contradicting everything I’ve ever considered I want from Winter Grove that still ring so sweetly, even with the concern they cause.

7

Only when I'm alone in the elevator of my dorm three days later does it feel like reality crashes back down to find me. I've spent ten days with Dorian's pack, but it feels like both more and less than that.

And already I miss it. From the moment they'd dropped me at my dorm, a frown on Foster's face, I've wanted to get back in the car and tell them they're not getting rid of me.

But that's not how real life works.

No matter how great it is spending time with them, I have school to manage. I have a dorm, a scholarship, and a life that isn't similar enough to theirs to keep pushing us into the same social circles once they've moved on.

Believing or hoping for anything else is just setting myself up for failure and disappointment.

The elevator doors open, admitting me onto my floor of the dorm. I shoulder my duffel bag once more, adjusting the slightly heavy bag so I can carry it down the hallway. Sure, I could probably drag it. It's heavy-duty enough to survive. But I feel like I'd lose some of my dignity doing so.

Instead, I focus on my door, backpack and duffel weighing me down as I take long strides and nearly jog toward it. There aren't many other people here, judging by the lack of sound and people in the hallways. A few doors are open, some students inside airing out their rooms or playing music while they unpack.

I suddenly wonder if I have a new roommate.

It's still a double room, of course. I doubt they'll let me *not* have a roommate. Even though that would be great. But then again, I should be grateful for getting anything at all, since I can't exactly afford it here on my own.

I find my door and pause, eyes narrowing at the music coming from inside.

Is that... *gospel* music?

Is there anything else it can be when the chorus is a repetition of 'praise the lord' and similar phrases?

Don't judge, I tell myself, reminding myself to be nice at any cost. *You need to get along with her for the rest of the semester. So just don't judge.* I swipe my card and push open the door, making it to my bed and resting my stuff on the mattress before I turn to look at the other side of the room.

Which is now encroaching on *my* side of the room. A huge shag rug takes up most of the floor, and above the tv is a huge, wide painting of...trees.

Just trees. Unless this is some optical illusion that I'm supposed to find the hidden meaning of.

The girl on the other bed looks up at me, her wide blue eyes framed with heavy lashes and brown hair so light that it's nearly blonde.

"Hey," I greet, trying not to look at the creepy trees. "I'm Mercy."

She doesn't answer right away. Instead, she curls her nose like she's smelled something revolting and sits back on the bed a little further.

"Can I ask you to shower before you come in here?" she asks, her voice a soft drawl. "Don't you think that's inconsiderate?"

I blink, confused. "Inconsiderate?" I reply, confused. "What exactly... is inconsiderate? I just did my laundry yesterday. And showered this morning." Is there something wrong with me? Surely if I smelled bad or... whatever, the boys would've told me.

“It’s just that you don’t really need to rub my face in how many partners you have. And I’d rather not deal with it when it makes my eyes water.” She’s still got her face screwed up, and suddenly my patience just snaps.

“You don’t smell so great either, Miss sunshine and soap. And if a *pack*’s scent on an *omega* has you this worked up, I’m really not so sure how you made it through life.” She’s a beta, that much I can tell. But past that, I have no idea. Hell, I don’t even know her name.

My heart twists in my chest after the words leave my mouth. I’m not sorry, exactly, because she’s been a bitch ever since I walked in.

“It would be considerate,” she repeats. “And if you didn’t want to compromise, you should’ve gotten yourself a single room.”

I want to ask why she had to switch, though I have a feeling it was only partially due to her taste in music.

“I’m not Christian,” I reply, my smile widening. “Maybe you could be a little *considerate* and turn down what you’re listening to.”

“No.”

“Then I guess we’re both just pretty uncompromising, huh?” In reality, the gospel music doesn’t bother me. I could tune it out if I wanted to. But it’s the point of the matter.

“But you can’t hear anyway, right? Just take out your hearing aids and you won’t have to deal with it. Meanwhile, I’ll still have to smell you.”

Wow. *Wow*. It’s not a low blow, exactly. But... it also kind of is. Not to mention I wish I had Foster here, just because I know he’d do better than try to rein in his temper and not tell her to go find a closet to sleep in.

I suck in a deep breath, reminding myself that I need my scholarship badly enough that I can’t just hit her. Can I ask to switch rooms? It would be a lot of work, but I’d still do it. Not to mention, the office where one of the resident advisors sits is

on the way to the dining hall, which sounds like a much better place to be right now.

Without speaking, I get to my feet, aware that the beta's eyes follow me when I grab my phone and shove it in the pocket of my jeans. Next are my keys and my card that I need to swipe in the dining hall, though internally I wish I could just collapse onto my bed and go to sleep.

"Where are you going?" the girl asks, still not telling me her name.

"To beg for a new roommate," I reply, slamming the door behind me with a trembling hand.

Don't do it, I remind myself, pacing the length of the hall and slamming the down arrow. *Don't, don't, don't*—I repeat the mantra all the way down to the front lobby, stopping to lean on the desk where an RA I don't know sits and flips through a book, boredom in every line of her body.

When she looks up at me, it's with a tired smile and eyes that look like she needs a nap. "What's up?" she asks. "I don't know your name, but I've seen you coming in and out. Do you need something?"

"I'm Mercy," I introduce. "I, uh, got a new roommate today. Since my last one... doesn't go here anymore."

I wonder if she attends anywhere at all.

"Are you guys missing something? I can help—"

"I'm here to get on my hands and knees and beg for a new one. Please. Any other one. I'll take any that you've got."

The girl smiles, apology in every line of her face. "Yeah, Petra's last roommate didn't like her either. But she had to wait the whole semester to switch with someone. And that someone is you."

"So..." I don't like the way she looks at me, or the pity in her eyes. "If I have to live with her, I might die."

"Don't die. Look, we're here if you need to mediate any issues, but past that..." She shrugs her slim shoulders in

apology. “You’re stuck with her. There are no open rooms, and none that’ll be open this semester. I’m sorry, Mercy.”

“Okay.” I let out a long, tired sigh. “That’s... well, I guess things could be worse.” I don’t know how, but that’s beside the point. “Thanks. And I don’t mean that sarcastically.” At least now I know her name, not that I was incredibly curious.

I wonder if I could chase her off with the boys.

Lazily my steps take me to the dining hall, and I grab a few things from the line, including a few pieces of fruit, a drink, and a blondie. It really is the superior brownie, though I haven’t found a lot of people who share that opinion.

Then I stop, frowning once more.

Last year I’d rarely ever eaten alone. I’d always had Briella with me, and most of the time we had Zara with us as well. Sure, she was a murderer and all, but at least she was a sympathetic ear and good company. If a little rude sometimes.

Now I have... no one. Not on this side of campus, anyway. Dorian’s pack has made it over here a few times, yeah, but that was usually only to fuck with me.

It’s just me here now.

“Well, don’t you look like a lost puppy?” The voice is slow and sharp. Melodic and amused. Every boy’s dream in an alpha, and it even causes me to shudder before I turn to look at the redhead standing at my shoulder.

Cecily Klein is just as gorgeous as the first time I’d met her, and just as expensive looking. From what I understand, her family rivals Dorian’s in influence, and she’s the only person I know who doesn’t have an ounce of misgiving or concern about him or his pack. But why should she? I’m pretty sure she could take him in a fight.

Not that I plan to tell Dorian that.

“Oh, right. Your roommate’s gone and so is Zara. Winter Grove overlooks a lot, but definitely not murder.” Her blue eyes dance, and she points with the hand not holding a drink to

a booth near the window where Eden sits. “You’re welcome to sit with us.”

“Are you going to, I don’t know, insult me?” I ask wearily, not sure I have time for her crap. “Because I’ve had a lot of that already in the last few minutes. I don’t need to do it again.”

“Not if you tell me who’s insulting the girl who stinks of Dorian and his boys.” Her gaze dances with curiosity. I doubt she’s lying to me. Why would she? Cecily has never needed to before, and neither has Eden. I’m no one to them, and probably to most others at this school.

I slide into the booth across from Eden, who looks up at me with narrowed eyes. “I thought you were done belonging to them,” she points out, not needing to say who she means. “Did they corner you already today?”

“Oh, no, umm...” Cecily sits beside Eden, wordlessly pushing her further into the booth with her thigh. If I didn’t know that Cecily preferred making boys cry, I’d think they were dating. “I’ve actually been back for about ten days. I ran into them when I got back.” I don’t *have* to tell them. But again, what are they going to do with the information?

“That scent is not ten days old,” Cecily points out, sinking her shining white teeth into an apple. She chews, thinking, and when she swallows, the red-haired girl says, “You’ve been staying with them at their house outside of town, haven’t you?”

“It’s wild that you know everything,” I tell her, toying with the grapes on my plate. “Yeah, I have.”

“They’re your *pack* now, huh?” she asks with confidence, but when I don’t answer, her head tilts to the side. “You’re really not admitting to it?”

“They’re just bored,” I reply. “I mean, maybe they like me some. But I don’t think it’s that serious. They’re not looking, not when they’ve had each other for that long. Besides, that’s not today’s problem.” And I don’t want to be disappointed about that any longer than I need to be.

“Then what is?” It’s Eden’s turn to be curious.

“My new fucking roommate. Her name’s Petra, and—”

Eden snorts, eyes back on the pages of her book.

“Do you know her?” I ask when she doesn’t go on. I take to peeling the grapes, needing something to take my frustrations out on and finding them helpless enough for my wrath.

“I know her enough to not want to be anywhere near her. Did you try getting a new roommate?”

I nod.

“No luck?” There’s so little sympathy in Eden’s voice that I’m probably imagining it from the brunette altogether. I look up at her, lips pressed in a line.

“I don’t care. I’ll figure something out. She got upset that I smell like Dorian’s pack and told me to take out my hearing aids if I don’t like her music. Am I overreacting? That’s a shit thing to say, right?”

“That’s an extremely shitty thing to say,” Cecily agrees. “What are you going to do about it?”

“*Do* about it?”

“I’d probably hit her,” Eden admits. “Cecily could probably have one of her *puppies* make Amelia’s life hell.” It takes me a moment to realize she isn’t talking about real dogs.

I frown. “I don’t know. Look, it’ll work itself out. But can I ask you one more thing?”

Cecily shrugs. Eden looks up at me expectantly, her fingers pausing where they’ve been skimming pages. I still can’t tell how the two of them feel about me, since it doesn’t exactly feel like they enjoy my company.

“Do you know Amelia from Royalwood?”

“Obviously,” Eden intones. “She’s on their archery team and all.”

“Well... maybe she’s on ours now?” I smile weakly when they both find my gaze, looking surprised. “She told me she goes here now. But you guys are looking like that’s a problem. Is that a problem?”

Eden glances at Cecily, who tilts her head to the side. Her blue eyes are cloudy with thought, and her mouth tugs downward at the corners in a frown. “She doesn’t like Dorian,” the redheaded, sweet smelling alpha explains after a moment. “And she has a particular dislike of August as well. He beat the shit out of one of her pack once, I think. But it was a while ago.”

“Does she hold a grudge?”

Cecily turns, her smile blinding. “Mercy, haven’t you learned anything yet? When we have all the money in the world, we have to find ways to keep life interesting. And that means, yes. We all hold the meanest grudges imaginable. Especially Amelia.”

The words prickle at the back of my neck as Amelia’s warning echoes in my ears.

Would she really do something here, at Winter Grove?

I sit down with a sigh beside Callum, flopping back in my chair. “I’m glad you’re here,” I tell him, flashing a grin at the friend I met last semester in bio. “I thought I was going to be on my own all day today. You’re a Godsend.” It doesn’t matter that it’s my first and only class on Monday. All of my other classes I share with one of Dorian’s pack. This was the only one that’s been up in the air. To have Callum in it makes me happy, since we barely got to hang out at all last semester.

The brunette smiles over at me, his mild-alpha scent just as friendly as I remember it. “So you missed me then? I thought you might not once you made up with Dorian’s pack.”

“You know about that?” I open my eyes to look at him, bemused. “I haven’t really been open about it...”

“Your scent tells me more than I need to know,” Callum assures me, opening his binder to the syllabus. I enjoy literature classes, especially electives like this. But they aren’t what I’m best at. I’m a science girl at heart.

I’m about to say something else when, all of a sudden, Eden sits down on my other side, taking the third chair at the table and tossing her backpack onto the table. When Callum and I both look at her, she raises a brow. “Aren’t we friends now, Mercy?”

“Yeah, no, we’re great friends,” I assure her. “You can sit here. It’s okay with me, anyway. I’m just surprised, is all.”

Eden rolls her eyes and gives Callum a quick grin. “I bet you missed Professor Potter from last year, didn’t you?” she

scoffs, and Callum shakes his head.

“No, I really can’t say I did.”

I take it from their conversation that not only do they know each other, but that they didn’t like the professor we have for Contemporary Fiction. At least it’s only for one semester, and that doesn’t seem as long as it could be.

“So, I—” Eden breaks off, inhaling and narrowing her eyes in confusion. Though, with her, it looks more like angry confusion, since she’s the empress of resting bitch face with little chance of being overthrown. “Guess you weren’t lying, huh?” she says after a moment, nodding toward the door and drawing my attention to it.

Amelia stands just inside, speaking to a blonde girl with wide eyes who nods her head and seems afraid of the alpha. From this far away I can’t tell what she is, but with the way she flinches, I’d guess that she’s an omega terrified of Amelia.

“Is that Amelia Orion?” Callum inquires in a low voice, leaning over so he’s nearly pressed to my shoulder. Eden does the same on my other side until it feels like we’re having a huddle. Even I lean down to complete the strange little triangle, thinking that we couldn’t be more obvious if we tried.

“Mercy said she was here. And she’s already made it clear she holds a grudge against Dorian,” Eden replies, still eyeing up the alpha at the door. The other girl has fled, but Amelia walks in, barely looking at us before she finds a table on the other side of the room and sits down lightly, placing her book on the table along with a folder from her backpack.

“Well, I would too,” Callum admits, frowning. “Sorry, Mercy.”

“Why ‘sorry, Mercy’?” I ask, confused. My eyes flick back between them, gaze no longer fixed on Amelia. “What happened with them? And since you both know, is it a ‘public knowledge’ kind of thing?”

Eden shakes her head. “Not outside of Winter Grove. And probably not outside the people who know Dorian’s family. Cecily’s dad works with his, and Callum is related to Cecily.”

“Distantly,” Callum assures me. “The sadism skipped my side of the family.”

I can’t help the small grin that flickers at my features while I wait for them to go on.

“I don’t know everything,” the beta beside me goes on, shrugging her shoulders. “But it’s a big reason she didn’t originally come here for school. She’s a sophomore, and their *thing* happened two summers ago.”

“Was it really bad?”

Callum taps his fingers on the table, and when I look at him, I see that he’s eyeing Amelia with a frown. “She doesn’t pick the best packmates,” he says finally. “From what I know, her mom was the same way. She and Dorian’s family were never that close, but she tricked him. Amelia knew one of her packmates held a grudge against one of his, and she got friendly with him so they could, uh…” he trails off, shrugging. “I don’t know. I’ve heard a few different things, but I don’t want to speculate. It was pretty violent.”

“Incredibly violent,” Eden agrees. “Dorian and August sent a guy to the hospital, and I don’t think anyone’s seen him since.”

It’s not really my business to ask him the details... is it? If he wanted to tell me, especially after seeing Amelia in the parking lot, he would’ve told me, I assume.

“So, why is she here?” Callum’s voice is soft. “Surely she knows she doesn’t have a lot of friends here. Even people who don’t like Dorian don’t like what *she* did. She won’t have any kind of support, and it’ll be hard for her to make connections.”

“I don’t think she wants to,” I admit quietly. “She warned me away from them. She basically threatened them. But surely that’s crazy, right?” I curl my fingers around the edge of my binder. “Surely she didn’t transfer schools just to get back at them for something that happened over two years ago, right?”

Callum and Eden don’t answer right away, though it’s Eden that finally sighs and says, “Don’t you remember what

Cecily told you, Mercy? If there's anything we're good at here, it's holding a grudge."

At her words, Amelia looks up at me, grinning, and gives a small wave. There's no trace of malice or anger on her face at all. Just... friendliness.

I don't buy it for a moment.

After class, I grab my stuff and walk into the hallway, barely remembering any of Professor Potter's words about his expectations and how he won't coddle anyone through his class. That's fine with me. I don't need to be coddled.

I suck in a lungful of air as I leave, and the familiar, bitter scent of Amelia fills my nostrils. It causes me to look up sharply, just in time to see that she's standing on the other side of the hallway, eyes on the phone that she holds in her hand.

My steps slow, but when she looks up at me, it's to give me a quick smile and a half-hearted wave. Like I'm merely an acquaintance and she hadn't threatened me in a parking lot just a week ago.

Does she think I've forgotten? Does she believe that I just don't care, or that I'll take her words to heart and actually *stop* associating with Dorian's pack?

When she looks up at me again and takes a step toward me, my stomach twists into knots and I think of things to say to head off whatever's going to come out of her mouth.

"Eden?" My stomach unknits itself when she falls into step with a very disinterested Eden. The brunette sneers at her, but Amelia doesn't look like she notices. Or maybe she just doesn't *care*. "I know that there aren't technically archery tryouts in the spring... but I was hoping that I could come to some of the practices?"

Eden looks her over, as if she's trying to figure out if Amelia is bullshitting her or not. "Thursdays," she says finally. "We meet on Thursdays, but for now we're shooting in the White River gym, because of the snow." I frown as they go, unable to hear more of their conversation.

Not that it apparently concerned me, anyway.

I shake my head to clear it, feet dragging as I go back towards my dorm. While I'm glad that I only have this one class on Fridays and it's from one to three-twenty in the afternoon, it makes me feel like my Monday is a little bit empty in contrast.

And it's not just because Dorian, August, and Foster are still *in* class until five. Tuesdays are better. I see August and Foster for a couple of my classes, and I get back into science during the day as well. Wednesday is my three hour Astronomy lecture, and there are worse things I could be doing than spending it with Dorian.

Will he want to sit with me this semester?

While I hope so, and I don't quite see why he won't... I can't convince myself that it's a definite thing. I can't mollify my feelings with that certainty, when it's just not a *certainty* to me at all.

In some ways, I'm still waiting for them to yank the rug out from under me and tell me that all of this was a joke. That they were just fucking around to see how far they could pull my chain.

That they don't care about me the same way I can't help caring for them.

The elevator doors open on my floor, and my thoughts switch to my new roommate, *Petra*. More than anything, I just want her to go away like a bad nightmare. She can take her weird forest painting as well. And the gospel music that plays like an anthem almost anytime I'm in the room.

It's just a semester, sure...

But she's going to make it feel like an eternity. Though, it's my intention to keep checking for open rooms on campus. I can't pay to upgrade to a single, obviously. Even if there are any available, which I doubt, based on the conversation I had with the RA downstairs.

But I don't know how I'm going to survive with Petra.

As if she's the devil herself summoned to make my life hell, I know she's in there when I open my door and lyrics

screaming to *praise Jesus* flood my ears. I wouldn't be surprised if my hearing aids shut off in protest, but I just press my lips together in a thin line and move to set my backpack on my bed.

Why can't she be in class?

Behind me, I hear movement. Enough that I know she's in bed, though when I glance over my shoulder I see that she's on her laptop reading through something.

"Is today a free day for you?" I ask, trying to sound conversational and not like I'm willing to do anything to get her the hell out of here for a few hours.

Petra's gaze slides over to lock on mine, and there's nothing but irritation in her eyes. Well. Shame on me for asking, I guess. Clearly I should've known better than to poke the hibernating hedgehog.

No, I need a better insult than that. Hedgehogs are adorable, with an important place in this world.

Petra is kind of like an appendix. Useless. Prone to causing problems to people.

If only someone would remove her from my life.

"I have a night class," she tells me, accentuating the words like I'm, well, deaf. Which I kind of am, but that's beside the point when I can hear her mostly fine. This just feels like an insult, quite frankly. She has to know I don't need her to talk like that, when I haven't asked her to speak up or slow down before.

This is just her being a bitch, clearly.

I take a breath, refusing to say anything to add fuel to the proverbial fire that is this conversation. "Okay, well, is it one you like?" The question is lame, but I don't know what else to say.

"Are you just asking me because you want to know how long you'll be able to get rid of me?" She waits, eyebrows raised, as I shake my head and widen my eyes to look innocent. Surely I'm not. That would be just so rude of me.

“Or because you’re trying to get me to believe you want to be my friend? Which, let’s be honest, you’re nowhere close to my type.”

I open my mouth, ready to say something unfriendly, before closing it again with a pained, stretched smile. “Neither of those,” I say, abandoning my plans for a nap before going to the library. I’ll just go there now and nap in a booth. Or in the snow. Either one is preferable to being here, I’ve decided. “I was just trying to have a conversation, Petra. But if you’re so against that, then I’ll go.”

“Great.” She looks back at her screen and I hesitate.

Why should *I* have to be the one to walk away? Haven’t I done that enough? She’s no better than me, except that she probably has money. But all that means is that she bought her way into Winter Grove instead of getting in on merit, like I did.

Caught in my thoughts, I don’t move once my backpack is slung over one shoulder, fingers gripping the strap hard. I shouldn’t have to leave my own goddamn dorm when I have just as much right to be here as she does.

Petra looks back over at me, manufactured surprise clear on her face. “Oh, you’re still here? Weird. I swear you were leaving.”

Seven possible responses bubble to my lips, and at least three of them include where she can shove her laptop. The one that makes it to my lips is a scoff, followed by, “Yeah, it’s such a shock that I like to be in *my* dorm room.”

“Ours,” she remarks absently, barely paying any attention.

“*Ours* because my ex roommate was associated with a murderer and no one likes you enough to live with you, so you have the honor of being the shittiest bad juju I’ve ever gotten in my life.”

Before she can reply, I walk to the door and slam it behind me so hard that it rattles on its hinges, the sound of gospel music following me down the hallway like my new, least favorite theme song.

There are a lot fewer people than I expect there to be when Thursday rolls around and the archery team meets up in the gym. I, for one, had thought it would be interesting to shoot in the snow. Especially all four feet of it that sits in the un-shoveled areas outside. But I'd been clearly outvoted. Not that I'd even brought it up.

Even though we're shooting somewhere warm, with styrofoam targets that sit under the basketball goal at the end of the gym, there are only five of us here, and Eden isn't one of them. I can't help wondering if she's sick, as the beta *never* misses a practice. She takes her job as captain incredibly seriously.

But today, it's just me, three sophomores, and Amelia.

Of course, Amelia couldn't just *not* show up. Petulantly, I wish Eden would've said no, though I know she can't actually keep her off the team without good reason. Not to mention, Amelia is one of the best archers I've ever seen. I don't know if I could beat her like I did last semester, a second time, and it's safe to say that in the long run, she's my biggest competition for anything I intend to do in the archery circuit of Winter Grove.

Not to mention that I figure she'll be on the team for real, once competition season rolls around again for us. Why wouldn't she be?

Absently, I saw my fingers back and forth on the string of my bow, watching the three sophomores as they shoot.

Objectively, out of all of us, they need the practice most. They're not awful at what they're doing. But they aren't that great. Though, it's not for lack of trying. And they aren't doing anything specifically wrong.

They just need more practice.

Blinking as I take a breath, I frown. While I've been watching them, it feels like someone has snuck up on me. Which is unfortunately rather easy to do when I can't hear things behind me quite as well as other people. For all I know, Amelia has been talking to me this whole time and I haven't noticed.

I whirl around, hand tight on my bow, and find that Amelia is only a few feet away from me, her bow in her hand. Her hair is up in a ponytail, and the guard on her hand sits below her pulled up sleeves. Her bow is much fancier than mine, and the scope is something I could drool over for days.

But I know that the accessories aren't what makes her good. She's so talented at this that I wonder how much of it is raw skill and how much is practice.

She smiles, the look free of malice, and her blue eyes narrow. "Want to shoot against me?" she asks, hooking a quiver of arrows on her jeans. As I'm wearing leggings, I've had to find a way to hook my quiver into my waistband, and while it could be more comfortable, it could also be worse.

"Sure," I reply after a heartbeat or six. I don't know what she wants, but just asking to shoot with me is definitely a harmless request.

Unless she shoots *me*.

She nocks an arrow and swings her bow up, already mostly in her stance as she sights through the scope and becomes absolutely still. It only takes her a moment, and when she looses, the arrow hits the target with a soft *thunk* and sits just inside the yellow circle near the middle.

As usual, she's damn good at this.

I pick an arrow and bring it to the string, my movements slow and measured. Smoothly, I draw back the bow, barely

needing to look through the scope myself as I match up the little lines with my target, then adjust for distance. My arrow punches neatly into the yellow circle as well, though further from the black than hers.

“How long have you been shooting?” Amelia draws again, looses, and watches as her next arrow hits closer still to the black bullseye.

“Since I was ten or so. My dad taught me,” I say tersely, my body going through the memorized motions easily and automatically. Again I hit the yellow, though I’m still just a touch further from the black than her. “Why did you come to Winter Grove?”

I don’t really mean to be so blunt about it, but I want to know. So, why not just ask *her*? Especially since I’m too much of a chicken to ask the boys what happened two years ago.

She doesn’t answer me at first. She draws a third arrow from her quiver, sights, and shoots. This time, the arrow lands right on the line of the black circle that denotes a bullseye, but I don’t move to shoot. I want an answer, not to continue this little contest.

Amelia turns to look at me expectantly, blue eyes on my hand clasped around my bow. Unmoving, I only grip it tighter until she meets my gaze again. “I could’ve come here in the first place,” she replies, the words almost... lazy. “I was enrolled, and should’ve started two years ago, instead of settling for Royalwood.”

“This is starting to feel like a villain origin story,” I tell her frankly, unable to help myself. “Are you going to tell me next that your plans for Winter Grove domination were thwarted by Dorian’s pack?”

Her smile widens, and she looks truly amused by my words. “That’s an interesting take on it. But no. There is no villain story or evil monologue or whatever you expect of me. I just wanted to come here like everyone else. I have just as much money as them. I’m not an idiot, and I would’ve made the archery team my first year.” For someone who is supposedly so upset about Dorian’s pack and not being here in

the first place, she seems so... flippant. Like it doesn't really matter that much at all.

"So what happened?"

"I heard they were shitty to you last semester." For a moment, I think that's her answer. That, for some reason, me getting bullied was her call to arms. "They made your life hell. Even heard that Foster had you framed for stealing."

I have no idea how she knows that, and I hate that she *does* know in the first place.

"We're not here to talk about me."

"Aren't we? It's not twenty questions if you don't answer me. Just like it isn't archery practice if you don't shoot." Her smile is blazing with goodwill, and I let out a breath before drawing my bow back, sighting, and loosing within a breath's length of time.

My arrow buries itself in the target in the bullseye, and I mentally let out a sigh of relief. That definitely could've gone one of two ways.

"What's your question?" I demand, feeling a little better after the shot.

"Why don't you hate them?" She blinks, and I think I see the smile fall at the edges. "They were *awful*. You can't tell me you've forgotten how they made you feel. Surely there's nothing they can do to make up for it, outside of, I don't know, a lot of money. Is that it? Did they pay you to forgive them?"

I scowl, a disgusting snort leaving my mouth. "What? No, I would never—"

"Or have you really convinced yourself that you're in love with them?" Her smile turns crooked, her eyes less friendly. "I've gotta tell you, Mercy. That sounds a bit like Stockholm Syndrome to me. Don't you see it too? How fucked up it is to be in love with the boys who wanted you to quit? Who played with your feelings because they could? They'll do it again, you know."

The words hit me harder than I want them to, but only because that's a fear I have as well. What if they *are* still fucking with me for some reason, just to get a reaction out of me?

What if they never really felt anything for me at all, and they've just done this to hurt me? It'll hurt now more than ever since I have strong feelings for Dorian's pack.

What if I'm not the omega they want or the one they intend to keep? They've been a pack of three for so long that they may not want one at all.

"It's scary, isn't it?" Amelia asks quietly. "I know you're thinking about it, too. How could you not? No offense, Mercy, but let's be real here. You don't have money. You're not influential, and archery isn't that much of a talent. What could they see in you that they couldn't easily find in an omega with that and more?"

I want her to stop talking.

"What could they possibly want with *you*?"

I blink at my bow, trying to drag my self-composure back. "So... was there actually a real question in there, Amelia?" I ask, keeping my words the same casual tone as hers. "Because you said earlier you didn't have any villain monologues ready to go, but I have to tell you, this is starting to feel like one. Unfortunately, you're wasting it on me." My grin is unfriendly at best. "I'm no hero, and you're a sorry excuse for a villain." I put my arrow back into the quiver, sliding it beside the others as I walk towards the target. Once there, I collect my arrows, hands shaking, and slide them back into the quiver before I return, intent on just passing her and leaving.

"I asked it," Amelia states, though she doesn't look as self-satisfied as she had a second ago. She shifts on the balls of her feet, watching me like a hawk. "What do you think Dorian, Foster, and August could ever possibly see in you?"

I've always had a good poker face, and right now I'm glad she can't read anything in my expression. I shrug one shoulder at her, head tilting to the side. "Don't know. But based on the

rest of your argument, there's nothing for me to see in them, either. They're vile and I'm poor. We'll make a good pack."

If only I felt the confidence that I speak the words with.

Instantly Amelia's expression changes. She sneers with derision, blue eyes cold. It's her turn to clench her bow in her grip, and she takes a step forward so that we're too close and her scent nearly chokes me.

"I'm trying to *save* you, Mercy," the girl says in a voice as smooth as velvet and as venomous as a cobra. "You didn't do anything to me. I don't want to hurt you."

"Then don't hurt anyone. What's the point, Amelia?" I have to tilt my head back to look at her, but I don't move away, even with her scent giving me a headache. My pulse seems to pound in my throat, and I have to admit that it's difficult to stand here like this, and face off against an alpha like her. She's definitely scarier than Callum could ever be, and more intimidating than August usually is.

It's hard to convince my body not to back down, but I'm not going to let something stupid like *biology* get in the way of making a point. "You say you were supposed to come to Winter Grove before. You're here *now*, aren't you? They don't seem to want anything to do with you. Why can't you be happy with that? Why can't you just make the best of things, instead of dragging people, and yourself, down into the mud?"

"Your optimism is adorable, though I'm surprised you still have it, being here," she remarks coolly. "This is it, Mercy. This is the last chance I'm giving you. Don't talk to them anymore. Ghost them. Tell them never to talk to you again and go find better friends. *Anyone* is better than them, and if you don't, then you're going to regret it."

"Because you'll *make me* regret it?" My brows raise. "They tried for a semester and failed to make me quit or regret my choices. You really think you can do better?"

"Yeah. I do," Amelia promises, grinning with enough malice to choke me. "Because they never wanted to really hurt you. And frankly? I don't really care that much. If making you

bleed is the only way to hurt them, then I'll do it. I'll do anything for that, Mercy. And that should worry you."

It does.

But I don't let that show on my face. I just shake my head at her, a sneer of my own twisting my lips. "Your shots drift to the left, Amelia," I tell her, turning to nod at the archery target. "Maybe you should try over-correcting to the right. Might fix that for you." I don't wait for her to reply. I don't bother stepping back from her either; I just turn and walk past, my shoulder brushing hers as I go.

And even though I want to, just to see what her face looks like, I never look back as I walk to where we keep our equipment so I can go to my dorm and suffer even more when Petra shows up.

“You can’t use gospel music to punish someone.” Petra’s voice is high, almost a whine, and she sneers the words at me from across the lounge.

I barely move. I just stare at her, gripping my hoodie tightly in my hands as I sit and watch the beta go on about how much of a bitch I’ve been to her. Besides, it definitely feels like she uses the volume of the music to punish me. Especially anytime I’m trying to do something.

“Would you like to tell them what you told me to do when I asked you to turn it down?” I ask, trying to keep my voice polite.

Petra doesn’t answer right away. I see a flicker of doubt in her blue eyes, and it’s clear we both know how much of a shitty thing it is to say, every fucking time she says it.

The advisor, a senior, looks at her with a sigh. “What did you say to her?” she prods, and I can’t help but take some joy in seeing Petra squirm.

“I didn’t mean it,” she snaps like a toddler caught doing something they shouldn’t. Because really, that’s all she is right now in my eyes.

The advisor looks at me, and I’m all too happy to explain, “She told me I should just take out my hearing aids and it isn’t that big of a deal when I basically can’t hear, anyway.”

Our advisor, a red-haired beta with the brightest green eyes I’ve ever seen, buries her face in one hand and lets out a long-

suffering breath. “You can’t say that,” she mutters, marking something down in her notebook. “Seriously, Petra.”

“I didn’t mean it and you know it,” my roommate hisses at me. “Maybe if you’d stop insulting my religion—”

“I’m insulting your need for volume in levels so high, it’s a wonder my hearing aids don’t start shooting off alarm bells because the emergency sensor has been triggered. I don’t care what kind of music you listen to, Petra.” It’s true, even though there’s only so much ‘praise Jesus’ I can hear before I can’t take it anymore, at any volume. It would be different if she didn’t play the same album over and over *and over* again.

“Well, look.” Our advisor sits back in her armchair. “I get that you guys aren’t getting along. Just like you didn’t get along with your last roommate, Petra. But there’s *nothing* I can do past trying to help the both of you mediate this out. You’re going to have to learn to live with each other for the rest of the semester because the dorms are full.”

I’m too frustrated to listen to this. Especially when I know that it’s not going to get better when our advisor walks away and Petra’s free to take her attitude out on me for the entire weekend. “I need to go to the library anyway,” I mutter, glancing at our advisor for permission to get the hell away from here. She frowns but nods her okay, and it only takes me a few minutes before I have my backpack with my iPad and textbooks in it, ready to go to the library and get caught up on homework that isn’t due for at least a month.

Anything is preferable to being stuck in the dorm room with Petra, who never seems to leave when I’m around.

Somehow, I don’t make it to the library. Though, I suppose I can’t really be too shocked when instead I find myself at the boys’ building. I manage to slip inside with another student and let my feet take me to the elevator, then to their door.

Once there, I pause, unable to bring myself to knock. I’m frozen, with Amelia’s words swimming through my head on a loop.

What could Dorian, Foster, and August ever see in *me*? She's right about a lot of what she's said about me, and about them. They're rich. I'm poor. They've got futures that easily eclipse mine, and I'm not that special.

I'm already so upset that her words sink deeper than they should, and I lose the nerve to knock altogether.

Maybe I really should just go to the library.

Before I can turn around to leave, however, hands press against the door on either side of my face, and August's scent floods my nostrils as he leans in to press his mouth to my throat.

"I hate to state the obvious, but it's clear you're upset. And I've been standing here for a few seconds." He pauses, though I hate to lose his purring voice in my ear as he runs his nose along my jaw. "You weren't going to knock, were you, Mercy?"

"Maybe I was just thinking about how to do it," I try to tease, but even to my ears, my voice sounds unsure and unbelievable.

He presses a kiss to my cheek before swiping his key in the door and pushing the door open, his pack's combined scent assaulting my nostrils in the best way possible.

Dorian's the first one to look up from the sofa, glasses half-obscuring his face and one hand buried in Foster's hair as he does something on his iPad. He looks at me, surprised, though that fades to worry when he gets a good look at my face.

"I was going to come get you later," Foster murmurs drowsily, barely moving from Dorian's lap. "I appreciate you saving me the cold walk through the snow. Thanks for being a mind reader, Mercy."

"What's wrong?" Dorian asks, as August urges me inside and closes the door behind us.

I really hadn't meant to come here to unload on them. Especially now, when my eyes burn and I feel like I want to cry at Petra's actions and Amelia's words. No matter what, I'm

not going to cry around them. Or they really will think I'm pathetic.

I open my mouth to say something stupid, and witty, and hopefully something that shows them I'm totally fine, even though two of them already think I'm not.

That's the plan, anyway, until August slides my backpack off my shoulders, lets it thump to the floor, and moves to look at my face with sincerity and concern.

Somehow, that does it. I feel tears pool in my eyes, and before I can help it, they're running down my face and I pull my hands to my eyes, palms pressed against them to stop the burn of tears. "Sorry, *sorry*," I apologize, my heart thumping painfully in my chest. "I didn't come here to cry. I didn't want to bother you with my problems, or—" I break off when hands wrap around my wrists, and when the black spots leave my vision I find Dorian in front of me, face etched with worry.

"Why?" he asks plainly, August at his side. I don't see Foster, but when hands curl around my waist and a face presses into the back of my neck, I realize that he must be behind me like a solid barrier between me and escape.

Though, I'm pretty sure I can take Foster if I need to.

"Why... what?" I ask, blinking rapidly in an attempt to staunch the tears that way.

"Why don't you want to bother us with your problems, Mercy?" He seems... guarded as he asks it. Like he's afraid of my answer, or how he's asking it.

"Because I don't want to inconvenience you, or for you to think I'm just here to whine or something." Because I don't want them thinking they're responsible for my problems. "I don't want you to think I'm trying to drag you into something."

"Drag me into it," Foster murmurs, head on my shoulder. "I *beg* you, Mercy. I like having more problems to stick my nose into so I can make them worse for the other person."

I can't help the small smile his teasing brings to my lips, and I nearly snicker.

“Why don’t you tell us what these problems are, and I’ll tell you if we’re okay with being dragged into them, all right?” Dorian keeps his grip on my hands as he pulls me further into the dorm suite until finally, I have no choice but to sit down beside him on the sofa, hands still in his.

It feels a little silly when August sits behind me, one arm around my waist, and even weirder still when Foster braces himself against my legs, head in my lap.

Like I’m the center of their world for this moment.

Like they’re my *pack*.

“My roommate is a bitch,” I say, extracting one hand from Dorian’s grip so that I can tangle my fingers in Foster’s hair. I’ve never really gotten to do this with him, and it’s nice to just massage his scalp and feel the softness of the silky strands between my fingers. I knew from the beginning his hair would be so soft, and I’m glad at least that I have the chance to confirm my suspicions like this.

Not to mention, I swear that I can hear him purr, and his arm around my leg tightens as though he doesn’t want to move.

“Like, I don’t know if she needs an exorcism, or a stint in prison, but she really is awful.” I tersely explain to them the same things I’d told my RA, trying not to dwell on any one part of it for too long.

“She told you to *take out your hearing aids*?” August’s near-growl is a rumble against my back as he combs his fingers through my hair. “What the fuck?”

“Yeah. Really nice of her, right?” At least I’m not crying now, but the tear tracks are sticky on my face and my eyes feel gritty and dry. “Roommate of the year.”

Foster opens his mouth to say something but closes it with a frown and a look at Dorian. Is there something I’m missing here?

When I turn to look at the pack’s alpha, I see that he’s not looking at Foster, but at me. “There’s something else,” he assumes, still holding on to my hand that he’s got in his lap.

His thumb strokes over the pulse in my wrist, and I hate the way he can apparently see through me so easily. “You wouldn’t be this upset over that. And you wouldn’t have hesitated at the door so long.”

I blink dry eyes and say, “It doesn’t matter. It’s just... worthless, anyway.”

“It’s Amelia, isn’t it?” August asks, unerring on his assumptions.

“She doesn’t say anything worth listening to,” I argue. God, I don’t want them to know how much I’m affected by what she said. I don’t want them to know how *desperate* I am for it not to be true.

“Well, how about you let me listen to it anyway, sweet girl?” The nickname loosens something inside of me, and I clench my eyes shut, sucking in a breath.

“It’s not your problem to deal with,” I say again. I’m not trying to be a brat or play around by not telling them. I really don’t think they’ll care, and I don’t want to hear their words when they agree with her, that I’m nothing more than a friend at best, amusing at worst.

I’m not going to tell him.

That is until he reaches out and curls a hand around my throat, dragging me closer to him on the couch. He growls softly, just enough that my hand against his chest can feel the vibration from under his shirt.

“Mercy,” he says, dark eyes plaintive. “I don’t know what it is that you think is going to offend me, or that’s going to bother me. Or what you think I’m going to do.” I barely notice when August gets up from behind me, only that his absence leaves me cold. “But you’re not leaving this sofa until you tell me, little omega.”

It reminds me of him when I didn’t like any of them. It reminds me of when he’d wanted my total surrender, or when he’d put a collar on me and told me that they *owned* me for the semester.

None of those are exactly unpleasant memories, framed as they are now.

August sits down again behind me, hand returning to my back.

I let out a breath, my free hand going up to grip his wrist, though I'm not trying to pull away or get him to let go. Dorian's grip is almost comforting, and not exactly painful.

So is his dominance, and the idea of just melting into it and *him* and telling him my problems as if he's my alpha is intoxicating.

Maybe I can. Just this once.

"Amelia keeps trying to warn me away from you. And she brought up the fact that you guys don't want me that badly, anyway. She, umm, reminded me that you guys are... everything. You're rich, you're so smart. You're good at everything. You're influential and you'll all be amazing when you graduate from here." His thumb strokes the side of my neck as I let out a defeated breath.

"And I'm not. I'm just Mercy Noble. I'm here on a scholarship, and I'll never be as rich or as successful as any of you." It's hard to admit all the things I keep pent up inside of me, and my hands grip both of his more tightly. "I'm not anything to you, so why should I act like it? She said I shouldn't get caught up in your trouble with her, and made it a point to remind me that you guys don't see me in that way, anyway."

All three of them are quiet for long enough that my anxiety turns to fear.

They're going to kick me out of here. Now that it's out in the open, they're going to kick me out of their room and blame me for ruining the fun thing we had going.

Amelia is right.

And I've always known it too.

Foster stands up, sliding smoothly to his feet, and I look up at him in surprise as Dorian lets go of my throat.

“Don’t,” Dorian warns, even though Foster is clearly on the way to the door.

Is he upset with me?

“August, don’t let him—” August is on his feet halfway through Dorian’s warning, and he catches Foster by the arm and *yanks* him back, even though the beta lets out a snarl of disapproval.

“Why do you care so much?” he sneers at Dorian. “You should let me after what she said. She’s fucking with Mercy and she’s *ours*. Why won’t you let me—”

“Because you’re going to get expelled if you do. Sit *down*.” He points to the floor and August drags Foster back to the living room, sitting down with him in the chair by the window, Foster on his lap. “And now *you*.”

I can’t help my eyes widening when Dorian turns to me again, a frown on his face as my stomach twines itself into knots. “Why would you think I wouldn’t want to know that?”

“Because...” I trail off. “Well, she’s not bothering *you*. Not with this, anyway. And I just assumed—”

“I think you shouldn’t do that anymore, don’t you?” His smile isn’t unkind, exactly. But again it reminds me of last semester when he made me nervous and hot at the same time. Though, honestly, he still turns me on and worries me, so things haven’t changed too much. “Your assumptions aren’t on point lately.”

“But I’m—”

He doesn’t let me finish. Or rather, when he raises his hand to show me a black leather collar with an o-ring up front, I’m stunned into silence. That must be what August got up to get.

“Guess I should’ve told you that you should keep wearing this. I kind of hoped you might just *want* to,” the alpha purrs. I don’t move as he reaches out and gingerly buckles it around my neck, his finger hooking into the ring as he pulls me toward him.

The entire exchange has butterflies taking flight in my stomach, and before I can stop myself, I lean forward to press my nose against his throat, every bit of me humming with excitement and *want*.

Mine, my brain whispers, and I have to fight not to scrape my teeth over his neck. *I want them to be mine*.

It's hard to crush that thought under a rug, and I don't think I succeed very well.

"You shouldn't listen to Amelia," Dorian purrs against my ear, loudly enough that I don't have any trouble hearing him. I hear a noise and glance up, surprised to see August bite down at Foster's throat, still pinning the writhing beta against his lap. "Or, better, you should come get me when she fucks with you."

"Why?" I ask, curling my fingers in his shirt. I can't help but watch the others, even as Dorian's fingers stroke down my spine. "What are you going to do, Dorian?" There's an edge back in my voice, and it feels like I might be baiting him into a reaction. "Are you going to growl at her? Are you going to drag me away on a leash so my feelings don't get hurt?"

"Yes," he chuckles, surprising me. "Yes, I'm going to keep you on a leash, so I know you can't wander off and get into trouble. *Yes*, I'll make sure she doesn't fuck with you." He has to stop when August finally manages to pull a sound out of Foster, one that's heady with desire and irritation since he *obviously* still wants to go on the warpath.

It's a losing battle with August, though. I can see that easily enough with my chin on Dorian's shoulder and one arm over his neck. "You're *weak*," I tease, catching the beta's eyes. "He got you distracted from your violent mission so easily." I grin, just to let him know I'm joking, but by the way Foster snorts, I doubt he took me seriously, anyway.

"It's not fair, and you should let me—" he breaks off with a sneer when August unbuttons his jeans, one hand going back to his chest to keep the beta against him while his other curls around his length. "Let me go explain to her that she's not allowed near Mercy."

It's probably one of the nicest things I've ever heard.

"*Mercy* seems to have forgotten how much we love playing with her. It's obviously my fault," Dorian hums. "Was I too nice to you, my perfect little omega?" It sends shivers down my spine when he says that. "Should I have clipped this collar back around your throat the night I found you in my bed?"

"Bet's over," I remind him, though my heart flutters anyway. "You can't *make* me wear this anymore."

He moves faster than I think he will, and a moment later I'm sitting up, his fingers curled around the leather of the collar.

"You never learn," he murmurs against my lips. "I love it, don't get me wrong. But you just never fucking learn, do you, *Mercy*?" His eyes glitter, the arrogance I remember so well back in full force. My heart hammers in my chest as he looks me over, his gaze pausing on my slightly parted lips.

Is he going to kiss me? I want him to.

"*Our* omega is going to wear her collar like a good girl," he tells me slowly, in no uncertain terms. "Just like you're going to learn that you come to us with your problems. I don't care how little you *think* we care. You tell us anyway."

I can't help the way that makes my ribs feel like they're contracting, and my chest feels suddenly tight.

"You should've told us sooner about Amelia and your roommate." It takes me a moment to realize he's urging me to the floor, but once I do, he's insistent. It takes only a few seconds before I'm on my knees between his thighs, staring up at Dorian in surprise.

"Here kitty, kitty," he says, pulling me forward by my collar. He hooks a thumb in his sweatpants, just as he had that first time, and before I can really catch my breath, his fingers are around his cock, stroking himself as he watches me. "I'm going to teach you a lesson about not keeping things from us."

I slant my gaze at Foster, who's got his face buried in August's neck while the alpha fucks into him slowly, almost

lazily. “Can I request that lesson instead?” I ask and August snickers at my words.

“Yeah,” Dorian agrees, moving to grip my jaw instead. “You want me to fuck your cunt instead of your mouth, Mercy?”

“Yes.”

“Then be a good girl for me this time, and maybe I’ll fuck your pretty pussy next time. This is a punishment, remember?”

I’m not sure it feels like one. I stroke my tongue over his tip, not minding when he winds his fingers in my hair and urges me forward. “A *punishment*,” he says again with a chuckle. “Means that you don’t get to play around and take your time. You shouldn’t like this so much, little omega.” Before pushing me down, he pauses to add, “Tap my leg if you want to stop, all right?”

I nod, but his fingers tighten in my hair.

“I want your words, little omega.”

“Yes, Dorian,” I breathe, lifting my eyes to meet his. He flashes me a pleased grin and then urges me downward until he can sink into my mouth, burying himself deeply until I can feel his tip at the back of my throat.

I shudder, not expecting him to go so deep so quickly. “Good girl,” he praises, arching his hips off the sofa. “So good for me. You’re going to let me fuck that mouth however I want, aren’t you?”

While I can’t say anything, it doesn’t seem like he wants me to. My hand tightens on his thigh, but he just sinks into me again, keeping my face in place with the hand in my hair.

“I love using you like my own personal toy. Such a *gorgeous* toy, too.” I close my eyes, content to listen to him breathe and praise me as he uses my mouth.

If this is a punishment, I should fuck up more often. Heat pools between my thighs, and more than anything, I wish I had something to grind against. Or someone actually fucking me. I

whine around his cock as the *need* becomes more insistent, and Dorian chuckles.

“Does my pretty little kitten want something in her cunt?” he teases, keeping his grip tight. “I bet she does. But what would that teach you, hmm?” I whimper, but he only chuckles. “No, Mercy. Not until you’re done learning a lesson.”

For all his words, he doesn’t last too much longer. He sinks into me faster, fucking my mouth with more insistency as I hold on to his thighs. “Swallow for me, Mercy,” he orders breathily, his fingers tightening in my hair.

I don’t need to be told twice. Or really, even once. I let him bury himself in my throat, tongue pressed to the underside of his length as he comes with my name on his lips, making me shiver. Finally, he pulls me up, his hand gentle on my jaw and a wicked smirk on his face. “You want your reward?” he teases, and I should know that something’s up by the way he speaks.

Besides, he never gives me what I want like this.

But I really am too horny to care, so I nod my head with the assumption that he’s going to make me come.

Until a hand around my throat pulls me back, and Foster snarls in my ear as he works to push my leggings down my hips.

“August told me that I could fuck you after he came if I stopped trying to commit murder,” the beta tells me sweetly. “It’s a pretty good deal for me. And for you. Well, except that I want you *now* and while you know where I’d rather have you, I’m not very patient at the moment.”

I lift my head, mouth open, and my stomach jerks when I realize August and Dorian are on the couch, both of them watching. A thrill goes through me, though I lose whatever I was going to say as Foster pushes me over the couch between them, Dorian on one side of my arms and August on the other. They’re close enough that they could touch me, but neither of them does as Foster runs his finger down my slit, until he can grip my thighs and massage them roughly in his fingers.

I start to move, only for August to reach out and tangle his fingers in my hair, keeping me in place.

“I think you’re turning this into a reward,” August chuckles mildly, just as I yelp at Foster’s length sinking into my pussy. “She doesn’t tell us her problems, but you still use her mouth and Foster fucks her while we watch?” I shiver as he scrapes his nails against my scalp. “She’s going to keep behaving badly if we show her this is what happens.”

“Maybe I don’t know how to be mean to her,” Dorian shrugs, but this time when I mutter a comment, he pauses, and makes Foster pause as well.

His hand slips under my jaw, pulling my chin up just enough so that he can look me in the eyes. “Care to repeat that, little omega?” he asks, almost delicately.

I... don’t, actually. And it must show on my face because his smirk widens and the wicked gleam in his eyes grows. “Come on,” he urges, while Foster’s fingers draw circles on my hips and he waits.

“I said ‘that’s a lie,’” I tell him, not knowing how to show up or what else *to* say. I can’t help my own nervous smirk that accompanies it, and I’m prepared for him to do something drastic.

“That’s what I thought.” He runs a thumb over my lip and lets go easily with a smile. “You can fuck her now, Fos,” he hums, grinning in such a friendly way that it makes me nervous. “I just wanted to hear her.”

“Sure,” Foster mutters, almost as if he doesn’t believe it either. But it’s short-lived. Moments later he’s gripping my hips hard again, not wasting any time in fucking me just how he wants to. When I can’t keep quiet any longer, Dorian’s hand slips under my chin again, not allowing me to muffle my noises against the sofa cushion.

“Let me hear you,” he growls. “We deserve to hear those noises.” August purrs his agreement, and I’m too close to coming to really protest.

Especially when Foster sinks into me with a soft *'fuck'* and leans over to suck at my throat, a finger teasing my clit. The combination of senses easily sends me over as well, and I clench around him as I come, biting down on Dorian's thumb that teases my lower lip. Distantly I can hear Foster still murmuring praises, but I'm too busy trying not to just nod off with how good I feel to really listen to him.

Later, after I've studied with August and fought Foster on a pizza order, I finally get my stuff together, knowing it's time to leave and go back to my dorm. Foster looks up like he wants to say something, but it's Dorian who grabs my backpack and walks to the door, holding it up for me.

"You can come here anytime you know," he tells me, holding it while I slide into the shoulder straps.

"Because I get *so* much done here," I snort, giving him a half-smirk.

"Maybe if you were here more often, we could do things other than remind you how much of a perfect omega you are." The words leave me at a loss, and he grins, hand on the door. "Seriously, though. You should come to us, all right? If anything like this happens."

"Thanks. I... I'll think about it." I keep my tone light, but I don't miss the way Dorian eyes me flatly. "Hey, umm." I pause in the open door, needing to ask something but afraid to at the same time.

He waits patiently for me to figure it out. "You really aren't mad about what I said while Foster was fucking me?" It feels like something he'd punish me for, but he just... hadn't.

"Of course not, Mercy," he chuckles, herding me out the door. When I'm on the other side, a goodbye on my lips, he adds in a purring voice, "Because we've learned that just doesn't work with you."

Before I can reply, he shuts the door behind me and I reach up to adjust my hood, frowning at it. Only for my fingers to brush against the soft leather collar he'd put around my neck that I hadn't taken off.

“You know, if we keep having lunch together, then I’m going to assume we’re friends,” I say, absently trailing my finger along the slim collar at my throat. It’s subtle enough that it could just be a fashion statement, and I don’t care enough about what other people think to take it off.

“Maybe we are.” Cecily shrugs, leaning back in her chair as she takes a drink from her water bottle. “I don’t recall ever saying we weren’t. And you are on the archery team, so it makes sense we see each other a lot.” She nods at Eden, who looks up at me from her phone as if she’s bored.

Maybe she never said we weren’t, but that doesn’t mean I’ve ever assumed we’re anything other than acquaintances. If that, even. They’re intimidating, maybe terrifying, and Cecily is probably just as frightening as Dorian. After all, according to her, she did give him the collar idea.

I realize with a jolt she’s looking at my hand, and the collar under my fingers, so I pull away to lay my hand on the table again, beside my plate of half-eaten eggs.

“It’s cute,” she assures me. “You’re making all his dreams come true. Did I tell you he tried to give Foster a collar?”

“Did he try to kill Dorian with it?” I ask, and Eden snorts.

“Basically,” the beta assures me. “I thought he was going to go down for attempted homicide at the least. Dorian never tried that again.”

“I think you look prettier than Foster would have. And it goes without saying that you look better in the one Dorian got

specifically for you, rather than the one he had for Foster,” Cecily remarks, setting the bottle down. We’re all finished with our lunch, and it’s time for me to leave for astronomy, where Dorian will be.

Will he be happy that I’m still wearing the collar openly? Will he be surprised?

“He got one just for me?” I repeat, puzzled. “It wasn’t just one he had or something?”

“No, Mercy,” Cecily promises in a soft snicker. “It was *just* for you. He had me help him pick out a width since he wasn’t sure what would be the most comfortable for you to wear.”

“Was this for this semester, or last semester when he was, you know, *harassing* me?” I ask, my voice full of sarcasm as I get up along with her. Following Cecily to the window to dump our trays, I’m not surprised that she takes her time answering.

“Both,” the redhead tells me finally. “Is that such a problem?” Of course, it isn’t for her.

And, truth be told, it’s not one for me either. More like a surprise, I guess.

By the time we’re nearing the science building, I’m dreaming longingly of one of the smoothies I’d enjoyed so much last semester. Thanks to my emergency flight home, those aren’t on the menu this year unless they spontaneously show up in the dining hall, so I’m just going without until a miracle strikes.

Still, coming back way before school started was worth it, and I don’t regret a thing. “See you later,” I call belatedly, realizing that Cecily and Eden have both said their goodbyes and are just waiting for me to do the same.

“We’ll see you for lunch tomorrow,” Eden asserts, solidifying our Thursday plans. We’ve been having lunch more and more often, and I hate to admit it, but they really aren’t awful to talk to.

I open my mouth just as Cecily grins, but before I can answer, an arm slips over my shoulder and pulls me against

someone's warm hoodie.

“Are you trying to steal my Mercy, Cecily?” Dorian chuckles, pressing his face against my jaw as he eyes the redhead. “I don't think you're her type.”

Cecily bares her teeth in a smile that might be more of a show of dominance, but Dorian doesn't flinch. “But maybe she's mine. After all, she does look so cute in a collar, doesn't she?” Cecily turns to me with a more genuine smile and waves us off, turning to walk towards the campus center and leaving me with Dorian.

Not that I mind at all, of course.

“Hi,” I tell him, waiting as he scents my throat with his nose pressed against my skin.

“Hi,” he murmurs, teeth catching on the collar. “You kept it on.” The amount of pleasure in his voice causes me to shiver, and I hear his purring chuckle as I do.

“I thought you'd want me to.”

“I do.”

He reaches up suddenly so I can see what's in his other hand, and when I do, I can't help but be confused.

It's a smoothie. The kind I normally get, judging by what's written on the outside of the plastic cup. “Is this...?” Did he get this for *me*?

“It's yours, Mercy,” he promises, sliding it into my hands. “Come on, or we're going to be on time. Which, as I know from experience, is late for you.” He isn't wrong, and there's something so comforting about walking to class with his arm around my shoulders and my favorite smoothie in my hands.

It's so... *nice*.

It's so perfect that it makes my heart hurt a little.

A growl from him surprises me into looking up from the mesmerizing drink, and I blink when I see that Dorian's teeth are bared, much like Cecily's were.

Not that it shocks me to find that he's making that face and noise at Amelia. My eyes find hers and she grins sarcastically, giving me a two-finger salute as she lounges on a low wall, two betas at her side. One of them is the terrified girl I'd seen talking to her on that first day, and she looks just as frightened as before.

The other is a dude more muscled than Dorian, who watches us with boredom on his face and a sneer on his lips.

Seconds later it dawns on me that Dorian's steps are taking us further to her, and I start to pull away, only for him to stop me. "Don't be afraid of her," he murmurs in my ear. "She's wrong about what she said, and I'm proving it." He tugs me along, not stopping until we're a few feet from Amelia's little pack.

"Mercy tells me you're joining the archery team," he greets almost pleasantly, his eyes glittering.

Amelia looks from my face to his, and I swear her eyes dart to the collar at my throat before she gives Dorian a pained smile, one hand going out to touch the boy's shoulder. "Yeah," she agrees, dipping her head and not trying to match his unpleasant grin. "She's been helping me catch up on how Winter Grove does things."

"You're really good." His arm slides more comfortably over my shoulders and I suck on the straw of the smoothie, content to watch their shit go down. "I bet the team here would be lucky to have you. It'd be a shame if you did something to fuck that up, you know?"

The scared-looking girl looks at me with wide eyes, like she's trying to warn me of an impending meteor strike. In this situation, is Amelia the meteor I should be afraid of?

Or is Dorian?

"Do I really seem like I'd do something like that? After how much I worked to get into Winter Grove?" Amelia snorts. There isn't a lick of sincerity in her words, so I don't know who she's trying to convince, truth be told.

“Don’t know,” Dorian shrugs. “I just wanted to say hi. It’s been a while, you know? I don’t think we’ve caught up since you came back.”

Amelia’s boot hits the side of the wall she’s sitting on while she watches Dorian. “Yeah,” she finally agrees. “My bad. I’ll have to rectify that. See you soon, Dorian.” Her gaze switches to mine and I raise a brow, not in the mood for her shit. “You too, Mercy.”

After we say our pleasant goodbyes, Dorian steers us away toward the science building, and I sigh.

“Was that so bad?” he asks, not dropping his arm. “She’s just a bitch, Mercy. But she’s a coward. She can’t do anything to you. Or rather, she won’t.”

“But she did something to you guys, once,” I remind him, letting him know that I’m not completely unaware.

His steps slow, and he meets my eyes with his dark gaze calculating and curious. “You’re just so nosy, aren’t you?” he laughs after a moment, smiling once more so that the tightness unwinds in my chest. At least he isn’t mad. “Yeah, all right. She fucked with my pack a couple of years ago. And she paid for it.”

I break free from his grip just to push open the door to our astronomy classroom and fall back into step with him as we walk to our table. The moment I sit down, his arm is back, and he’s warm enough that I couldn’t mind even if I wanted to.

Not to mention, I’ve always loved Dorian’s scent. The only thing better than his pack’s individual scents is when they’re all mixed together in their dorm, and that really is intoxicating.

“What did she do?”

“Cecily didn’t tell you?”

I roll my eyes at him. “She doesn’t tell me *everything*, Dorian.”

He snorts his disbelief, thinking. “She tried to hurt Foster, once. One of her betas found him and he ended up with a concussion when all was said and done. He doesn’t remember

the guy's face, but it was bad enough that she faced charges for her involvement. So, she couldn't exactly show her face at Winter Grove." He smirks, though it's only a corner of his mouth that pulls upward. "It's irrelevant anymore, and Foster doesn't like to talk about it. Besides, I have something more important to ask you, little omega."

I'm not expecting the nickname, and I suck in a breath before I can help it. Honestly, he can ask me for anything when he says stuff like that and I won't mind, nor will I likely refuse.

"It's group date night," he announces quietly. "This Friday. We're going to a restaurant Foster's been eyeing up. You're in, right?"

"Me?"

"Yes, silly." He looks at me like I'm an idiot. "*You*. Why wouldn't you?"

I don't have an answer to that. Every time one of them does something like this, I'm closer and closer to opening my mouth and asking the question that itches and burns at the tip of my tongue.

Do you want me to be your omega?

But I don't have the guts to do it. There are so many answers that will hurt, and only one that won't, and I'm not willing to take the chance of being wrong. There's a realm of possibilities up in the air, and it's incredibly possible that they don't like me the same way I like them. No matter what they said the other day.

"Is it a good restaurant?" I can't help asking instead, a similar grin on my own face.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm going to be honest with you, Dorian. I don't trust Foster's taste in... well. Anything. Except alphas."

My response obviously isn't what Dorian is expecting. He parts his lips halfway through my answer, a reply on his tongue, only to close it when I finish. His smile looks more

genuine, and when he pulls me in for a kiss, I feel the purr building in his chest and have to pry myself away from him when I hear the door open and our professor's voice echoing off of the walls to begin the lecture.

August's knock on the door comes at the worst time, and I want to bury my face in my hands as Petra scowls and snarls, "Come in!"

Does she know? I've known since his mild scent found my nose a few seconds ago, but I doubt she knows who he is, or what he is to me.

The door opens, August's brows raised. There's no way he hadn't heard the yelling, or the way I'd threatened Petra's sanity on this side of the grave or the other. Apparently it was the wrong thing to say, and according to her I should start wearing sulfur perfume to get used to the scent of my final destination.

"Hey, Mercy," August greets, hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans. "And uh." He glances at Petra. "You're Petra. I've heard about you."

"Oh?" She's bemused instead of pissed off now, and she moves to look at him, her eyes widening like he's just the most glorious thing she's ever seen.

"None of it has been good," I assure her, bringing her ire back to me. "Just in case you were wondering or anything." Dressed in leggings, a red skirt, long-sleeved black shirt, and Doc Martens, I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be for this date. Doubly so, since I managed to stop a migraine its tracks with a combination of eating ibuprofen like candy and my emergency meds.

Unfortunately, I have a feeling it's not going to last forever. I feel a bit like Cinderella, though I'm not sure *when* my personal midnight will come. And I hope it's not a pile of vomit I leave behind instead of a glass slipper.

"So now you tell your friends our business?" She's gearing up again. I can smell it in the air.

"It's not our business, Petra," I sigh, grabbing my phone. Buying a wallet case for it last year has been the best thing I've ever done, and it means that I only have to pocket that and my keys. "It's *your* business." I flash her an unhappy smile and all but *drag* August out the door, not wanting to deal with her any longer than I have to.

"She's, uh... pleasant?" I know he doesn't mean it as we walk down the hallway, and before I can answer, he drags me to him and leans against the wall, stopping me in my tracks.

Confused, I tilt my head to the side. "She's not," I promise him. "Her old roommate didn't think so either. I'm hoping it doesn't turn into a death match situation before the end of the semester."

He snorts, all while dragging me to him so he can lean down and press his lips to mine. His kiss is sweet, though the purr that I can feel under my hands in his chest is anything but. It makes me shiver all the same, and I can't help but smile into his kiss.

"What's this for?" I ask in a low murmur, fingers curling in his shirt.

"Sometimes I don't like to share you," August admits. "Sometimes I like it to be just us. And I'll be sharing you all night, so I just wanted to take a few moments for us." He watches my face, his grin widening. "You like that, don't you? When I say we'll be sharing you all night?"

Yeah, that definitely feels like some kind of trigger phrase for my body to get frantically hot and needy.

But instead of agreeing, I grin blithely at him and bat my eyes. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about, August."

“Sure you don’t.” He kisses me again, his hand at my lower back sliding up my spine until the elevator dings. It opens a second later, and finally August pulls away, grinning savagely at the boy who glances our way.

I can’t find it in me to care who sees or who doesn’t.

Outside, Dorian waits in his silvery-grey car, head thrown back against the headrest of the driver’s seat like he’s been waiting for an age and a half. He raises a brow when I open the back door, finding that Foster is already there, and gestures to the front.

I pause, surprised, and a little taken aback. “I don’t need to sit in the front. Let August,” I argue, not wanting for them to think I need some kind of special treatment.

“You heard her,” Foster chuckles, reaching out to tug me into the back. “She wants to sit with me, not you.” Somehow I end up more or less with my head on his lap, my feet pressed against the back seat. I stare up at Foster while Dorian pulls away from the curb with August in the front seat.

“So your roommate is, umm...” August trails off, looking for the word.

“A joy to be around? The friend you want for a lifetime?” I ask, eyeing Foster’s hand that he brings to my face. He grins at my reaction, knuckles tracing my jaw.

“Yeah. Definitely one of those. I heard you guys yelling from down the hallway. Doesn’t everyone else hear that, too?”

“Probably.”

“Do they say anything?”

“Uh, yeah. We’ve gotten called into mediation about three times now,” I assure them. “She always says it’s my fault, the RAs beg us to just make it work for the semester since everywhere is full. I continue planning her murder. I think I’m going to hide her in a snowdrift, actually.”

I turn my face into Foster’s hand, his fingers unbending so he can gently stroke my forehead. If I’m not careful, I’m going to fall asleep at how surprisingly sweet and relaxing it is.

It also doesn't feel very *Foster*, and I have to wonder if he's possessed.

"But you haven't said how you're going to kill her," Foster points out, tapping my nose lightly. "That's a pretty important step. Potentially more important than hiding the body."

"Is it?" Yeah, this is way more relaxing than it has any right to be, and I melt into his light touch when it resumes.

"Want to poison her?"

"Do you know *how*?"

"Don't give him something new to learn," Dorian sighs from the driver's seat. "Look, he already studied stab wounds and knives last year. He's a budding psychopath at this point."

"Budding psychopath?" I raise my brows as Foster rolls his eyes. "That's a little insulting."

"I know," he agrees dryly. "Just because I have interests ___"

"I would've dropped the 'budding' and said 'rampant' instead," I break in before he can finish. Foster pauses, a smirk twitching at his lips.

"Oh, you're funny," he tells me, flicking my nose. "You're just so funny aren't you, when we're in a car so I can't do anything to you? Bet I could, though. Bet I still could."

I hesitate before speaking, but I need him to know that I'm a little fragile tonight. "Wait." Grabbing his hand that goes to press against my chest, it causes Foster to pause. "I like... this. I mean, I like everything that involves you guys except when you bully me... or when I'm taking bullets for you."

Dorian sighs from the front seat, and I almost grin.

"But I worked really hard to get rid of my migraine today so I could come. And uh, I don't think my head is up to anything more than this. I'm sorry." I don't know why I'm apologizing, other than feeling like I've ruined Foster's plan and I'm just copping out after I'd said what I did.

“Oh. That’s totally understandable. Thanks for not letting me *hurt you*,” Foster replies, frowning. “Next time, maybe you say something a little earlier? We could’ve done something else. Like strap a sleep mask to your face and watch movies at low volume?”

“No,” I snicker, surprised when his fingers find my temples and massage lightly. It feels *amazing*. “I’m not going to inconvenience you for a headache, okay?”

“It’s only an inconvenience if you don’t go,” Foster replies too-sweetly. “I’d rather us be in the dorm doing something headache-friendly than you reeling and passing out on me. Though…” He considers that in his head. “Okay, I’m not going to lie. I’d love the chance to play with you when you’re asleep. Just to see your reaction when you wake.”

“There’s a word for that.”

“Yeah, it’s called somnophilia. I’m not an idiot, Mercy.” He glares balefully down at me. “But I’d only do it with your consent, so don’t sneer. Anyway, do you want to go back to the dorms?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” asks Dorian from the front. “None of us would mind.”

The fact that they’re so willing to be accommodating is almost too much for me to deal with. It’s hard to fathom how different they are from last semester, and how different from how I imagined them to be.

“You know, if you keep being so nice to me, I’m going to start thinking last semester was all a front. That you guys are actually nice, and that’s the rumor I should be spreading,” I murmur, half lost in Foster’s touches.

“Who’s going to believe you, Mercy?” August chuckles drowsily from the front seat. “No one other than maybe Cecily and her pack think that about us. Why would they believe you?”

“And you should think about something else, if you’re going to do that,” Dorian adds lightly.

“What?”

“The things we’d just have to do to you if you tried to paint us as sugar, spice, and everything nice.” I shiver at the unveiled threat, though I can’t help feeling like I might not hate most of those things, if any of them at all.

It takes me a minute to finger comb my hair back into order when Dorian pulls up to the side of a building, and less than that to make it from the car to the warm lobby.

Only then does it hit me that I’ll never be able to afford a place like this in my life. I hesitate, unsure of everything, and finally notice that the boys are dressed nicer than normal as well. But I can’t worry about it for long, because Dorian loops his arm in mine and walks to the hostess stand, a smile on his full lips.

“I have a reservation for four,” he states, his voice like smooth silk. The young omega at the stand glances up at him, her eyes going wide.

For the first time in my life, I feel a streak of possessiveness. It shoots up my spine and I curl my arm more tightly around Dorian’s, my eyes on her face. I shouldn’t feel this way, I don’t think. I don’t have any right to it, and I know that for sure.

But that doesn’t stop the way my stomach churns at the clear display she’s trying to make, and how her fruity scent noticeably perfumes the surrounding air.

“Hi,” she tells him breathily, like they’re in some kind of rom-com and she’s the girl he’s been looking for all his life. “Umm, what’s the name on it?”

“Wakefield.”

She flutters her hands as she looks and finally gives a quick nod. “Yeah, I—I have it here. And you want one of the private dining rooms, right?”

He dips his head in a nod. She fumbles for a few more moments before collecting four menus. We follow her through the restaurant, my ears once in a while picking up the sound of

quiet, atmospheric music and the low murmur of conversations.

I can't hear any of what's being said, unfortunately. It all gets jumbled when it comes through my hearing aids, and is little better than white noise to me.

"Mercy?" Dorian's voice is just loud enough that I can hear him, though when I turn to look at him, the expression on his face makes me wonder if he'd had to try a few times to get my attention.

"Yeah?"

His smirk turns devious. "Are you *jealous* of me looking at another omega who wants my attention?"

Oh god.

Oh no.

I widen my eyes, doing my best to look absolutely innocent. "Why, Dorian. Whatever would make you think that?" It's hard not to go all the way with my impression of Scarlett O'Hara and put a hand to my chest.

His smile doesn't go anywhere. If anything, his eyes dance with amusement. "Nothing," he assures me. "Obviously, I was just imagining it."

The small, private room is gorgeous. Paintings line the walls and there's a giant window overlooking the lake that Dorian sits in front of, with me to his right and August on my other side. Foster sits down across from me, lounging in the chair and leaning it back on its rear legs to get a better look outside.

"Pretty," he admits, only for August to yank him back to all fours with a growl.

"Sit," the alpha orders. "All four on the floor. I'm not picking you up again like I did the other day."

When I look up, interested in the story, Foster meets my gaze with an unfriendly grin. "You don't need to hear about it," he promises. "It wasn't that cute."

“I was just going to ask how it feels to be nineteen and still be learning how to eat at the dinner table like an adult?” I shrug innocently, causing Dorian to snort into his water glass.

Foster’s unfriendly smile only grows.

“You know, I’m aware of where you live.”

“I know.”

“I could come find you.”

“Kill my roommate first, thanks—”

“And make you regret that.”

“Kill. My. Roommate. First,” I enunciate, picking up the menu to flip through it. Only then do I realize something.

There are no prices.

What’s the old saying? If you have to ask, you can’t afford it? Well, I already know I can’t afford it. My stomach twists a little, uneasiness filling me. Are they paying for me? What if they aren’t? Surely they know just how broke I am—

“Surely overthinking the menu is going to trigger you back into a headache,” August chuckles, plucking it from my hands. “Especially with all the faces you’re making.” I look at him, unsure of what to say without sounding like I’m whining.

“We did ask *you* out,” Dorian reminds me, as if he can read my mind. “Do you really think we’d make you pay for your own dinner?”

“I guess if you are, then there had better be a surgeon outside so I can sell my kidney to pay for it,” I respond, trying for humor and ending up somewhere between nervousness and unease. “Thank you for all of this,” I add, gesturing to the restaurant and the menu. “It’s hard to believe Foster picked it.”

“Why?” Foster asks, glancing up from his own menu.

“Because you seem like a trash panda, not someone who enjoys Michelin star restaurants,” August tells him, smiling. “I’ve said that too, so you can’t be that surprised.”

Foster eyes me and August, sniffs, then goes back to reading the menu.

I've never had time fly by so fast. It feels like one minute we're in the restaurant, the next I'm in August's room, finishing up a clandestine game of rummy.

"You could probably beat him if you play like that," he tells me, getting to his feet as I do as well. "And are you sure you want to go back to your dorm? You could just stay here."

"No, I should go back," I sigh, pulling on my jacket. "I have to at least pretend like what she says doesn't bother me." August kisses me on the cheek and I return it with a quick nip to his lower lip that draws a growl from him. "I'll see you on Tuesday at the latest?"

"Or tomorrow. Or Sunday. You could have dinner with us," he points out.

"Makes me feel like I'm part of the pack or something when you say that," I joke, pulling on my shoes.

"Maybe you should be."

I glance up at him, eyes wide in the dim light of his room. I don't know what to say, so I only give him another quick goodbye before leaving the room and finding the door to their suite in the dark.

"Hey, Mercy?" Dorian's voice is unmistakable, and when I turn to look at him on the couch, I see that Foster is asleep on his lap, Dorian's fingers in his hair. "Come here for a sec?"

"Okay?" I make my way toward him quietly, heart pounding. Had he somehow heard our game? Or had he heard what came after? My heart thumps harder at the thought, and I suck in a breath to prepare myself for whatever he has to say.

"Here." The box he hands me is small, and I have to peer at it before I realize what it is.

An Apple Pencil. A *real* one, not the knock offs I have to replace every couple of months.

I hesitate, my fingers flinching when they find the box. "Dorian..."

“Your pencil wasn’t working the other day in astronomy,” he reminds me. “And I know how you take notes, so you need one that actually works. I just picked it up the other day when I got a new one. Take it.” He presses it into my hand, not giving me much of a choice.

I just stare at him. This is *expensive*. Just as expensive as dinner, and I don’t have enough experience with expensive gifts to know what to do.

“Dorian—”

“This is where you say thank you,” he informs me gently. “And say you’ll go back to your room and go to bed so your headache doesn’t come back.” It makes something warm unfurl inside of me when he’s so... caring. It only adds to my confusion, frankly, and I bite my lip.

“Thank you,” I say finally. “Really, I... thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Mercy.”

“**M**ercy Noble?” The woman standing outside of my literature classroom doesn’t look familiar, and she’s obviously not a student, judging by her age. I stop, confused, and bite my lower lip. My head still aches from the near-migraine I’d had since yesterday, and I hate that I never seem to get just one day of pain with them. Instead, it feels like they’re spread out over a couple of days before I feel better completely.

“That’s... me?” I ask, confused. I don’t know her. She isn’t one of my professors, and she isn’t someone I’ve talked with at all.

“Could you come with me, please?” She says it nicely, like there’s nothing wrong with what she’s asking me. And yet, it feels strange.

It feels off.

Especially when I see Amelia walk by, intent on the conversation. It definitely can’t be good if she cares this much, but for the life of me, I can’t figure out what a stranger wanting to talk to me would have to do with her, unless I’m about to get jumped.

“Are you okay?” Eden moves to stand beside me, eyeing Amelia rather than the woman. On my other side, Callum smiles politely at the older woman.

“Should we come as well?” he asks, his gaze bright with curiosity. “The three of us are pretty close, so maybe—”

“No, that won’t be necessary.” The woman cuts him off quickly and brusquely, her eyes flicking back to mine. “Now, please?”

“Okay?” My heart thumps unpleasantly in my chest, and more than anything, I wish she’d tell me right here what’s going on, or at least give me a hint. Otherwise, I’m going to think it’s something awful until proven otherwise. “I’ll see you guys later?” Eden is still barely paying attention to me. She’s focused on Amelia, and when I glance over I see that the blonde is standing with her frightened-looking beta.

Both of them are watching me, and pretending as if Eden doesn’t exist.

“Yeah. Text me if you need anything.” Callum hesitates a moment longer, still frowning, but breaks off when I nod to agree.

“Later,” Eden adds, though she doesn’t move from her spot. “I’ve just forgotten that there’s something archery related I need to discuss with Amelia.” I have a feeling there’s nothing of the sort, but I’m too nervous to mention it.

Instead, I follow the brown-haired woman down the hallway, out the door, and across campus like a lost puppy. She doesn’t speak, or give me any indication of what’s going on. The only attention she does give me is to glance back over her shoulder every other minute or so to make sure I’m still following her.

Finally she slows, and when I glance up I realize we’re at the administration building. I’ve only been here once, and it was just after I’d obtained my scholarship to go here last year. The fact that I’m here again makes me even more worried than I had been.

Is there something wrong with my scholarship? My grades are flawless, and I know for a fact that won’t be changing soon. Still, I go over them in my head, trying to think if I’ve missed anything at all that I could be in trouble for. I don’t owe any money, obviously. And everything should still be settled.

Still, my breathing quickens as the woman leads me up a flight of stairs to a large, glass walled office with floor to ceiling windows. The golden plate beside the door reads ‘PRESIDENT’ and it really does nothing to calm my nerves.

There’s no reason I should be here, unless there’s something incredibly wrong.

The woman opens the door and I step inside, unable to walk any further as I look at the man behind the desk. Patrick Roberts is a balding, shorter man. He has the same beer belly as he did last summer, and his glasses certainly haven’t gotten any thinner. Instead of just a dress shirt, he dressed it up now with a sweater-vest, the likes of which has never once been in style.

As usual, his clean, neutral scent reminds me of carpet cleaner, and sticks in my nose just as badly as I force myself to sit when he gestures for me to do so. I manage somehow, even though my joints feel like they’ve all locked up with no sign of ever working properly again. I’m sure I look like a clockwork doll sitting down in strange, stiff motions in front of him, shifting one body part at a time.

The man smiles kindly at me, but I can tell there’s something wrong here. He’s not good enough of an actor for this to be something other than problematic.

“Miss Noble.” He sits back with a sigh that jars my heart into rabbit-fast beats. “I’ve heard you’ve been doing well in your classes. You’ve maintained better grades than we could’ve asked for, and nearly perfect attendance. Are you enjoying Winter Grove?”

I flinch as the brown-haired woman closes the door behind us and grip the fabric of my sweatpants hard in my fingers.

“Yes?” I ask, unsure of what to say. “I mean... it’s the school of my dreams. Umm. There was never any doubt of that.”

“Well, I hate to have to meet with you under less than pleasant circumstances.” He smiles again, the look just as false as it had been the first time. “But unfortunately, that’s what

this is, Miss Noble.” He spreads his arms over his desk like he’s presenting me with some kind of explanation... except there’s nothing there.

“Umm... what?” I ask, blinking. “I’m not sure what you mean, Mr. Roberts.” Clearing my throat, I try to sound unfazed by his statement. “As you’ve said, I’ve kept my grades up. I almost never miss class unless it’s due to health reasons. I think I’ve only missed two altogether, anyway. And I’m never late on assignments, I—”

“I know all that, Miss Noble.”

Then what the hell does he want?

I hate how patronizing he sounds, like I’m a child instead of a grown-ass adult.

“Then I’m unsure what I’ve done that’s unsatisfactory here.”

“Well, you’ve been causing quite a few ripples, I’ve been told, with one of our other students. You’ve made their semester difficult, and they’ve had no choice but to get a parent involved,” Mr. Roberts explains, trying to sound both stern and kind at the same time.

But all I can do is stare at him. Had *Dorian* told him that? Was I right? Was this some big joke all along where they just get me to like them, to want to be a part of their pack, only to have me kicked out of the dream school I’ve always wanted to attend? I think of Foster’s grin, of August’s quiet purr, and of *Dorian*’s fingers on my neck. Even I can’t really believe my own line of thinking, and yet, it doesn’t feel like there’s any other explanation. I haven’t had a bad time with anyone else—

It falls into place slower than it should. My fingers tighten and I look down, my eyes narrowing.

Fucking *Amelia*.

This is why she’d looked so interested in the woman coming to get me. This is why Eden was suspicious. Hadn’t *Amelia* threatened to do something awful to me? I’d assumed she meant she’d beat me up or put a dead horse in my closet, but this?

This is so much worse.

“There must have been some kind of misunderstanding,” I say, the words falling from my lips like stones. “I haven’t done anything to cause ‘ripples,’ I don’t think. I barely have many friends as it is. It must—”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Miss Noble.” Mr. Roberts sits back in his chair, beer belly pushing him back an extra few inches as he fights to sit comfortably and at ease. “Miss Amelia Whitely’s parents have come to us to discuss consequences for the behavior you’ve shown towards her. I shouldn’t need to tell you this, but Winter Grove isn’t a public school, or like any other school in the country. Especially the ones you’d be more used to.”

That hurts. It hurts more than it should, and steals my breath for a few seconds as he continues.

“We don’t allow fighting, bullying, or any kind of harassment.”

That’s not true. They just don’t want the middle-class student bullying the rich one.

“Whatever’s going on with you two has serious consequences, and they’re sitting squarely on your shoulders, Miss Noble.”

I open my mouth to speak, to tell him that I haven’t done anything and that she’s the one threatening me. I want to tell him all the things she’s said and done, and how she’s told me I shouldn’t be friends with Dorian’s pack.

But at the last second I realize that it doesn’t matter. It won’t matter, because I don’t have the money or the influence to ever make my perspective matter.

Amelia’s word is always going to weigh heavier than mine, and it’s a hard, bitter pill to swallow. Even when I should’ve known it was coming all along. Slowly, I take a breath, trying not to cry. “Okay,” I said quietly. “I umm... I understand.” Is he going to expel me?

I don’t think I’ll be able to handle it if he does.

“I’m placing you on probation.” The words sting, but not as badly as a more severe punishment could have. Instead, I feel an inch of relief, and I close my eyes as they burn with the threat of tears. “For the next month, at the very least. Possibly for the rest of the semester. If I hear anything else from Amelia’s parents, then I’m afraid I really won’t have a choice. I’ll have to pull your scholarship. Do you understand?”

Jerkily, I nod, my fingers relaxing as my body goes completely numb. “I understand.”

“Well, don’t you look worse than normal?”

I can barely hear Petra over the fucking music, and my hands tremble as I throw my bag onto the bed, not caring that my iPad is in it.

“Can you turn that down?” I hiss, hands shaking.

“No.”

“For fuck’s sake, Petra—”

“The RA said you should refrain from talking to me like ___”

“I don’t give a *fuck* what the RA said! She also told you to learn how to compromise!” I whirl on her, tears standing in my eyes. “She told you to stop being the bitch that no one can stand to live with.” I see the surprise on her face when I practically yell at her, but I don’t care. “She told you to stop saying shit about me being deaf!” I walk over to her laptop and hit the pause button, careful not to break anything. “But here you are still doing all of it, and yet I try so hard not to make this *worse*. I hate you!”

I’m not sure I’ve ever said those words so loudly before coming to Winter Grove.

“I hate you so much it’s unreal. Do you know what it’s like to hate someone like I hate you?” Tears run down my face, but I laugh in spite of them. I’m so hot that it feels like my chest is on fire, and the surprised, wide-eyed look Petra gives me only spurs me on. “I have never, *ever* in my life had to be around

someone who's just as terrible as you. And you know, that's probably saying something since my last roommate's girlfriend was a goddamn murderer. Does that do anything for you? To know that I would rather spend time with a *literal serial killer* than I would with you?"

She gets up slowly, and for a second I think she's going to cry. I think she'll run out of the room and hide, or maybe she'll go tell Mr. Roberts how mean I am and I really will get expelled before the day is out.

Admittedly, coming in here and screaming at her probably wasn't the best idea. Especially with the door open.

"Is that supposed to hurt my feelings?" The loud words aren't what I'm expecting, and it takes a few seconds for me to register that she's yelling at *me* now. "You think I give a fuck what *you* think? You're only here because Winter Grove has to feel sorry for someone every year, and you were the saddest fucking person they could find."

Ouch. It's not the first thing someone's said today that hurts, and I have a feeling it won't be Petra's last.

"Your opinion means as much as dirt. Who cares what you think? Who *cares* that you don't like me? You should be grateful to be here, not throwing a fit that you think my music is too loud!" She steps closer to me, her scent burning my nose, and I have to fight the urge not to shove her away from me.

"Trust me, Petra. If all it took to get rid of you was to blast gospel in my ears all day, I'd do it in a heartbeat," I promise. Only belatedly do I realize that there might be something a little wrong with me. I'm normally not so quick to anger like this. I never yell, not really, and I don't come out and tell people I hate them. Well, not... usually.

Am I okay? Has my brain-to-mouth filter just taken a day off so my pent-up emotions can run the show?

"You think I haven't begged to get rid of you?" She sneers the words like they're going to upset me, but I only cackle.

“Clearly not as many times as I’ve been willing to live in a closet to stop living here. And that’s your argument? That you don’t want to live with me? Petra, *no one* wants to live with you!” I throw my hands up, so upset that I barely notice the two girls outside of our room where the door has swung inward to give everyone a show. I’m sure the whole dorm can hear us, if not the whole school, by this point.

“Your last roommate should’ve done us all a favor and had her girlfriend murder *you*,” she hisses, after a second’s pause as her eyes go impossibly wide. “Who the fuck would even *miss you*?”

Her next words are lost as I step forward, unsure if I’m going to scream at her or hit her. Either seems like a viable option, as blood roars in my ears.

I’m saved from making a decision by the door slamming the rest of the way open, admitting one of our RAs.

“Enough!” she snaps, looking between us. “Both of you, out. *Out* right now. I don’t know what we need to do to get this to stop, but there has to be something. Go to the first floor office *now*. And don’t talk to each other, all right?”

I nod meekly, looking down as I grip my sleeves in opposite hands, arms curled over my chest. The anger is slowly burning out, being replaced with dread and humiliation.

This isn’t what I wanted, or what I planned.

And is it really so hard just to be left alone by people that I don’t like?

I feel like I'm in a brain-fog as I go to the first floor, taking a separate elevator from the one Petra stormed off into.

What am I going to do? Even if this doesn't get back to the president of the school, I don't know what I'm going to do now.

Unless there really is a closet I can slink off to in order to get away from Petra for the rest of the semester. Would I like it? No. Would I do it? Absolutely, and in a heartbeat.

"Mercy?" The voice surprises me, and when I look up to see August standing in the lobby of my dorm, I reach up to scrub the tears off of my cheeks. There's no way he won't know, but maybe I can make this not so embarrassing for him to see.

"Hey," I greet softly, giving him a small wave as I walk to pass him and go toward the mediation office. He side-steps to block me, one hand coming up to cup my jaw. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk. Well, we all wanted to see if you were okay. Cecily texted Dorian about what happened after your class. We figured..." he trails off, frowning when I look up at him with tears about to fall again. "Okay, okay. Tell me this, Mercy darling." His other hand comes up so he can cradle my face in his hands. When I close my eyes, I can't help the tears that fall, only for him to brush them away. "Is your roommate problem separate from what happened after class, or not?"

"Separate," I whisper, unwilling to move.

“And you’re going to mediation again because of a fight?”

I laugh, finally opening my eyes. “Yeah. A fight. A huge fight that everyone got to see.” My grin is crooked and unamused. “That’s what I wanted to do today, you know? Provide the dorm with a show. I’m surprised you didn’t hear it down here.”

“Will you let me help you?”

The words connect with my brain, but they don’t quite make sense. How in the world is he going to *help* me?

“What do you mean?”

“We can get you away from Petra if you want us to.”

“Miss Noble?” The RA’s voice is crisp and irritated from behind August, making me close my eyes in defeat.

“Yeah, August. I—”

“*Now*, Mercy.”

I can hear August’s low growl at her tone, and the way his grip tightens somewhat on my jaw.

“Whatever it is, yes. Please, God. yes,” I whisper, extracting myself from his grip and trudging down the hallway.

I don’t realize he’s walking behind me until the blonde RA frowns. “She doesn’t get to have backup,” she informs August, though there’s uncertainty on her face. Does she know him? Does she know whose pack he’s in? Does it *matter* to her?

“I know,” he promises. “I’m not here to get involved in your mediation, okay?” From the corner of my eye, I see him raise his hands in surrender. “But my pack has a solution to their living situation. Seeing as it’s really not possible for them to get along.”

Petra stands near the doorway glaring daggers at me, though I can see the unsureness on her face at August’s words and the way she clenches her hands.

“There aren’t any other dorm rooms available,” the RA reminds him, arms crossed. “Unless you’re going to conjure

one out of thin air—”

“I kind of am,” he chuckles, cutting her off smoothly. “Mercy is part of my pack.”

I am?

“We’ve been discussing for a while why she doesn’t live with us, and while we’d planned on waiting until the end of the semester to change things officially, that seems like it won’t be necessary. She’s with us most of the time, anyway.”

That isn’t strictly true, but I’m certainly not going to argue.

But is he really saying that they want me to live with them?

And that I’m part of their pack?

My nerve endings feel like they might be on fire, or at least hyper-charged with a thousand volts, but I don’t move. How can I, when I’m afraid this is going to shatter and become just as awful as the rest of my day has been?

“Would that be a problem?” August asks in his best formally polite voice. “We live in the Lakeside dorm in a four person suite, but there are only three of us living there right now. Dorian Wakefield is usually the one who deals with things like this, but...” he trails off, and I wonder if he name-dropped Dorian to make a point. “Anyway, it seems like it would be the best option, don’t you think? We’re, of course, willing to give Mercy a better environment more conducive to her living on campus, and Petra will get her own room.”

Somehow, he manages to smile politely at *Petra*. It’s certainly a feat I’ve never managed. Even Petra looks surprised and glances from the RA to him.

“I don’t see why it would be an issue,” the RA says at last, frowning. I can see the relief flooding her face, however. I doubt she wants to deal with us for any longer. “In fact, I don’t see this becoming any better. Do you two think you’d be able to work this out?”

Petra shakes her head fervently.

“No, I don’t think so either,” I agree, eyeing up my almost-former roommate. God, I still just want to hit her so badly it hurts.

“We can have some staff move your stuff, Mercy, if you could get packed up. It’s Friday, and if you’re free for the rest of the day...?” The RA raises her brows and I respect the urgency in her voice.

I want to be out of here, too.

“I’ll help her,” August assures her, curling one arm around me as if he knows I still want to throttle Petra.

“Can you stay out of the dorm for a few hours?” the RA asks her, and Petra frowns.

“Yeah, I guess that’s fine.” Like she doesn’t have someone else to make miserable. “Can I just go get my backpack so I can go to the library?”

“Yes. Mercy, you can stay down here with August while we get moving arrangements worked out.” She gestures for us both to go, and I step back as Petra walks towards the elevator quickly, the RA striding into the office to make a phone call.

“Well, that went smoothly,” I murmur, realizing that I’m holding on to August’s hand. “But umm...” Butterflies still flutter in my chest, and when I look at him, I find that he’s staring down at me already. “We have to talk about this. All of it. About what you said, and—”

“Mercy?” August interrupts, his voice low.

“... Yeah?”

“I meant all of it.”

It’s probably a testament to how little I have with me that it only takes a few hours to get from my dorm to the pack’s. Thankfully for my overwhelmed brain, Dorian and Foster are still in class, so it’s just me setting up my new room with a heart that’s trying to thump its way out of my chest while August watches TV in the living room.

I'm done all too soon, and I take a deep breath as I look around the space. It's just as big as my dorm, but the difference is... it's *mine*. It's all mine, instead of having two desks, two beds, and two closets. My bed is a full instead of a twin, the closet is big, and I can pile on as much stuff on the desk as I want to without fear of my asshole roommate knocking something off.

Not to mention, it's blessedly quiet, and it smells like the pack, which is something I can never get over. Do they know how much I love their combined scents? God, I hope not. It would be a little embarrassing if they do, honestly.

With a sigh, I get to my feet, my steps dragging as I leave the room that somehow is *mine* and re-enter the main area of the suite.

August is still there, the TV low enough that I struggle to hear what's being said.

"Hey," I say, unwilling to brush this off. "Can we talk, please?"

"Nah."

The answer surprises me, and August uses that moment to tug me down to the couch with a soft smile. "We can't talk right *now*, Mercy. Because you'd want to have the same conversation when Dorian and Foster get home. But there's nothing for you to worry about."

That's a lie. Even when August draws me into the circle of his arms until I'm leaning against his chest and reading lips on the tv, I know that couldn't be further from the truth. He's given me so much to fret over, and not only that, so has Mr. Roberts.

Part of me would rather curl up here and go to sleep, to hope that this is just a bad dream as my ribs clench around my heart at the memory replaying over and over in my head of him telling me I'm on *probation*. I'll stay on my best behavior, sure, but... don't I always? If Amelia has had her parents lie already about things I've done, then what's to stop her from doing it again?

A hand in my hair draws me from the light doze I'd fallen into, and when I open my eyes, the first thing I see is Dorian's face close to mine.

"Good evening, sleepyhead," he purrs after a moment, when I have the consciousness to half-listen and half-read his lips. "Are you moved in okay?"

"Yeah, but..." I struggle to sit up, lightly smacking August before he'll let me go. Dorian doesn't move at first either, and between both of them, I feel like I'm trapped. Not that it's an unpleasant kind of trapped. Quite the opposite, actually. Still, I put a hand on his chest and glare balefully at the alpha, pushing him back until I can sit up. "Can we talk? Please?" From the corner of my eye, I see Foster edging toward his room, but when I turn on him, he grimaces.

"We're going to do that thing where you think we're just being nice, or lying to you, and you get really surprised to know we aren't right?" he assumes, and Dorian shoots him a look. "Come *on*, Mercy," the beta goes on, groaning as he walks over to me and falls to his knees in front of mine. He grips my thighs as he stares up at me, his eyes wide. "It's obviously not that. Like, who would put that much work into bullying someone or being mean? Do you know how much of my day that would take just to plan some kind of epic nastiness of that magnitude? Do you know how long I'd have to work on my *face*?" He scrunches his face up in a grimace. "I don't know if anyone told you this, or if you've just never noticed, but I'm not good at being nice like they are. If I didn't like you, you'd know it."

"You're so inspiring," I tell him, dragging my hand through his hair and tugging on it. He sighs, leaning into the touch like a cat. "You're so good at making all of my doubts just go poof."

"Yeah, I know. I'm really good at shit like that. Thank me for it all you want."

"*But I want to talk about it, anyway.*" I give his hair a sharper tug that has him giving me a warning glare, though he

doesn't pull away. "Because I can't just throw my stuff in here and let August say it's because we're pack—"

"Why not?" Foster's mouthiness makes me want to kick him. "You moved in here. You were literally always welcome to move in here, by the way. And aren't you?"

"Aren't I what?"

"God, you're obtuse today." Foster turns his head as much as he can so he can glare at Dorian. "Can you just say it already?"

"Say what?" I ask, turning to glance at Dorian.

Dorian eyes Foster reproachfully, mouth pressed into a line. "He's been wanting to ask you to join our pack for almost two weeks," Dorian says at last, facing me fully. "But I told him no."

The word knocks the air out of me, but then August picks up the conversation.

"Because it feels like we're pressuring you, okay?" His touch on my hip is grounding, but I can't help being confused, still. "And we don't want that. We want you to join our pack because *you* want to. Not because you feel like you have to, or because you're afraid of someone."

"You really want me in your pack?" The words sound strange when I say them out loud and so... casually. Like this isn't everything I've been dreaming of for almost a *month*.

Even last semester, on the tail end of them being not-so-nice to me, I was always drawn to them. I loved their scents and most things about them, outside of the obvious shit.

Not to mention that I've never dreamed of joining a pack other than theirs. Or loved the scent of a pack until theirs came along.

"Yes, Mercy," Dorian purrs. "We really do. But you don't have to tell us whether you do or don't right now. You can think about it—"

"Of course I fucking do." I look up at him, a surprised smile on my lips. "Are you kidding? What else would I do?"

Who else's pack would I *ever* want to be in?"

The approval falls into place on his face instantly, and even Foster seems thrilled as he turns his face into my thigh.

"But..." I pull his mouth away from my legging, giving him a quick, reproofing look that makes him roll his eyes. "There's really, *really* something we need to talk about first."

"Oh, come on, Mercy," Foster hisses, fed up. "Do you want us to draw up a contract? We're not making you sign a prenup or something—"

"Amelia is trying to get me kicked out of Winter Grove," I say, cutting him off without hesitation. "She had her parents lie to the president, and that's where I had to go after class today. They say that if I bother her again, or if I cause any more trouble, then I'm gone. That's it. I won't be able to attend Winter Grove on a scholarship anymore, so I won't be able to stay here at all."

My first thought when I wake up in my new, deliciously large bed in the boy's dorm suite is that there's something wrong with me.

My second thought, which is accompanied by a groan and pressing my face into a pillow, is that my heat is three days early. I'm *hot*, as the name implies, and when I press my thighs together, I feel like I'm on fire. Rational thought is a myth, a joke, a *farce* as I lie in bed and fight the urge to try to take care of this myself with my fingers.

Unfortunately, I'm not stupid enough to think that'll work. But it doesn't stop me from continuously considering it, or lying in bed rubbing my slick thighs together like it's going to help.

At least until there's a knock on the door and I moan, with feeling, "Go away, I'm dead." Thankfully, my hearing aids are in, because I'm able to hear the person clear their throat on the other side of the door.

"Umm, I would Mercy. But I know for a fact you aren't dead." It's August, and there's a growl in his voice that sends shivers down his spine. "Can I come in?"

"Can you hold your breath?"

"Why in the world would I ever want to?" he opens the door as I try to think of a reply, nostrils flared and eyes dark. "Can I come over there?" he asks, though the hoarse note in his voice tells me that it's killing him to just stand there.

I open my mouth, a sarcastic reply on my tongue, but instead his scent hits me and I nearly come right there. “*Fuck,*” I purr, reveling in it. I don’t know if I’ve answered August, but the next thing I know, the blankets are torn off of the bed and he’s kneeling on his hands and knees above me, mouth open as he breathes in my scent.

“Mercy...” He says my name like a curse, or maybe a blessing, then leans down enough that his mouth is only inches from mine. “*Fuck,* Mercy. My perfect, darling omega. I’ve never smelled anything as sweet as you right now.” He curses again, as if he’s unable to stop himself.

“So, uh, I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but I might be in heat,” I tell him, watching the look on his face go from bliss to a wry half-grin.

“No, I hadn’t noticed,” he sneers sweetly, moving one hand to slide between us. For a moment I think he’s just going to touch my inner thigh, but when he slides two fingers into me quickly and deeply my eyes nearly roll back in my head and I honest to God might have just *mewed*.

“Aren’t you normally the one who wants to-to go slow,” I stammer, wide eyes on his. “You like teasing and—”

“I do,” he agrees, cutting me off. “But not when you’re here, scenting like this, with your pussy so wet I know you’ll take my cock like you were made for it. Want my knot, Mercy? Want me to breed your cunt so well that you’ll never, *ever* think you need another alpha again? Dorian excluded, of course.”

“Of course,” I agree solemnly. I know he isn’t serious. And it’s just a bit of dirty talk, but I love it all the same. “You should probably hurry,” I tease, sitting up as much as I can even though it’s really hard to think or talk with his fingers inside me. I want it to be his cock, but *fuck* if this isn’t pretty great, too. “They’ll be back soon, and you’ll have to share if you aren’t quick enough.”

“Oh, Mercy.” The words catch me off guard, as does his grin. “Foster’s already back. And we can’t start without your favorite little psycho, can we?”

I don't get to reply. August tugs my tee off of my body, along with my drenched sleep shorts, and I'm pretty sure he's going to fuck me right here, right now, no prep.

But he doesn't. He picks me up in his arms, ignoring my yelp of surprise, and walks out of the room, past the living room, and to *his* room instead, where I find Foster sitting on the bed. August's bed is in a better position for group activities than mine is, being pretty much in the middle of the room, and Foster looks up in surprise, his nostrils flaring.

"Shit," he whispers, just as August dumps me on the bed. I don't get to move. Foster grabs my arms, pinning me down as he leans over me with a spreading grin. "Well, well, well," he murmurs, holding my arms down against the bed. "Look who's in heat, hmm? I see August did the right thing and got rid of your clothes. You don't need them."

I squirm, just to be contrary, and August grabs my hips with a low growl, digging his fingers into my thighs when I press my knees together tightly.

"You'll have to use your safeword with me if you want me to stop, darling girl," he tells me, his eyes full of heat and promise. "Do you remember it?"

"I do, I—"

"Say it for me now, so I can be sure."

"Pineapple."

Foster snorts and rolls his eyes. "That's just so original," he snickers, but August growls at him and he doesn't say anything else.

"Would you like me to tell you how this is going to go, Mercy darling?"

I shake my head to be contrary.

"Poor thing. You're going to open your thighs for me, or I'm going to hold them open. I'm going to taste you and clean you up. You're so messy for me already. Foster's going to hold you down and he can do whatever he wants to you while I'm down there. Then, when I'm ready to fuck you, you're going

to let him fuck you as well. I know you've been working up to it."

"Now?" The idea makes me nervous and sends a bolt of electricity up my spine. "Not if you're going to *knot* me—"

"Yeah, Mercy. While I knot you. And you're going to love every second of it. Don't pretend you aren't greedy for our cocks in your holes. You *love* when we fill you up." Foster moves to slip his arms under mine, and drags me up just enough that my back is against his chest, his legs bracketing my still-closed knees.

"Open your thighs for me, Mercy," August says again, his eyes dark. "I won't ask you again."

I bite my lip, nearly delirious with need, but still manage to say, "Didn't sound like you were asking me that time."

His growl is terrifying and such a turn on that I shudder. He grips my knees hard and pries them apart, until finally he can wrap his arms around my thighs, mouth just over my slit so that I can feel his breath there. I shiver, and he chuckles.

"I'm going to enjoy tasting your pretty cunt," he murmurs, and closes the distance so he can press his tongue into me, hands tight on my upper thighs.

I gasp, and it feels like something uncurls inside me when he starts to lick wildly. My hands move so I can grab his hair, but Foster is quicker. He pins my arms with his, wrapping them around me until he can cup my breasts in his palms.

"Look at how sensitive you are, little omega," he murmurs in my ear, teasing my nipples with his thumbs. When I shudder, he does it again, and one more time before, instead of just tickling, he's pinching them, pulling at them until they're throbbing.

"Don't!" I gasp, throwing my head back against his shoulder. "That's too much. I'm going to come if you—"

"That's the fucking plan, filthy little princess," he chuckles, and does it again. "Come all over his face like the good girl you are, Mercy." As if to respond to Foster's words, August's grip on me tightens, and his efforts become more

insistent. Not that it takes much else to send me straight over the edge. I gasp, back arching, trying to move, to do, well *anything*. But I can't move. I can't shift my position at *all* and it's so hot that it edges me into another orgasm right off the bat.

But it's not enough. My eyes are heavy and hooded, thighs shaking, as August sits up and wipes his mouth on his forearm. "Come here, pretty girl," he growls, not actually waiting for me to do so as he drags me up and into his lap. "Come and let me fuck that greedy cunt of yours." I loop my arms around his neck, surprised when he so easily moves me over him until he can loosen his grip on my hips so that I can sink onto him. I gasp, burying my face in his shoulder, only for him to grip my chin in his hand and pull me in for a kiss that tastes of my cum.

It's hotter than it has any right to be, and I barely notice when Foster is behind me, slick fingers pressing into my hole while August helps me ride his cock.

"Careful," Foster teases from behind me, nipping my shoulder. "If you move like that, you're going to take more of my fingers than I mean to give you so fast."

"It's not me," I snap, because it's true. August is the one moving me like a rag doll, and I have a feeling he's helping Foster along as the beta works to get me ready for him.

"Baby, it's totally you. You're just so needy for both of us to be in you at once," the dark-haired alpha purrs. "It's going to feel so fucking amazing with him in you as well. And you're going to feel so good when we're both inside you."

I moan at the visual that inspires, losing coherent thought as he fucks me. It doesn't hurt when Foster adds a second finger, or a third, though I am surprised when August lies back, moving so I'm lying on him. He still controls the pace, and Foster isn't far behind. Now, however, he nips and licks at my spine, all three fingers thrusting into me slowly.

"I'm going to come again," I whine, mind almost whiting out with need. "Fuck, please, August. Please tell me you're going to knot me soon. I need it." I can't think of much else

except how good it's going to feel. How can I, when he's just so perfect and already inside me? With my knees on either side of his thighs, I hold him tightly against me, one hand in his hair as I look up at him to catch his mouth in a kiss. He happily obliges, his hand around my waist holds me tight while the other tangles in my long hair. This time he kisses more roughly, and it only grows in intensity until I realize, suddenly, that his knot his swelling.

"You're so ready to take my cock." The words in my ear are a surprise, but when I try to jerk away in surprise, August holds me still. "You can take me," Foster promises, and suddenly I feel his length brushing up between my thighs, teasing my hole.

"What if it doesn't fit?" I ask again, nearly delirious with the need to come. Especially now that August has stopped his steady pace and is waiting for Foster to make his move.

"Oh, it's going to fit," the beta promises. He grips my hips, his body warm behind me as slowly, so slowly, he sinks into me.

It's tight. It's *so* tight that I let out a shudder and a soft whine, my face buried in August's shoulder. But Foster keeps going, and August murmurs praise in my ear until finally, *finally* Foster's hips brush my ass and I realize he's completely inside me.

And I've never felt so full in my life. I didn't know I *could*, but I'm glad they're giving me a moment to get used to it.

"She's so tight," Foster breathes, draping himself over me. "August, it's unreal how tight she is for me. You're so perfect, Mercy. So fucking gorgeous. I'm going to move, okay?"

"Okay," I whine, gripping August's hair harder as he kisses my cheek. Foster moves, slowly at first, until he's built up a steady pace and the burn is fading away, leaving me back in my heat-haze.

"Good girl," August praises, keeping me in place with his arms. "Stay right here between us. Such a good girl. I'm going

to fuck you now as well.”

I’d forgotten that they were going to fuck me *together*, though with him still inside me I definitely should’ve realized. I don’t have time to protest, however, before he’s rocking into me again and the combined sensations make me instantly see stars.

“Oh my god,” I whisper, nails scraping against his chest. “It’s too much. Please, it’s too much. I can’t—”

“Does it hurt?” August asks gently.

“N-no... but it’s too much. I’m so full and—” I yelp when Foster thrusts into me harder, but he only huffs a soft sound of apology. “And I can’t believe how it feels. I can’t—”

“Yes, you can,” August promises in his purr. “You can use your safeword if you need to. But you can take us, Mercy. You’re already doing so well. You’re going to take my knot. Don’t you feel it?” I do. I still do, and it’s starting to feel like it’s not going to come back out as he arches his hips into me and withdraws again.

“So good for us,” Foster agrees. “Knot her August. She needs your knot so bad. Holy *shit*, she takes it so well.” As he talks, August continues what he’s doing, until finally he lets out a soft curse and his arms lock around me. He drives himself into me again and stays there, locked inside me as he comes.

I feel like I’m not going to be far behind. Especially when Foster picks up his pace, panting as he presses a hand against my back. “You like this, Mercy?” he asks, and I almost can’t handle the overwhelming sensations from both of them inside me, even though August can only give small, half-thrusts that tease my walls.

It still feels amazing.

“I’m going to come,” I reply, instead of answering. “Foster, please. I’m going to come.”

“Come for me. Come for us, Mercy,” Foster urges. “I want to feel you tighten around me while I fuck your ass. You can do it.”

“You’re so good. Such a good girl,” August echoes. “Be a good little omega and come for us, Mercy.”

I whimper at their words, and when Foster sinks into me again, I *do* come. My thighs shudder, and my whole body seems to quake as they both praise me and tell me how good I feel. Finally, Foster comes as well, staying where he is through his orgasm until he finally pulls away and sits back. Though, that’s not going to happen for August and me just yet.

“Good girl, Mercy,” August repeats, kissing my throat. “You take my knot so well.”

Twenty minutes or so later I stumble back to my room, figuring I should put clothes on if I’m going to drink six bottles of water before doing everything all over again. It feels like the polite thing to do if I’m going to be on the furniture, anyway.

And that’s the plan... until Dorian snags my arm and *yanks* me to him with a growl and bared teeth. I gasp, surprised, though in reality the biggest reaction is that I can feel the arousal threatening to run down my thighs. Especially when his nostrils flare.

“Aren’t you proud of me?” my stern alpha asked. “I was so good. I waited for them to be done with you. But now...” He drags me further into my room and kicks the door closed, then turns and pushes me onto the bed. “You’re mine, Mercy. You’re all *mine*.” As I watch, he pulls off his t-shirt and unbuckles his jeans, shoving them and his boxers to the floor.

“See what you do to me?” I do see, because he’s already hard and the tip of his cock leaks precum. “On the floor, pretty little omega.”

I don’t need to be told twice, though my eyes stay on him as he goes and sits on my chair, thighs wide, and crooks a finger at me. “Here kitty, kitty,” he purrs, lips curved in a crooked smile. “This is your mess to clean up.”

I crawl to him, not even thinking about getting up, until I’m between his thighs and wondering how much wetter I can

get. I reach up, one hand curling around the base of his length so I can lick at his tip.

But it isn't what he wants. He bares his teeth again, and I can't help but grin at the response until his fingers find my hair and he urges me downward. "You don't get to be coy right now. Not until you suck my cock and take my knot in that sloppy pussy." I shiver at the way he says it, every nerve ending in my body on fire.

I've never wanted him more. I've never wanted *any* of them more, and I'm enthusiastic enough about him in my mouth that there's no way he doesn't know it. All too soon he's pulling me away, a soft sound leaving him like he's disappointed.

"I wanted to make you work for it more, but..." He pulls me up by my throat, until I'm standing and my fingers are wrapped around his wrist. "You're ready to beg me for it, aren't you?"

"Been ready," I murmur, nearly falling into him.

"Then *beg*."

"Please, please fuck me, Dorian," I plead, not needing to be told twice. "I need you. I need you to knot me. I need to come, *please*." It doesn't feel degrading at all, not when I'm in heat. And especially when I'm here with them.

Fuck, I need him in me so badly I'll probably die if I don't get it soon.

"Say you're *mine*. Say you belong to my pack, you're our perfect little toy. Our perfect little omega."

"I'm your omega. I'm yours," I agree, my lips quirking into a smile. "But If I have to say I'm your toy, then you have to say you're mine. My sexy alpha to play with, with a glorious cock that could totally be inside me right now if he wasn't trying to be so dominant."

His grin is frightening. He all but *throws* me onto the bed, falling between my knees and *jerking* me to him. He spreads me with his thumbs and looks up at me with hooded, narrowed eyes.

“You’re leaking,” he informs me, grinning. “Though I can’t tell if it’s you or August. Maybe both? But we’ll make sure from here on out it’s *us* that’s filling you up. And after I fuck you, don’t you dare touch those clothes, or I’ll tie you down. Do you understand me?”

I scrunch my nose. “I want to sit on the furniture.”

“Well, you don’t get to. But you can sit on our laps instead, with our knots in your pussy, or Foster’s cock in your adorable ass. I bet he looked so good filling you up. I bet you *loved* it. Fuck, it sounded like you did.” Without giving me a moment to realize what he’s doing, he slides into me as deeply as he can, leaning over me with an arm braced on the bed beside me.

“Are you flexible?” he asks, and I hesitate, only to receive a slap on my thigh that makes me yelp, my stomach lurching.

“Did you just fucking—”

“Spank you like the bad little omega you are? Yeah, I did. Are you flexible, Mercy?”

“Yes?”

He grabs my leg and urges it up, bending my knee until my leg is folded in two with my shin against his warm chest.

This time when he sinks into me, it feels deeper somehow, and I let out a long, appreciative sound.

“I knew you’d love that. Am I just so deep in your cunt?” He pulls out to do it again, and again, before suddenly letting my leg fall and gripping my throat. “I want to make that last, but not this time. Not while you’re in heat.” He takes a deep breath, his fingers tightening around my neck.

“I’ll breed you like you deserve, my sweet girl. My filthy little omega.” His pace picks up until he’s hammering into me and my hands fly to his arm, one leg still thrown over him to try to steady myself.

“Oh my God—Dorian, *fuck!*” I don’t know what else to say. What else *is* there to say when my brain is completely melting from how hot he is, and how spectacular this feels?

“Fuck, I’m going to come. I’m sorry, I can’t—I have to come. I need it so bad, Dorian. I need you and—”

He kisses me so hard it should be illegal. With his fingers still clenching around my throat, he kisses me as his knot swells. When he buries himself in me and growls into my mouth, I can feel his release as his knot locks us together and my own orgasm hits me like seven trucks at once.

It’s perfect. I have no idea where I am or what day it is, but that doesn’t matter because I have my *pack* and I’m filled with Dorian’s knot.

At this moment, I could die and be happy, though I’d rather not because I want to do this again and again until I’m so dehydrated that I need a whole case of bottled water to fix me.

And judging by the way Dorian isn’t moving, I can only assume he feels the same.

“Good girl. Such a good girl,” the alpha purrs in my ear, gingerly rolling us onto our sides. “There you go. That’s it, sweet girl. You’re so good for us.” He presses his forehead to mine, still breathing heavily. “You’re perfect,” he says, and I can tell that he absolutely means it.

“Yeah?” I whisper, reaching out to cup his jaw. “Well, you guys are pretty perfect, too. In my opinion, anyway.”

Dorian chuckles and turns his head into my palm, kissing it lightly before grazing his teeth over my skin. “No, not like you. Never like you, Mercy. My sweet, *perfect* girl who deserves all the discipline in the world.”

I can’t help the soft snicker that leaves me, but it’s worth the raised eyebrow and promise to regret it later just to say, “Why, Dorian, I don’t think you could properly discipline me if you *tried*.”

He moves to press his face against my neck, and I can feel his grin slide against my skin moments before his teeth sink into my throat. I suck in a breath, tangle my fingers in his hair, and hold onto him as he bites down harder. It’s thrilling, and I

have to close my eyes hard as he makes sure no one will ever forget that I'm part of his pack ever again.

I t's hard to focus on anything.

Literally anything, when my brain feels like there's an angry beehive inside of it that keeps getting kicked and kicked over and over. Only, instead of being able to leave and sting the offender, the bees are trapped in my head, doomed to fly in frantic circles until their deaths.

And there's nothing I can do about it while sitting in anthropology with Foster. He's got his head down, eyes half-closed as our professor talks about the lineage of shamans in different countries. The subject should be interesting, but our professor makes sure that it's not by whatever means necessary.

Even *I'm* bored, which I would've thought would be impossible. Instead, it just gives the problematic thoughts an easier time of taking over, and I tap my Apple Pencil on the table lightly, refusing to let go of it.

How can I, when I only discovered that it's engraved with my name after I'd gotten it out of the box? It's obvious Dorian was lying when he said he'd just happened to pick one up while he was getting a new one for himself. I doubt they just have custom engraving stations at the nearest electronic store. My thumb lightly rubs over my name written out in cursive, and it drags my attention from our lecture, only to plant it squarely on Dorian and his pack.

My pack.

I'd said yes when they invited me, clearly. And the sex we'd had on Saturday was absolutely mind-blowing. Not just because of my heat, either.

But because it was *them* and it was *perfect*.

Unfortunately, the rest of my life hasn't gotten the memo to shape up so I can enjoy this. Dorian's collar might sit snugly at my throat, reminding me that I don't have to go back to Petra anymore, but every time Amelia passes by me with a smile or a word about archery, my heart constricts and I worry that this is the day I lose my scholarship.

And no matter how many times Dorian tells me not to worry about it, I can't do anything *but* worry. I'm not like them. If I don't have that money, I can't afford to go here. I won't be able to get the education I need.

I won't be able to stay with my pack.

It surprises me how much harder that hits than losing Winter Grove. Losing *my pack* would be unthinkable, even though they've only been mine for a few days. Still, I'll do anything I can not to let that happen. Even if I have to suck up to her and act like I'm sorry.

When the professor dismisses us, I'm surprised that Foster grips my hand, silently asking me to wait. Usually he's the one grabbing me so we can jet out of here, with how much hates this class.

"Wait," he murmurs, slowly packing up his things. "Just wait a second, okay?"

"Okay?" I have no idea why he wants to wait. But I do so, my own stuff already shoved into my backpack as he takes his time to organize his.

Finally, when we're the only two in the room and even our professor is gone, Foster turns to look at me. "I just want you to know that you're not her only target, all right?" he tells me, his eyes dark.

"What?" The words don't quite make sense, and for a stupid moment, I think that he's talking about *Petra*.

“I’m talking about Amelia. She’s too afraid of Dorian to do anything to him directly. And I think she knows that August just doesn’t care about what she says or does. Especially since she doesn’t have anyone in her stupid little pack that can challenge him. Either of them, for that matter. Unfortunately...” He smiles crookedly. “That leaves me and you as the obvious targets. And Amelia is nothing if not obvious.”

“But she can’t get *you* kicked out, right? Not like she can me?” I reach out and take his hand, like he needs the comfort, but he doesn’t pull away.

Has she gotten to him? Has she wormed her way under his facade to the sweetness that lies underneath? It feels impossible, since Foster never cares what other people think. But the look on his face tells me that isn’t true this time.

“She can’t get me kicked out of anywhere,” Foster agrees, his grin widening. “I promise you that. But she’s looking for other ways. You know some of what happened two years ago, I hear.”

“I didn’t mean to be nosy—”

“Mercy, you are *always* nosy,” he tells me witheringly. “I’m not mad. But...” he trails off, his smile fading into a frown. “I don’t know,” he says finally, getting to his feet. “Maybe I’m overthinking it. There’s something familiar about that creepy guy she has as a beta. And sometimes I feel like she’s planning something shitty. Which is stupid.” His tone is reassuring as he slings his backpack over his shoulders. “Because what’s she going to do to me with Dorian and August around? And even if they weren’t, it isn’t like I can’t take care of myself *and* you.”

“Have you told Dorian and August?” I ask suspiciously, following him out the door.

Foster snorts. “Come on, Mercy. Do you really think they need to worry more than they already do? You’ve seen them. They’re aging themselves prematurely, trying to put the world on their shoulders as it is.”

While I'm sure they're managing a lot, I don't agree.

He's their *beta*, and I know they'd want to help him or at least make sure nothing is going on that's going to really hurt him.

"Well, I'll worry for you then," I tease, trying to sound humorous or flirty but probably just ending up concerned.

"Yeah, okay, Mercy," Foster snorts, gripping my hand in his as we walk. "You do that."

I should know better.

One would think that after the semester and a half that I've had, that I would absolutely know better.

But still I stay late at archery practice, wanting to get a few nerves less-frayed by shooting and doing something that brings me peace. Afterward, I sit in the locker room, long after the other girls have gone, and lie back on the bench that runs down the middle of lockers on either side.

It's quiet enough that I can pretend my hearing aids are out, even though I know that isn't the case. Thankfully, I haven't had a headache in over a week now, which makes me pretty happy, and I attribute most of that to the fact that I'm away from Petra.

She really was one of the biggest problems in my life, and the solution was just so easy that I can barely believe that it's over.

If only the rest of it was over as well.

I barely hear the footsteps, and only distantly register the sound of the locker room door swinging closed. It's only when someone brushes by me, causing me to flinch, that my eyes open and I prepare an apology that sits on my lips at inconveniencing whoever is trying to use the locker room for its intended purpose.

Until my gaze finds Amelia's upside down grin. She stares down at me, scrutinizing my face as I struggle upward and

finally to my feet, turning on her like she's a tiger ready to pounce and eat me.

"What do you—" I begin, but she cuts me off as if I wasn't speaking at all.

"Do you think I like doing this to you, Mercy?" Her grin is closer to a grimace than a look of happiness, and her eyes are bleak. "Do you think I *like* hurting you?"

"Yeah, at this point?" I move to put the bench between us, though I find that I don't feel any safer for it. "It's pretty obvious you and your pack get off on doing this."

"Not to you, we don't." She follows me until she's standing just on the other side of the bench from me. "What's the big deal, anyway? So you talked to Dorian, and he came and growled at me. What do you think that changes? It certainly doesn't change *you*. You're still just the Wonder Bread of girls to guys used to things that aren't lying stale on the grocery store shelf."

I blink, needing a moment to take in such a creative insult. I'm sorry that I've never thought of it before, though I know I won't ever have an excuse to use it.

She's right, after all. I *am* the Wonder Bread in this scenario.

"If I'm stale white bread, then you must be the rotted rye in the garbage attracting flies," I say after a moment's silence. I tilt my head to the side, not surprised when she just continues to grin.

"Maybe," she agrees, shrugging one shoulder. "But at least I'm not pretending to be something I'm not, as you are."

"Yeah, you caught me, Amelia." I hold my hands up in surrender. "My game is up, I think. All this time I've been pretending to have perfect hearing, and I know I've fooled you all for so long. I'll come clean. These aren't fashion statements, they're actually hearing aids. And I'm not rich, either. My backpack isn't even a designer knockoff. It's just from the strip mall near my house. Guess I can't lie anymore, can I?"

“You aren’t taking this seriously.”

“I’m taking it as seriously as you deserve.” I can’t help my words, or the way they come out. Even though I know she could make this go really bad with just a phone call.

When Amelia snorts, it catches me off guard enough that I have to make myself not look away from her. “God, Mercy,” she snickers. “I wish you weren’t with them. I *like* you.”

“Feeling isn’t mutual,” I assure her. “Frankly, Amelia, I don’t have anything nice to say to you. And since my mom raised me right and all, that’s why I try not to talk to you.”

She laughs again, brushing off the insults. “I’ll miss you when you’re gone,” she remarks off-handedly, and it’s enough to send my stomach plummeting. It must show on my face, because her grin darkens when she catches sight of my expression. “Yeah, you didn’t forget about that. I can have your scholarship taken away whenever I want. My parents don’t care if it’s true or not. You’re *nothing* to them. You’re *nothing* to almost everyone here. And the people you do matter to? They’re shit.”

“Well, that’s an improvement from two weeks ago when I didn’t matter to anyone.” I try not to let my fear and despair show on my face. “Last time we did this, you swore the boys didn’t care about me. Now they do? I’m moving up in the world.”

“All I hear is you telling me how much you want to lose Winter Grove. Was this what you came here for? A rich pack? Two shitty alphas and a sad excuse for a beta that’s about to get what he deserves?”

“What?” Her words towards Foster catch me off guard.

Amelia frowns, as if she hadn’t meant to say it. “You’re going to lose this. *All* of this. Because you refuse to do the one thing I ask.”

“Yeah, Amelia. I refuse to play your stupid little game when it means you’re telling me who I can’t be around,” I agree, mind still racing.

“You should be more willing to play my ‘stupid little game’ when this is the last chance you’re getting.” Her voice is low and dangerous. She means every fucking word. “I won’t even make you leave them.”

My chest unclenches just a little with false hope that I grind under my heel. She isn’t being serious, obviously. She’s just trying to get me going, or get me to break when she shows me what’s behind curtain number two. I’m not an idiot, and this is a bad time to start acting like it.

“Oh? That’s so kind of you. What do you want now, for me to spill government secrets? Poison Dorian while he sleeps?” I keep my voice as sarcastic as possible, just so she knows how I feel. In case some part of my feelings weren’t already evident, and I’m pretty sure they’re more than clear.

“No. I don’t want you to do anything to them.” She’s a few inches taller than me so I have to look up when we stand so close to one another, and as usual, her scent is a burn in my nose. “I’ll tell mom and dad it was a misunderstanding. That you apologized, and all of this will go away.”

When she doesn’t go on, I roll my eyes and ask, “And what do I have to do for you, Amelia?”

“You apologize.” She says it so simply, as if the answer were obvious all along.

“Excuse me?”

“Well...” She shrugs, arms crossed. “Not *just* apologize. I want to hear how sorry you are for your *pack*. I want you to tell me how you’re not worth my time, or the time it would take me to make the call to my dad. Tell me you’re not worth it and convince me that it’s just too much trouble for me to do that to make you lose your scholarship.” She smiles widely enough to bare her teeth. “Convince me you just aren’t worth it, Mercy, and I’ll let it go.”

Her words leave me speechless. So does the cruelty in them. She wants me to tell her I’m worthless... worse; she wants me to believe it enough to make *her* believe it.

And she actually thinks I'll do it. I can see in her face that she believes I'm about to do it. Just like Dorian last semester, she's so confident that I'll drop to my knees right here and tell her that I'm barely worth more than the dirt on the floor of the locker room.

A semester ago, I would've done it. Just as I had to Dorian's pack, I would've been down and begging her not to get me expelled. I would've done anything to keep my place here and not get sent home.

And while I'll still do almost anything to prevent that from happening, I'm not the same person I was back then. I'm *not* going to beg her for anything. Let alone human decency that she should already possess. I won't convince her I'm worthless, because I'm *not*.

I won't convince her I'm not worth her time.

Because I absolutely fucking *am*. She's never considered me equal to her. That's clear in this moment more than it ever has been before. While Dorian, August, and Foster see me as a person, as do Eden, Cecily, and Callum, Amelia just doesn't. I'm less than that to her, and all because I didn't grow up with money like the rest of them.

I wouldn't need to work hard to convince her that I'm dirt, because she already fucking believes it. And that, more than anything, sends rage coursing through my body, along with white-hot anger that burns at my fingers like a different kind of heat.

"I get it now," I murmur, not taking my eyes off her face. Confusion crosses her features, and she opens her mouth to speak only for me to cut her off. "I get why no one here likes you, or wants you around."

"It's not everyone, Mercy, it's—"

"It's everyone who matters," I correct. "Anyone who would want to be around you is just as bad as you. But you're in the minority, aren't you? And you know it. You know that while the other students here might be rich and selfish and sometimes cruel... they aren't like you."

“I didn’t ask for—”

“I know you didn’t. Because you *don’t* ask. You don’t know how to. You didn’t ask that terrified girl to be a part of your pack, did you? You *told* her to. You don’t *ask* anyone for anything, because you don’t see them as people. Well, that’s a real shame, Amelia.” I can’t help but grin. “Because you really are just *pathetic*.”

She sneers, though her eyes widen with surprise. “Sticks and stones, Mercy. And who cares what I am, when you’ll be gone? When you’re back in your shithole of a house wherever the fuck you’re from, no one will care about your opinions.”

“Maybe not,” I shrug. “But they’ll still hate you.”

She sucks in a breath and pinches her nose, trying to keep her composure. “One more chance, okay? All I’m asking is for you to convince me not to get your scholarship taken away.”

I know I shouldn’t do it. If anything, I should walk out of here and call Dorian to see what I should do. He’d know. He’d be able to keep me out of trouble, since he’s so good at staying out of it himself.

“You want me to convince you, Amelia?” I ask, already silently screaming at myself when I realize what I’m about to do.

“Give it your best shot, Mercy,” she invites, arms still folded. “I’ll wait.”

I smile unkindly, hand curled into a fist at my side, and punch her in the face as hard as I can.

I don't know what I'm going to tell the pack.

Potential scenarios go through my head, each of them worse than the last. They'll be upset. *I'll* be upset. I don't know what I'm going to, or how I'm going to tell my mother. Thankfully, the school has never gone to her for anything financial, as the scholarships are all in my name and she's never thrown a cent towards my college.

God, she'll be smug. Disappointed, sure. But just so fucking smug. Especially when she finds out about the pack.

I can hear all of it now, no matter how hard I try not to, and a tear rolls down my face that I quickly wipe away as I sit in the conference room of the administration building with my chest constricted and my heart barely daring to beat in my chest.

It only took Amelia a few minutes, not even an hour, to have me called in here, and I'm not an idiot. I know what this is, obviously.

It's the end.

Closing my eyes hard, I beg myself not to cry anymore. No matter what I tried to say about what happened, the president had just frowned when I came in and directed me here while he was still on the phone with Amelia's dad.

I could hear him yelling about giving the scholarship to a student who *actually* deserves it. Someone that Winter Grove would be proud of helping out.

Someone other than me.

Drumming my fingers on the table, I try to do anything other than cry. I want to figure something out, some grand gesture or evidence that will get me out of this. Instead, I have nothing. There are no cards to play today. No moves to make so that I won't have to leave.

All of this will have been for nothing. I'll have to figure out a way to attend community college, and probably get a minimum wage job to do so. All of my beautiful dreams of making something of myself in the world are vanishing right before my eyes like smoke blown apart by the wind.

The door opens, but I don't look up. Not when it closes, nor when President Roberts moves to sit across the round table from me. He lays a file on the table between us, and I hear him sigh loudly.

"Under normal circumstances, this would just be a reprimand," he tells me, trying to be nice. I can hear the pity in his voice, but I can't decide if it's real or manufactured.

It's unclear how much of this is him giving a damn and how much is just him going through the motions. It's not like I can actually do anything in retribution like Amelia, Cecily, or Dorian could. He'd never have the balls to do this to them.

But they aren't the scholarship kid who couldn't afford a single day of this place on her own, either. The difference is money, and it stings to know that I have nothing in my arsenal to fight the almighty dollar.

"Amelia has admitted that she isn't innocent in the matter, but we had a deal, Mercy."

We had no such deal, and Amelia is *far* from innocent in any of this.

"The rules of your scholarship were outlined in the form you signed." He flips the folder open to show my stupid, unreadable signature on the list of promises I made in order to attend Winter Grove on a scholarship. *Best behavior* is on there somewhere. So is *due respect*.

But I guess that was just for others, and not for me. How nice.

I blink at the paper, my teeth gritted together. I don't trust myself not to cry if I open my mouth, so I just nod and tap my knuckles against the mahogany of the table.

"You're not expelled, exactly," President Roberts goes on awkwardly. "But we are revoking your scholarship. And unfortunately, unless you can pay for this semester and the rest of your time here, you'll no longer be able to attend Winter Grove."

There it is.

My heart constricts and I feel like I'm going to throw up. Obviously, I can't afford to be here. He knew that before he walked in the door. From the moment this decision was made, everyone knew it would result in me having to go home.

"I'll need you to sign this," he adds, flipping to another page in the folder. I read the title and the nausea in my throat only grows.

SCHOLARSHIP DISSOLUTION AGREEMENT.

I don't want to agree to that. I shouldn't *have* to agree to that, and he can't exactly make me pick up the pen and sign my name. Though I suppose if I don't sign it, then this is going to be a lot less cordial and a lot more forceful when they kick me out of school.

"Again, this isn't expulsion." God, I hate that he keeps saying that. "It's just the dissolution of your scholarship. If you can pay for it—"

"I can't," I say evenly. Flippantly, even, as I pick up the pen and stare at the paper. God, I don't want to do it. Surely there's a way to apologize or agree to work this off or *something*.

But deep down, I know there isn't.

This really is it for me here.

With a shaky hand, I sign on the dotted line and lay the pen gingerly down beside it. President Roberts sighs, looking

uncomfortable. “So... I guess we should talk about what happens now,” he tells me quietly, his hands resting on the table. “As you cannot pay for the semester or any more schooling, you won’t be allowed to attend classes anymore. We can give you a few days to pack your things, but—”

He stops, glancing up in confusion. I look up as well, though it’s a few more seconds before I hear the raised voices outside and the secretary’s unmistakable voice arguing that whoever it is can’t just barge on in.

When she says something about this meeting being private, the door suddenly opens, and the fluorescent lights from outside flood the dimly lit room, along with Dorian’s irritated, bitter scent.

My eyes widen, gaze going up until I can find his face, where I find that he looks incredibly aggravated. With his lips pressed together and his attention fixed on the president, he really looks like he’s going to say something unkind, or tell the president he’s fired.

Not that Dorian can do that.

Probably.

The door opens wider and the registrar that I’ve met two whole times walks in, fixing the president with a look as well. She’s an older lady in her mid-fifties, I’d guess, with pulled back brown hair shot through with grey. She’s an alpha through and through, with a scent like old lace and either almonds or arsenic. Probably arsenic. She carries a large handbag that she *slams* down onto the table as she comes in, and just *looks* at the president disapprovingly.

“If your secretary had interrupted this ‘meeting’ to tell you I was coming, we wouldn’t have had to basically break in, Patrick,” she tells the president in a very unamused voice, sitting down in the chair to my left. “Though I’m not even sure what this *is*, truthfully.” Dorian sits down on my other side, quiet except for the displeasure loud on his face.

“Yes you do, Romilda,” President Roberts sighs. “We’ve been discussing it for weeks, ever since Whitely called about

her.” He nods his head in my direction, obviously content to talk about me while I’m here.

Irritated as he is, Dorian puts a hand in mine and I look at him, confused. How does he know about this? And more importantly, why is he even here?

Romilda slides the paper towards her and presses her lips together, looking over it and my signature. “I see.” She sounds unimpressed and unbelieving, which clearly stirs up the college president.

“If this is some favoritism because of family, I’d like to remind you that she signed an agreement.” He taps the other form, but I’m still stuck on the first part of that sentence. Family? Favoritism? I’ve never met this woman in my life, and I’m pretty sure I’d know if I had any family here at Winter Grove.

“Favoritism?” A brow raises on her angular face, and in that moment she looks so much like a displeased Dorian that I nearly laugh in spite of myself. Maybe that’s what he means by family. I can see it when I look at her, and even her dark eyes have a hint of Dorian in them. “How can it be favoritism when she isn’t a Wakefield?”

“Because she’s close to them.” Roberts sits back in defeat. “Come on, Romilda. If you’re seriously going to sit here and tell me to shred this agreement, that’ll be the worst nepotism I’ve ever seen. And I won’t be able to. It isn’t just *me* who’s decided this. And the Whitelys would come down on us if—”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself, Patrick,” Romilda the registrar says icily. “As you did when you started discussing her leaving.”

I look up at the president, who glances at me in surprise as well, as if I have a hidden million up my sleeve that I’m going to produce for dramatic effect.

“Well, it isn’t like she can afford it,” he reminds her, looking irritated and edgy about the situation. “Helping her get home should be our first priority. We—”

“No one said anything about Mercy Noble footing the bill for her education. Nor did they say anything about a scholarship. If you’d read my emails from two days ago, you would’ve seen that the Wakefields have offered to pay for her education in the circumstance that she loses her scholarship to attend Winter Grove.”

... *What?*

I don’t know who’s more surprised, President Roberts or me. He glances at me like I somehow knew this was coming, but I’m just as shocked as he is.

“You are?” I whisper, and Dorian smiles sweetly as he squeezes my hand in his.

“Yes, Mercy,” he promises. “And it’s not *me*. It’s my family.”

That implies that his family knows who I am, and I’m not sure I can handle that right now. In fact, I’m definitely sure my brain can barely handle this for the moment, and the implications of Dorian’s family are too much for me.

“Oh,” I just say, not sure what else I can really reply with. Are they really so rich that they just have all this money to throw around without worrying about it? They don’t even *know* me, and Dorian himself hasn’t known me for long either. I open my mouth to say something about it, but he twines my fingers with his and gives me a small shake of his head, obviously telling me *not right now*.

So, like the good omega I’m trying to be today, I close my mouth and listen to the adults argue. Though argue is a strong word, since it’s obvious that President Roberts isn’t going to do anything. What can he do when he made sure to let me know that I’m not expelled and the registrar has informed him my education has been paid in full?

“We’ve made sure to cover everything that her scholarship did,” the registrar goes on, pulling a paper from her purse and laying it on the table. “As you can see here, she’s paid in full for this year. Dorian’s account is now set up for both of their fees to be delivered annually. We’ve matched Dorian

Wakefield's sum, giving her access to any of the dorms on campus, a fully paid meal plan, money in her fast account to use at any of the restaurants or stores on campus, and another for auxiliary fees such as her archery. I wanted to go over all of this with you yesterday," she adds reproachfully. "Instead of doing it here in front of the students. Now, that should be all?" Her brows arch and it's definitely not a patient look.

"It's not all," Roberts snaps. "The Whitelys are upset after what happened to their daughter, Romilda. They were told that Mercy Noble would be off campus grounds by this weekend, and now someone is going to have to call them and tell them that won't be the case."

Somehow, the fact that he knew he'd be expelling me by withholding my scholarship just to make them happy hurts a little more, but I'm still too numb by staring at the sum of money on the paper to really care.

It's so much that I feel like I'm going to vomit. And not just the bare essentials, either, but money to get smoothies, do archery, and whatever else I want? I can see the stipend to be put in my fast account, and it's more than I could use in a decade, I'm pretty sure. Is this really what Dorian gets every year?

"I can take care of that," Romilda assures him, getting to her feet. She looks at us expectantly and Dorian drags me up as well, not letting me just sit there in shock and stare at the paper any longer. "I'd enjoy it, actually. I'll remind Mr. Whitely of how things work at Winter Grove, so don't worry about that." She makes a small gesture and Dorian pulls me to the door, having to basically drag me out in front of his aunt.

He doesn't stop until we're outside, and only then does he let me stumble to a stop, staring at him with wide eyes. "You shouldn't have... Dorian, it's so much money!" I whisper, gripping his hand as I stare at him. I'm going to cry, because I know this is just a fever dream that my brain is cooking up so that I don't have to accept what's going on.

Then a hand rests on my shoulder, and I look up into his aunt's face as she gives me a kind smile. "I know it may seem

that way, Miss Noble. But it's not a lot for our family. But even if it cost double what it did, Dorian's family would do it anyway." She glances at her nephew and smiles. "We've paid a lot more to keep my nephew out of trouble. And to keep Mr. O'Dell out of trouble as well." It takes me a moment to realize she means Foster. "If the only thing we have to pay for this decade is your college, it'll be a far cry from what any of us expect when it comes to my nephew and his pack." He scoffs at her words, but she goes on. "You should do something nice for her, Dorian. She's upset."

He rolls his eyes. "Yes, auntie," he grumps, dragging me closer to him. "I'm not twelve. I know how to treat my omega."

His omega. The words burn in my chest, thawing the frozen fear that's kept me still this whole time.

"Good. I have calls to make." She walks away quickly, handbag slung over her shoulder as she marches toward the parking lot. I watch her go, unable to even *move*.

"I can't go anywhere," I murmur when Dorian starts to move, my hand in his shirt.

"Why's that, Mercy darling?" he asks, his lips brushing my hair as I close my eyes hard.

"Because if I do, then all of this will be a dream. I'll wake up to getting kicked out of Winter Grove, and I won't have this wonderful fantasy where you and your aunt break in to save me."

"No, Mercy, you won't. You're not dreaming." He wraps his arms around me, and I press my face against his shoulder, glad he can't see me cry. "Did you really think I'd let Amelia tear my pack apart?" I turn to bury my nose against his throat, scenting him thoroughly as he speaks. "Did you think I'd let her do that to us? *Any* of us? Sweet girl, that was never in the cards. I told you not to worry, didn't I?"

"Well, yes," I agree shakily. "But I figured it was the general sentiment. Not that you'd actually make sure I wouldn't get kicked out. Dorian, it's so much money—"

“It’s not,” he promises kindly, pulling away to kiss my forehead. “It is to you, but it isn’t to my family. I just want to take care of you, all right? *All* of us want to take care of you. Even though it’s so hard to get you to *let* us.” His grin is crooked, and I realize that all the little or not so little things they’ve bought me this semester haven’t just been one-offs or random gifts.

They were all planned, I’m willing to bet.

“I...” The argument dies on my lips, though I’m definitely going to bring it up later. “Thank you, Dorian.”

He purrs, the noise and feel of it comforting against my skin. “Anything for you. Can we go home now? It’s cold, and I’m starting to get hungry.”

“You’re only hungry because they’re having a grilled cheese bar in the dining hall tonight,” I point out as he slings an arm over my shoulders and drags me down the sidewalk with him, heading to our dorm beside the lake.

“That’s true,” he agrees.

“And you know I’ll never use all that money in my fast account, right? That’s too much for *anyone*. It has to be.”

“Mmm.” He tilts his head from side to side, grinning. “Take it up with Foster. He uses that and still comes whining to me for shit when it’s empty.”

I want to argue. I even open my mouth to do so. But it sounds so like Foster that I just snort and shake my head, letting Dorian pull me back towards the dorm.

I t's so... strange how nothing changes. I go back to the dorm, I go to class, and it's really no different than it was before. If I'd thought there would be some kind of blood debt owed to Dorian, that isn't the case either.

I manage to not see Amelia all week, but since I'm pretty sure I broke her nose, that isn't a surprise. And it serves her right, so I definitely don't mind the time without her. Maybe I'll get lucky and she won't come back at all, though I'm not exactly holding my breath.

August's arm curls around my waist, pulling me out of my thoughts. I open my eyes, tilting my head back to look up at the mild, sweet alpha. "What's up?" I murmur, sleepy from the nap I've been taking in his lap.

"Dorian and Foster are going to be back soon," he purrs sweetly, nose against my hair. "I had an idea."

"Oh, yeah?" I ask, still half-asleep and wanting to just curl up and return to my slumber. "And what is that, August?"

"You should ask Dorian to a friendly game of cards."

My eyes fly open and I sit up, looking at him nervously. "You think so?" I ask, unsure. "You really think I could beat him?" Of course it isn't life or death if I don't, but I've been working on this plan for three months now, and I'd really like to beat him, obviously.

"Yes, Mercy." He kisses my cheek. "I think you can. And I want to see his face when you do."

“What can I bet him? I mean—what are the things he won’t do? I don’t want to do anything he doesn’t like, you know?” Even though I’m a little nervous at the idea, excitement tingles up my spine. I’ve been practicing for this, and I’ve even beaten August a couple of times. Maybe he’s right about me being able to best Dorian at rummy.

“He probably wouldn’t like wearing cat ears,” August admits. “But apart from that? We’ve kind of done it all. He’ll tell you if he won’t like it or won’t do it, and probably ask you to pick something else. But make sure you don’t let him con you into a different game, or betting something crazy.”

“Oh, right, because I’ve never done anything crazy with you guys,” I agree, filled with mock solemnity. “I’ve never let him put cat ears and a tail on me. I’ve never worn a collar for any of you.” I hook my finger in the ring of the one I’m wearing for emphasis. “Totally would never go crazy, don’t you worry.”

August snorts, rolls his eyes, and stands up with a stretch when the door opens.

Dorian and Foster come in, snow-covered, with food and groceries from town. They *like* to go shopping and being super organized, I’ve come to realize, which is fine by me. I’d rather do anything but. Still, I go help them, putting everything away before finally Dorian collapses on the sofa with a sigh.

I sit down beside him, waiting for him to say or do something.

When he doesn’t, I decide that it’s now or never. If I don’t ask now, I really never will.

“Do you want to play cards with me?” I all but demand, and I’m not that surprised when I’m met with silence. He moves the arm that’s thrown over his face just enough to peek out at me, a little smile on his face.

“You want to play cards with *me*?” he repeats too-sweetly. It makes me nervous. He doesn’t *know*, surely. How could he, when I don’t think the others would’ve told him my plan?

“Yeah,” I reply, trying to act confident. “Do you not want to?”

“*Just* cards, Mercy?”

“Just cards... and a bet,” I reply, smiling sweetly. “If that’s alright with you.”

“Oh, sweet girl, it’s more than alright with me.” He watches as I reach out and grab the cards off the table, eyeing him up as I do. For his part, Dorian’s smile grows, and he drops down to sit on the floor on the other side of the coffee table, just like how he had when we did this for the first time last semester.

Except this time we aren’t playing memory, and I’m not afraid of him like I was back then. Unboxing the deck from its metal tin, I shuffle the cards through my hands anxiously. I want to beat him. I want to make a bet and *win*, because I want to see his face when I do.

And I want to see what he’ll do when I *do* win. If I win, anyway.

“What do you want if you win?” I ask sweetly, placing the deck face down on the table. I don’t want to show him just yet what we’re playing. Call it playing dirty, but I know he’ll retract his stakes if he knows we aren’t playing memory again.

Dorian’s eyes darken as he looks me over, his hands folded in front of his face. “What do I want?” He grins lightly as Foster sits down beside him, eyes on mine as he fights not to smile. Out of all of them, Dorian is the only one who doesn’t know that I’ve been preparing for this since January. “Well, I already have my favorite things. I have you here with my pack, and I have you wearing my collar. Hmm...” He rests a hand on the coffee table to tap his fingers against it while I wait. “I want you to myself for a day,” he announces finally. “No clothes. Just the cat ears you wore last semester. One day of being my cute little kitten and following me around the dorm, ready to do whatever I want.”

My stomach twists as my breath catches. As loss conditions go, it certainly isn’t a bad one. I’d be more than

happy to do it, but this isn't about that. Not this time. He and I can indulge in pet-play another time.

“What do you want?” he asks in response, unable to hide the amusement and excitement from his face. “If you win, that is.”

I start to say something, then hesitate. “You’ll tell me if it’s too much, right Dorian?”

“Of course I will, sweet girl.”

“If I win, will you be *mine* for a while? You have to do whatever I say, and this time it’ll be me on the sofa with the metaphorical goldfish and you putting your mouth to good use.” I get more confident as I say the words, and I curl my legs under me as his crooked smile widens. “I get to have *you* however I want. And also? I get to watch August fuck you.” Taking a deep breath, I add, “*If* you and August are up for that.”

“Wait. *Wait.*” Foster holds up his hands. “August gets something out of this too? Then I want him. Dorian, if she wins, you have to let me fuck your mouth.”

He looks between us, and even up at August, who’s sitting up so that his thighs are on either side of my shoulders. “Okay,” Dorian chuckles, and his eyes dance. “It’s fine with me. But I’m upping my stakes, then. You’re getting a tail, and not the clip on kind. You have to let both of *them* fuck you while I watch. However much I want. Deal?”

A big part of me would rather lose, truth be told. A lot of that sounds all kinds of fun, and terrifying, and perfect.

“Deal.” I shuffle one more time and deal both of us seven cards, watching him tense up as I do.

“What are we playing?” he asks, staring down at the cards even as I pick mine up. “This doesn’t look like memory, unless I’ve forgotten how to play since last semester.”

“Oh, I decided we should play something else,” I reply offhandedly, trying to keep the smile off my face. I doubt it works, though, especially when he eyes me suspiciously. “You’ve played rummy before, haven’t you, Dorian?”

It clicks into place for him instantly. He looks up at August, a rueful grin curling his lips as he scoffs. Even Foster gets a look, but the beta only smiles sweetly at his alpha while Dorian picks up his cards to spread them out in his hands.

“So tell me,” he sighs, as I get lucky and place a match of tens down on the table. “How long have you been planning this?” He picks up a card from the deck, frowns, and puts it back down. “A month?”

“Longer,” I assure him, picking up a card. I discard one, a little nervous, but he doesn’t pick it up. *Good*. If he had, I would’ve been concerned.

“Surely not since before the school year started. And I’m sure you didn’t think of this alone.” He picks up a card and places down a match of threes before laying down a four of hearts. Immediately, I snatch it up, throwing down a run of three.

“Since I moved in with August and Foster.”

“*Oh*.” His hand pauses over the deck. “Oh, I *see*. That’s why you were playing with her so much, wasn’t it August? You were teaching her how to play this with stakes attached.”

The alpha at my back chuckles, his hand briefly massaging my scalp before he sits back. “Guilty as fucking charged, Dorian. Can’t say I’d be too upset to see you lose to her.”

“Only because you get to fuck me,” Dorian accuses lightly, drawing and discarding without making a move.

“Nah. I’ve wanted to see her do this for a while.” He sounds thrilled and snickers when Dorian throws him a quick glance. Dorian looks back down, however, when I grab three of the cards in the stack—two of them his—and use them to place down another straight.

“You’re losing,” I tell him, glancing at his paltry match.

“Yeah,” he admits, chuckling. “I really, *really* suck at this game.” Still, he draws again and places it down in another match, this time three aces. “But even losers get lucky once in a while, huh?” After he discards, he shows me the one card in his hand, eyes gleaming wickedly when I see that it’s a jack.

My heart sinks in realization, because he can play that on the cards I've already laid down next turn when he gets one to discard, and end the game that way. Without looking up, he adds, "If I beat her, August, I'm fucking *you*. Got that?"

"I've still got faith in her." August doesn't sound worried in the least, but I am.

If he puts that down and discards, he'll win. Especially with the queen in my hand. Just barely, but still. It's a win either way. Sucking in a breath, I draw a card.

And nearly faint.

It's an ace. An *ace*, when he just put three down. The queen in my hand is pointless now, because unless my math is *very* off, this is it.

"I don't know, Dorian," I say, looking up at him with a smile. He sees the look on my face, but there's still no worry on his. There's only a smile like he's thrilled, surprised, and possibly excited. "I think you're counting your win too soon." Quickly, I put down the ace and discard the queen, showing him my empty hands. "Rummy, my friend."

He doesn't need to count. He can see as easily as I can that I've won, and he sits back and laughs, clearly surprised by the way this game has gone. "Goddamn, Mercy," he chuckles, pressing his elbows to the table. "Look at you. I never thought you could be so..."

"Wickedly good at making you fall for it?" Foster assumes boldly, gathering up the cards.

"Yeah," Dorian agrees, his eyes never leaving mine. "That's what you are. My sweet, wicked girl." A shiver goes down my spine as he gets to his feet and stretches, shoulders rotating. "How do you want to do this? *When* do you want to? It's the weekend, so if you'd want to wait until—"

"Now," I tell him, getting to my feet as well. Beating him has me feeling bold, and I crook my finger at Dorian over the coffee table. "You didn't let me wait last semester, did you?" Of course, all he did that night was put a collar around my neck. He didn't actually do anything sexual with me.

“Oh? Is this *revenge*?” He leans over the coffee table, my finger hooking in the neck of his shirt as I drag him in for a kiss.

“It might be,” I reply, nipping his lower lip. I’m nervous, though. For all my bravado, I don’t know *how* to go about this, exactly. They’re a lot better at taking charge than I am, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to let the opportunity pass me by. Why should I? “Unless you want to wait.”

“Nah, Mercy. I’d never make you wait for anything. Except I’d really like to shower first. Do you think you could let me do that, wicked girl?” It makes me shiver whenever he says it, though I try to hide my reaction with a sigh.

“I guess,” I tell him, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Unless you’re slow. Then I’ll send August in to drag you out.” It feels like I’m playing a role. That I’m putting on a performance of my own. But it’s fun, and I can’t help feeling like he’s enjoying it too.

Or at least, I hope he is.

“Wait.” I catch his arm as he walks toward the bathroom on his side of the suite and take a step to close the distance when he raises his brows at me. “I’m serious, okay? If you don’t want to do this. If you want to wait, or any of this makes you uncomfortable—”

“Mercy.” He turns to grip my arms and suddenly kisses me hard on the mouth, nipping and teasing at my lips until I finally pull away. “I’m not upset. I’m not trying to put any of this off. But if August is going to fuck me, then I want to shower, okay? Wouldn’t want to smell like the gym for him, now would I?” His dark eyes dance, and it’s reassuring, to say the least. “I’m more than willing to do what you want. *Exactly* what you’ve told me you want. So loosen up. Don’t be so nervous. And don’t think I’m just doing this because I feel obligated to. I mean...” He drags me close, pulling my hand to him until I’m forced to feel the front of his sweatpants and register just how *into* this he obviously is. “Does it seem like I’m not here for this?”

“Maybe not,” I agree, a nervous grin back on my face. “I don’t know. I’ll believe you when I see what kind of noises August can get from you.”

“Challenge accepted,” he chuckles, and leaves after one more kiss to head for the bathroom and leave me grinning in the living room.

Dorian has been gone fifteen minutes when all of a sudden Foster sits down on the sofa beside me and drags me into his lap, kissing me hard enough to make me see stars.

“I love that you won,” he tells me, his lips brushing mine on every word. “*Fuck*, I’m so happy you did. And that you’re going to play with him for a little while.”

It’s hard to articulate a response with his tongue back in my mouth, and I nip at him to get him to pull away for a moment.

“You want him first?” I ask, licking his lower lip in apology. “I’ll let you fuck his mouth first, if you want.”

“No,” Foster says, chuckling. “I want you to have him first. You deserve it. You *won* against him, after all.”

“Mostly fairly, too,” August agrees, coming in to sit behind me. He pushes my hair off of my neck and leans forward, his mouth finding the side of my throat as he bites down gently. “At least as fairly as he played you last semester, in my opinion.” His hands come around to cup my breasts through my hoodie, and I let out a sigh as I melt into his touch while Foster kisses me again.

“Thought I was the one who she was going to play with,” Dorian purrs, and when I look up, I see that he’s not wearing a shirt and his hair is still damp and tousled from the towel. I watch as he stalks over to the sofa and drags my legs to the end of it to sit down between them, hands on my knees as he

stares up at me. “You’ll have to take these off for me, sweet girl,” he says, gesturing to my leggings. “Unless you want me to rip them off of you.”

I consider that. It’s not that I don’t want him to rip them off of me, but these are some of my nicer, fleece-lined leggings and I’m not willing to give them up just yet. So I get to my feet in front of him, surprised when he doesn’t move. Instead, he only looks up at me, now at the level of my thighs, and when I reach up to pull the waistband down, August catches my hand.

“Why don’t you make Dorian take them off?” he asks gently, grinning savagely.

“Will you?” I ask, finding Dorian’s dark gaze.

His smile turns sharp. “I was hoping you’d ask.” His hands wander up my thighs, finding the top of my leggings and hooking his fingers into them. He’s slow and teasing as he pulls them down, and finally off of me so he can toss them into a corner.

I know I shouldn’t, but I still feel so... exposed like this. With only my hoodie on and here, with his face at the level of my thighs, it’s pretty clear I wasn’t wearing anything under my leggings. Even with my hoodie still on, it’s a lot to just stare down at him as he kisses my thigh and finally shoves me back down onto the sofa.

“Is there a reason you always keep your hoodie on, or try to, when we mess around?” Foster asks, leaning in. It reminds me a little bit of the time I’d done this with Dorian, when I’d been wearing cat ears, except that both of them are beside me on the sofa instead of just August.

“It’s, umm, kind of a safety blanket?” I admit almost nervously as Dorian presses my thighs open and leans in between them. Gently, I reach out and run my fingers through his hair before curling them against his scalp.

“Do you need it? Can I take it off, please?” Foster asks sweetly against my ear. “You can tell me no if you want to.

But I just want to play a little while Dorian's using his mouth for something useful."

"Foster." Dorian pulls away, though he doesn't look up. "I'd like to remind you that I still have ears, and that I'm not exactly focused enough not to hear you. You're starting to sound like you're asking for it once I'm done here."

"Yeah, I don't know. Maybe you're just misreading the situation," Foster purrs, grinning. Dorian finally eyes him, but when I tighten my fingers in his hair, he grins up at me.

"Come on, Mercy," Dorian chuckles, leaning in to kiss my inner thigh. "Don't you want to see me pin him down and put him in his place?"

"I'd love to see both of you fuck him," I admit with a soft laugh. Foster's hands slip under my hoodie, and when he gently works it up over my stomach, I look at him again.

"I'm not going to hurt you, okay?" Foster promises. "But you have to know that you're incredibly gorgeous and we love looking at you, right? And touching you all over?"

My fingers twitch in Dorian's hair and he stops once more from where he was teasing my inner thigh so he can rest his chin near my hip and look up at me. "You don't have to," he reminds me. "Especially right now. You won, and everything is always your call with us. But he's right. You don't need to hide from us."

"You don't *ever* need to hide from us," agrees August from my other side, leaning in to kiss my throat. My free hand goes up to catch his neck, pulling him closer, and for a moment I really am lost between the three of them. It's too much and perfect at the same time to have all of them touching me, and when Foster tugs on my hoodie again, I help him pull it over my head, leaving me completely naked for my boys.

The feeling makes me shiver, and Foster leans in to kiss me sweetly on the mouth, pressing his body against mine. At least, until Dorian wraps his arms under my thighs and yanks me forward on the couch. It draws a small, surprised sound out

of me as I'm left lying diagonally, and Foster fixes things by pulling my head onto his lap.

"What are you doing?" I ask, moving to sit up and look down at Dorian as best I can.

"You aren't in a hurry, are you?" he purrs, his breath hot over my slit. "You wanted me for the whole night, I thought. So I'm doing what you asked." As I watch, he lowers his mouth until his lips are pressed against me, and slowly I feel him lick a long line up my slit, then his tongue curls over my clit and I gasp.

"What is with you guys and being so... teasing about stuff like this?" I ask the ceiling fan, causing August to chuckle.

"Why hurry?" the mild alpha asks, leaning over me so he can cup my face in his hands and kiss me sweetly. He moves only to turn on the tv, and I'm pretty sure I hear the telltale signs of *Ocean's Eleven*. Is this a joke? We're doing this *again*?

It's... certainly interesting to be in August's place this time, instead of mine.

"I'm not going to last an hour like you did," I threaten, when August moves to lie on the sofa beside me with his head on my ribs. It's not exactly the most comfortable I've ever been, but I'm not going to move. Not with Foster's hands in my hair and Dorian's mouth tracing up my slit once more. He urges my knees up and over his shoulders so he can fit himself more snugly against me, and my hand in his hair relaxes. I like it there, though, and I'm not going to move it. Not right now, anyway.

"You don't have to last," Dorian points out. "I'll make you come as many times as you can." Before I can reply, his tongue dives into me, and I gasp. "That's my girl," he urges, when my fingers tighten in his hair again. "Hold me tight like that. I want to know how much you like this."

"It feels like even when you lose, I'm still the one being told what to do," I laugh breathily, unable to stifle a gasp when August reaches up to tease first one nipple, then the other. Is

this some conspiracy where I win but they still overwhelm me and have me begging for them to fuck me before much time has gone by?

Because it's definitely starting to feel like it.

"He won't be saying much of anything when I'm fucking him," August promises lazily as Foster buries his fingers in my hair.

Dorian looks up and I can see him from where I lay on Foster's lap, but he doesn't say anything. He can't anyway, when I use my grip on his hair to pull his mouth back more firmly against me.

"Less mouthing off, more using your tongue," I tease, unsurprised at the amused narrowing of his eyes. "Come on, Dorian. It's your turn to be good for me. My sweet alpha." I feel him pause, before suddenly his tongue is deeper in me and his hands are spreading me wider. "*Fuck*," I breathe, leaning back when Foster's hand finds my throat. "*Fuck*, Dorian. Is that what I should've been saying all this time? That you can be my perfect alpha, just like I'm your omega?" His growl against my body, makes my toes curl. "I don't want to wait. I want to come for you, okay? You need to make me come for you with your perfect damn mouth." My fingers are tight in his hair, and it takes me just a second to realize that as he's picked up the intensity of how he's eating me out, August has started nipping at the skin over my ribs, his fingers becoming more insistent as he cups my breasts and toys with my nipples.

Dorian moves, changing so he can lick long stripes up my center, and finally fixes his mouth over my clit. But he doesn't stop there. Two fingers press into my body, curling upward as he sucks my clit and teases it with the edges of his teeth. "Shit. *Dorian*," I breathe, though it isn't just Dorian. It's the way Foster's hands in my hair and on my throat tighten just right. And the way August teases me right into frustration and beyond. "I'm going to come," I tell Dorian, releasing his hair. "You don't have to stay. I want you to know—" He reaches up with his free hand and forces my fingers back into his hair, giving me a quick, narrow-eyed look.

“Okay, okay,” I laugh lightly. “I get it.” I grip his hair again, fingers scratching against his scalp as he presses a third finger into me. Not even a minute later, I’m arching off the sofa, unable to stop myself from coming with his name on my tongue. If anything, he grips my thighs more tightly, and it takes me a good few minutes before I can breathe well enough to sit up, free from August and Foster, finally.

“I love your mouth,” I tell Dorian, who’s still between my thighs and running his tongue over my sensitive flesh. “Will you kill me if I give you the ‘here kitty kitty’ line, though?”

He pulls away just enough to grin savagely up at me. “Winner or not, I’ll put you on the floor on your knees and I won’t let you up until you can’t even say the word ‘sorry,’” he promises.

God, that’s so tempting. I *want* him to make good on his threat, but thankfully August brushes my hair back from my ear before I can say it.

“Can I fuck him now?” he purrs in my ear. “So you can see his face while I do?” I’m absolutely happy to be reminded of that part of me winning, and I nod my head, finally letting go of Dorian’s hair.

“Are you going to put on a show for her, August?” Dorian teases, getting to his feet to look down at the other alpha of his pack. Realistically, I know that at the end of the day it’s Dorian that’s in charge, but to see the slow, lazy smile on August’s lips and the way he kicks off his pants and pulls his shirt over his head while he just sits on the couch and looks up at Dorian is great.

“I think you mean am I going to have *you* put on a show for her, Dorian,” he replies with a low, soft chuckle. One hand goes around his length, the other hand beckons Dorian down for him. “Take off your pants, alpha,” he murmurs, and to my surprise, Dorian does just that.

I move to one side of the sofa, going for my hoodie on the floor, only for Foster to pick it up and toss it to the corner of the room with a smile.

“You don’t need it,” he tells me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me into his lap as he leans against the arm of the sofa.

“Maybe I’m cold,” I reply, nipping at his lower lip. “Ever think about that, Foster?”

“No,” he admits, smirking. “But I also don’t believe you. If you’re cold, then let me cuddle with you. I’ll keep all of you warm, Mercy.” He drags me closer to him until I’m pressed solidly against his bare chest. Not that I know quite when he took off his shirt. His skin is warm against mine, and while one arm stays around my waist, the other absently teases my still-sensitive nipples, making me shiver.

Dorian and August aren’t unfamiliar with this, judging by how easily the former sinks down onto August’s lap. With both of them naked, it’s so easy to watch as August’s arms slide around Dorian’s waist while he deepens their kiss to the soul-sucking level that they’re so good at. His hands grip Dorian’s hips, dragging upward and leaving red lines before he releases his grip and to brush a finger over Dorian’s hole.

When he slips it in, and then another, August pulls back with a raised brow, only to be met with Dorian’s smirk.

“Mercy wants to see you fuck me, not prep me,” he laughs quietly, surging forward in August’s lap.

“You take all the fun out of it.” He shoves Dorian to his feet and follows with him, gripping him suddenly by the throat in a move that makes my jaw drop.

But Dorian just... leans into it. That and the hand that strokes along his chest while Dorian reaches back to spread himself for August while the latter slicks up his length with lube he pulled from a drawer in the side table. I can’t move or blink. It’s that unexpected and that *hot* to see August line himself up with Dorian and sink into him, pulling a whine from Dorian’s throat as he does.

“Fucking *perfect*, just like always,” August sighs, gingerly sitting down once more with Dorian on his lap. The hand on his chest slides down as he rolls his hips up into the slightly

smaller alpha's and Dorian only tilts his head back onto August's shoulder with a groan as his throat is squeezed lightly.

"Tell me how much you like it," my mild-mannered alpha purrs, nipping Dorian's ear. "Tell *Mercy* how much you love it."

Dorian moves, tilting his head in my direction with a grin. "I really love it," he promises with a low growl. "Just as much as I love fucking August. He's so good at switching for me. And so good at fucking you, isn't he, *Mercy*? I bet you're wet watching us, aren't you?"

It doesn't occur to me that Foster's being sly until he shoves his hand between my thighs, fingers sinking into me. "So wet," he agrees enthusiastically, pulling his fingers free and shoving them into my mouth when I try to speak. "And so fucking hot like this. Both you *and* them."

August doesn't speak again. He buries his face in Dorian's shoulder, jaw moving as he sinks his teeth into the skin there and his movements pick up. In no time Dorian is leaning forward into his arms, and one of his hands moves so he can wrap his fingers around his own hard cock.

"Damn" I breathe, as Foster pulls me into a kiss. "Why don't they do this more often?"

"Because they're both too dominant most of the time. But they love it, and they look so good," Foster replies, fingers sliding into me again. "Can I finger you while they fuck?"

"Of course you can." He makes good on the request, and it isn't long before I'm panting along with Dorian, watching my alpha's face twist with tense desire as he reaches back a hand to twist it in August's hair.

"I'm going to come," he warns, and August only laughs against his neck, sinking his teeth in deep once more.

"Of course you are. You never last long like this. I think you need more practice, Dorian." It's so wild to hear August talk to him like that, and I can barely believe it myself, except that I'm here, present, and in the moment.

“Can I come?” With a jolt, I find that Dorian’s eyes are on mine, and they’re wide with desire and arousal. “You’re in charge here, Mercy, aren’t you? I really want to come.”

Him asking me might be the thing that makes my brain short circuit. My body clenches around Foster’s fingers, and I bite my lip hard. “Yeah,” I tell him, without hesitation. “I want to see you come from his cock, Dorian. You look so good with him fucking you... it’s unreal.”

Dorian opens his mouth to say something, but breaks off in a long, jagged moan as August buries himself inside him once more. It’s hotter than it has any right to be, especially when August reaches around to wrap his fingers around Dorian and coax him into his own finish that stains his long-fingered hand with cum. But all I can do is watch as Foster brings me closer and closer to my own release. I come with his mouth on mine, three fingers fucking me as deeply as he can.

Waking up to sex is not something I thought I’d ever start getting used to, but I don’t even open my eyes when I feel Dorian’s tongue against my slit again.

“It’s like four in the morning, right?” I murmur, reaching down to curl my hand against his scalp. “What are you doing?”

“Do you want me to stop?” he asks lightly, pushing my knees up so he can urge them over his shoulders.

“Well... no.” I open my eyes, glad that I stumbled into my room and fell asleep without taking my hearing aids out. It’s not that uncommon, but I don’t like to do it. Still, it makes times like this very convenient. “But why aren’t you asleep?”

“I’m yours, remember?”

The words send a jolt through my body, and I prop myself up on my elbows to look down at him, only for Dorian to gently push me back down.

“You let me off too easily,” Dorian continues, teasing his fingers over my clit as he speaks to make up for the absence of

his mouth. “I was supposed to be yours all night. Not just until August fucked me silly and Foster used my mouth.”

“Well... yeah,” I admit. “But I’m not going to make you stay up late or do something when you’re tired, Dorian. I just wanted to see the look on your face when I won.”

“You should’ve. I’ll teach you how to take your winnings like you should, my wicked girl.” The sharp growl, punctuated by a bite to my thigh, pulls a gasp from my throat. “If I’d won, you’d still be wearing cat ears with your ass full of the tail butt plug I’m buying for you. Maybe you’d be asleep, but it’d be because you passed out from exhaustion with my cock still in your pussy, and not because I’d politely told you that you could go to bed.”

“Dorian—” I begin, but he bites me once more, teeth scraping against the sensitive skin of my inner thigh.

“You’re too nice,” he goes on. “Too nice to *me*. We’re going to do this again tomorrow, all right? You and me, while Foster and August are out running errands. You’re going to fuck my face and ride me until you get off.”

“And you,” I point out, but he shakes his head.

“Not me. Doesn’t matter, since I didn’t win. Besides, I doubt I’ll be able to outlast you. Not with how tight and hot your body is.” He moves to sit between my thighs, pressing my knees up until my legs are folded in half. One he pulls over his shoulder, and I don’t need to see him to know what he’s doing. Especially when his cock brushes my slit.

“Tell me something... do you regret winning?” he asks, entering me smoothly and without much foreplay. Still, I gasp at the stretch of him, and grip my pillow with tense fingers.

“What?” I ask the question punctuated by his thrust as my body shivers with pleasure. “Of course not. I’m so happy I won. I’ve been practicing for *months*, Dorian—”

“But you want what I would’ve done to you if I won, don’t you?” he asks, voice a low purr.

“I...” I bite my lip, thankfully unable to answer when he fucks me so sweetly and thoroughly.

Until he stops, one hand on my jaw as he jerks my face up so I have to look at him in the dim light. “We both know you do. And you know I’ll give it to you when you deserve it.”

“What if I just ask for it?” I demand instead, but his grin is savage in the dimness of early morning.

“No, sweet girl. No, my perfect omega. You get it when you *deserve* it. But tomorrow I’m going to teach you how to take what you’ve won.”

“Dorian—” I arch off of the bed as he fucks me, eyes closing again. “Dorian, it’s too much—you made me come so many times already—”

“Come again anyway.” He grips my hips in his hands, keeping me still as he fucks me. While I love his mouth and I love seeing him on his knees for me, there’s something about my alpha fucking me like this, holding me down and controlling me, that drives me crazy.

He doesn’t have to ask more than one time. I shudder and fall apart for him, my leg hooked around his shoulder, urging him deeper into me before he comes as well. He’s quiet, only murmuring my name as he finds his release before falling down beside me and dragging me against him, arm hooked over my waist.

“You didn’t take your hearing aids out again,” he realizes, touching my ears. “What am I going to do with you if you don’t start taking better care of them and yourself?”

“Fucking me with a tail and cat ears?” I suggest; removing one but hesitating with the other.

I hear his snort, and his soft chuckle, as he urges me to take it out as well and place it on the bedside table before pulling me against his warm, solid body again and drawing patterns on my shoulder that lull me to sleep within minutes.

“You’re starting to smell like them all the time.” Cecily’s voice is the opposite of delicate. Instead, she rests her phone on the table, scenting the air again. “It used to be, after when you moved in with them, only on your clothes. But you’ve been letting them mark you, haven’t you?” the redhead asks with some bit of satisfaction in her voice.

She can’t see them, yet the bite marks from my boys still burn under my jacket as she stares at me. I only smile.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” I tell her too-sweetly. “Surely I wouldn’t be so bold as to let a pack I’ve only known for like, eight months, take their turns marking me however and wherever they want. Surely I—”

“I’m not Dorian,” Cecily reminds me, as if I’ve forgotten. She sweeps her hair back from her face, looking me over. “And I’m not about to fuck that cute attitude right out of you, so save it for him, won’t you?” Still, I make a face at her before going back to my iPad and scrolling through the assignments I need to email by the end of the day. They’ll still be three days early, of course, which is when I prefer to turn things in.

“I don’t have an attitude,” I reply, though I know that I’m not exactly being honest. Neither Cecily nor Eden scare me any longer. Honestly, Amelia doesn’t either. More than anything, I just want to be left alone by her, while Cecily and Eden have definitely reached ‘friend’ level in my little social hierarchy.

“You’ve changed,” agrees Eden, putting down her bottle of water. “Maybe you don’t realize it.”

“You never would’ve said those things to Amelia last semester. You couldn’t say them to Dorian, after all,” Cecily points out, and I can’t help but lay my iPad down and look up at them, confused.

“I haven’t changed.” I dismiss the idea with a shake of my head. To say that I have makes me somewhat uncomfortable, since I like myself the way I am for the most part. I’m rather agreeable, in my opinion. Sometimes funny, and I don’t cause a lot of trouble when I can help it. To change would mean to take something away from those traits, and I don’t think I really want to do that.

Do I?

“You’ve changed for the better. I haven’t seen you shrink away from Amelia in over a week. Even at archery practice you just... ignore her.” Eden shrugs, buttering a piece of toast. “Is it the pack? Is it Dorian that’s made you change?”

I have to think about that before I can answer, and my fingers find the engraving of my name on the pen as I think. “Is it?” I ask myself, more than either of them. “I don’t know... maybe a little bit. I’m not so afraid of her anymore, and I think part of that is because I know I have security with the pack. She can’t get me kicked out of Winter Grove, and that was the only thing she could hold over me.

“It’s not just them. Or the fact that the Wakefields have made sure I’m not going anywhere. Though that’s definitely a part of it. I don’t want to be like I was last semester. I was so afraid of Dorian’s pack for a while... it was awful.”

“Until you wanted in their pants,” Eden snorts, prompting me to flip her off. She returns the gesture with a grin and tilts her head lazily to the side. “No, that’s okay, princess,” she growls, showing off her teeth. “Unfortunately, you just aren’t my type.”

“Is anyone?”

“Yeah,” she says. “But not you.”

“She likes girls who are into all the sports she is, and who like to get dirty,” Cecily remarks absently. “Not the kind of dirty you’re thinking, either.”

“Thanks, Cecily,” her friend grouses, giving her a quick sideways glance. “I’ll remember this next time she asks about *your* type.”

“Oh, you don’t have to.” Cecily gazes at me, giving me her full attention. “Just in case you’re ever wondering, Mercy, you’re basically my type. Small, weak, helpless... I can imagine how easy it would be to make you cry or scream or *beg*. Normally I prefer boys, but I’ve played with girls before. You say the word and I’ll ask Dorian if we can make it a threesome sometime. I’ll teach him a few ways to make you wail.” Unlike when Eden did it, when she shows *her* teeth, it’s a threat.

If there’s anyone in this world I don’t want to piss off, it’s most definitely her. Maybe Eden, by association, but more than anything, Cecily petrifies me.

“O... kay.” I blink a few times. “Anyway, I don’t see that I’ve really changed that much. I was just tired of being walked on. Amelia’s a bitch, but what’s she going to do, hurt me? Like, physically hurt me?” I probably can’t fight the alpha in a fist fight match, but still. I doubt it’s ever going to come to that.

That is, until Eden and Cecily glance at each other, and Eden’s mouth twists down into a frown.

“What?” I ask, glancing between them. “What are you looking at each other like that for? Now I’m worried.”

“She’s just troubling,” the redheaded alpha says, needing a moment to find the right word. “I guess that’s how I want to say it. I don’t know. That guy who’s a part of her pack? He didn’t used to go here, either. He came here with her. I’ve heard he’s her cousin or something, but there’s something off about him.”

“There’s something *wrong* with him,” adds Eden. “I’ve seen the way he talks to other students. Especially betas and

omegas. He's not an alpha like her, but he can't hide his nastiness even half as well as she can."

Which is saying something, since Amelia isn't hiding anything or fooling anyone, in my opinion. I sit back with a frown, studying my plate, even though I have no intention of eating the rest of what's on it. Burnt toast ends aren't my thing, and it seems the sausage wasn't what I wanted in my mouth today, though I can't say that it's *bad*, exactly. It's just that the more we talk about Amelia, the more my stomach tells me that food isn't on the radar for me.

"Do you know anything about him? Maybe there's something about him at his last school?" I ask, laying my fork down on my tray.

"Well, we don't really know where he went," Eden admits, trading a glance with Cecily. Both of them seem irritated at that, or at the very least, frustrated. "We don't know anything about him, like I said."

I frown, but I get what she's saying about him. I've only seen the guy a few times, but he gives me weird vibes that are just... off. And hadn't Foster said the same thing about him? Hadn't he said that he gets weird vibes from the guy?

"Whatever," I mutter, shoving my iPad into my backpack. "Hey, I have to go, okay? I'm going to be late for anthro... which I hate more than any class that's ever existed." It's amazing how a great subject can be rendered unbearable by a professor that talks in the same monotone voice, never asks questions, and goes from bell-to-bell in class. The only time he *doesn't* lecture is when we have tests, and during those, there are usually three or four students telling him that he didn't cover all the content he put on the test.

Such a fun time of day.

"You know you can come to us if anything happens, right?" The offer is unexpected, and it makes me pause to glance up at Cecily, who taps her nails against the table as she sits back in her chair. "I know you have this wonderful pack and all now. I know that they're your everything."

I fight not to look awkward or embarrassed at her words, and instead only succeed in probably looking uncomfortable.

“But sometimes you need an outside perspective. If something happens with Amelia or with anything else, you have our numbers. Or if you just want to talk.”

“You make it sound like we’re friends,” I joke awkwardly. I’ve never once thought of myself as the girl who would be friends with these two, but the words bring a rueful grin to Cecily’s face.

“I guess we are. You’ve grown on me, Mercy Noble. Her too, though she doesn’t want to admit it.”

“It’s your archery skill,” Eden sighs loudly, not looking up from her book. “It’s really just that. And the fact that you fucked up Amelia’s nose, I guess. But she’s right.” Finally, she does look up, brown eyes unimpressed. “If you need help or advice. Or you want me to beat up August, we’re always around. Literally always, because someone never goes home for breaks if she doesn’t have to. She has a house near your pack’s, too.”

Cecily gives her a glance, getting her things together as she does. “You’re not going to beat up August. Foster would kill you,” she points out, but it’s the last thing I hear as I tell them both goodbye and drop my tray off at the window. The lady smiles at me and I return the look, shouldering my backpack as I make my way out of the dining hall and head to the liberal arts building where I must resume my weekly suffering with Foster.

Or at least, that’s the plan.

Halfway there, I catch sight of the girl who hovers around Amelia. She always looks terrified, but today is a different case entirely. When she meets my eyes, I’m worried her heart is going to stop. The blood drains from her face and she stares at me, open-mouthed, while I look at her.

My heart sinks, but I have no idea why. Even though I don’t want to be around her, I still make my way over to her,

stopping when I'm only a few inches away from her in the courtyard.

Tears stand in her eyes, and again I worry that she's going to faint or *die* and I really will have a body to bury in the melting snow piles that still stand shoulder height in some places around campus. Hesitantly, I reach up, but drop my hand when she looks at it with the same fear she'd shown when she looked me in the eye.

She's an omega, like me, I realize as I suck in a breath of cold air. I can't tell what her scent is underneath all the fear, but whatever it is, it's soft and sort of pleasant.

"Are you okay?" I ask, wondering if this is some sort of trick. Maybe Amelia is coming up behind me with a net, ready to drag me back to the president's office and have him expel me. But if this is an act, then this girl deserves an Oscar for her work here.

"I told her not to," the girl murmurs, hands trembling. "He's... he's been waiting to do something awful, and I *told her*." She closes her eyes hard. "You should go," she says finally. "You have to go."

"Go? But I'm—"

"Go behind the liberal arts building. There's a little alcove back there where professors sometimes spend their breaks. You can't see it that well until you're right up on it."

I frown. "Do you think I'm stupid? I'm not going to fall for that just so I get *jumped* by your pack. I wasn't born yesterday—"

"You're not going to get jumped. It's not *you* he ever wanted to hurt, anyway."

The words somehow make everything worse, and time seems to slow down.

"... What?"

"She told me it wouldn't be like that this time." The girl is babbling now, and tears fall down her cheeks as she looks down. "She said he was different, that she could control him."

But he's so *violent*, and he's been so angry ever since they got caught last time."

Last time?

"So you've got to go. You've got to go help Foster, or call someone, or—"

"*Foster?*" I'm already moving toward the liberal arts building, and at this point I really do hope this is some sort of dumb trick or trap or that I'm the one who's going to get jumped.

"She promised," the girl says again. "I'm really sorry—I thought she'd keep her word."

I barely hear her. I don't have it in me to care about what she's saying or how she's saying it. Not when I need to make sure her words are a lie and Foster isn't lying in a dumpster somewhere hurt.

Or dead.

I *don't know what I'm doing.*

The only thing I know I've done right is calling August to tell him, and I'd only stayed on the phone long enough to say where to go and that Foster's in trouble.

But by his tone, I knew that he'd be longer than the *minute* he'd promised me. He and Dorian both.

Not that it slows me down. I run around the side of the liberal arts building, feet slipping in the melting snow as I go, until finally I see the little indent of the building forming an alcove that's mostly hidden until I'm close.

Then I see Foster.

He's leaning against the wall, eyes wide as he looks at the beta in front of him who's probably two times his size. One of Foster's arms is cradled against his stomach, and his lip is cut and bleeding. The beta takes a step closer to him, and another, but before he can do anything else, they both turn at the sound of my footsteps.

"Mercy—" Foster is cut off when I launch myself into the beta, nearly knocking him off his feet. He stumbles, though of course remains upright, and when he slams me into the nearest wall, a hand at my throat, it takes me a moment to respond. I see stars, and if this were a cartoon, there would be little birds flying around my head while my eyes spun comically.

The boy snarls, and he's not like any beta I've ever met when his scent flares and becomes almost an alpha's overwhelming, bitter anger.

But he's neither an alpha nor *my* alpha. I sneer back at him, catching sight of Foster, who slams into him as well. The beta has to be bigger than both of us combined, and not even Foster knocks him down. He just causes him to stumble.

"You're bleeding," Foster tells me, looking at my face.

I grin at him, grateful he isn't dead. "Yeah," I reply breathlessly. "You are too."

"You think two of you are going to be better than *one* of you?" The boy bares his teeth. "You think I won't play with him just because you're here? Because what, you're their little whore of an omega?" His teeth are bloody, and it gives him a savage appearance that somehow the close-cut brown hair and angry, dark eyes didn't.

In spite of myself, I draw away from him, feeling a touch of nerves for the first time since I got here. He's right. There's no way the two of us will get him to go away unless Foster has a knife that I don't know about.

Not that I'm discounting it. It's *Foster* after all.

"You, uh, hiding a switchblade in your pocket by chance?" I ask as we back up into the alcove, my backpack sliding to the ground at my side.

"No, Mercy, I'm just happy to see you," he replies, sarcasm in every word as he rolls his eyes. "A switchblade? *Jesus.*"

"Well, you're kind of psycho," I tell him. "I just figured ___"

"Yeah, I'm not psycho enough for a switchblade."

"Shame." The terrifying beta lunges for me, feinting at Foster before he grabs me again by the throat and slams me to the wall. He pulls me away, only to do it again, and hits Foster with an elbow when he gets close.

If my brains weren't being knocked around in my skull, I'd agonize over how pathetic the two of us are, apparently, in a situation that requires physical strength. Still, I manage to get my knees up between us before he can slam me again,

thrusting him away from me just as Foster comes back to hit him as hard as he can in the face.

The beta goes down to one knee before he's up again, this time swinging wildly at Foster instead of me. I can't say I'm upset about the break. It's hard enough trying not to *die* from the pain in my head and back as I lunge forward and grip the arm he's hitting Foster with to drag him back.

Unsurprisingly, I end up on my back on the concrete, smacking my head hard against the smooth surface.

"Foster!" I yell, seeing that the beta has him pinned now. He squirms and writhes under him, and I have to come up from the ground to grab the beta's hand again and pin it to my side.

But he's expecting it, and changes his target to me instantly. If I didn't somewhat know better, I'd swear this guy was a Marine instead of a college student. After all, who the hell else could know how to fight like this, and so easily take both of us on?

When my back hits the ground again, I'm gasping, the pain in my lungs sharp. My body hurts too much for me to ignore, and even when Foster kicks him in the face, the beta only sneers and bares his bloody teeth again.

"Amelia should've let me end this a long time ago," he snarls, his hand twisting in the front of my hoodie. "She doesn't want to get rid of your pack badly enough to do anything that counts."

"Oh right, because beating someone up counts." I spit blood in his face. "That's so playground bully of you. What are you, eight?"

He doesn't get the chance to respond. Movement behind him takes me by surprise, and suddenly he's yanked off of me, nearly choking me with my own hoodie in the process. I slump back to the ground, rolling to my side as Foster falls down beside me, eyes wide while August and Dorian *drag* the beta away from us.

On the bright side, we delayed him long enough for them to get here. On the not-so-bright side...

“We fucking suck,” I tell Foster, crawling over to lay my head in his lap. I’ve never wanted to watch someone get their teeth kicked in before, but a furious Dorian and fuming August make it look artistic. All they need is classical music to make it a performance, but I’m dizzy enough that I can call up an orchestra in my head to go along with it.

Finally, August pulls him to his feet, the beta dazed and bloody. “If I *ever* see you again, I’ll kill you,” he promises hoarsely. “Do you fucking understand me?”

The beta hisses in contempt, but Dorian is there as well, gripping his hair with white-knuckled anger. “You think he won’t do it? You know what my name is. I’ll help him and no one will ever admit to knowing you even *existed*.” Both of them let go and the boy stumbles, nearly falling before he catches his balance and makes the smart decision.

He runs.

“He’s like a tank,” I remark, Foster’s hand on my head gently pets my temple. “He didn’t even go down after all that.” Dorian comes to stand in front of us, staring down at the two of us as I add, “Maybe he had a lot of milk as a child.”

“Hey uh, I don’t like to be needy, you guys,” Foster adds tiredly, leaning back on one arm. “But maybe you could drag us to the clinic? I think we could both maybe do with a Band-Aid or seven.”

“Or seventeen,” I mutter.

“What am I going to do with the two of you?” Dorian purrs, kneeling down in front of us. From the corner of my eye I see August on the phone, talking to someone quietly enough that I can’t hear as he casts quick, worried glances in our direction.

“We *just* told you that you can give us Band-Aids,” Foster reprimands, though there’s no real malice in the words. “We demand them.”

“How about *I* demand that the two of you go to a hospital, hmm?” Dorian looks so... mild. Like he wasn't just threatening to kill someone a moment ago.

“That seems like overkill,” Foster grumbles.

“Yeah, I mean, we clearly just need Band-Aids,” I agree. Except that I'm worried I have a concussion and Foster looks like he might need stitches in his mouth. Still. Band-Aids will probably do the trick and we'll be fine in the morning.

“No, I don't think so.” He looks back at August, who gives him a surreptitious thumbs up. “We're going to the urgent care in town. Not the clinic.”

“But also not the hospital? I don't think my insurance will like that,” I admit, only half thinking of my dwindling bank account.

“Mercy...” Dorian sighs, reaching down to push my hair back from my face. “You look awful. You *both* look really awful. This isn't a debate, anyway. August has someone coming to drop off the car, and we're leaving. Can you both stand?”

“You first,” I mutter, as I glare at Foster, who grimaces and gets to his hands and knees.

“Maybe you're right Mercy,” he groans, staggering to his feet as I do the same. “And I obviously should've drunk more milk as a kid. Maybe then I'd be a tank like him, too.”

The urgent care clinic, thankfully, isn't that busy. It isn't a hospital, either, and so I don't feel nearly as nervous as I would have there. Not to mention, the alphas split up as Foster and I are taken back into rooms, and I'm not surprised to find Dorian with me, staring at me from the chair like I might spontaneously *die*.

It makes me a little nervous, truthfully. Biting my lip, I tap my hand on my leg, waiting for the doctor to come in. “It's not that bad,” I say, mostly to fill the silence as I touch my swollen

cheek. Apart from that, my head still hurts like a bitch and my back is one solid pain.

“It’s not that bad,” Dorian assures me, getting up and walking over to put his arms around me loosely. “It’s really not, okay? But I just want to make sure the both of you are taken care of.” His purr is soft and sweet, and fills my brain with happy thoughts instead of worry. I can’t help it when I lean into him, and he just moves so he can easily take more of my weight.

Until there’s a knock on the door, anyway. He steps back as a woman in scrubs walks in, a stethoscope around her neck. “Hello there, Miss...” She glances at my chart. “Miss Noble? It’s nice to meet you. I’m Dr. Adams.” She doesn’t hold out her hand to shake, but she does smile at Dorian as well. “Would you like him to stay? You’re experiencing quite a bit of back pain, so I’ll need you to take your shirt off,” she tells me kindly.

“Oh... yeah. He can stay.” I’m still just amazed this urgent care has separate *rooms*. The one at home has a few rooms, sure, but it looks more like an ER than anything, and when I’ve gone before I’ve had to stare up at the ceiling in order to avoid awkward eye contact with other bleeding humans.

“Let me help you,” Dorian murmurs, doing most of the work to pull my shirt off. He steps back with it still in his hands, and the doctor comes to look at me, starting at my face. Her hands are cool, and as she works her way down my neck, she frowns when she comes to the bruises from where the beta had grabbed me.

“Do you think we could speak alone, Miss Noble?” the doctor asks, casting a quick look at Dorian. “I just think you’d perhaps be more comfortable if—”

“It wasn’t him,” I say quickly, reaching out a hand to grip Dorian’s wrist. “And I don’t want him to leave. Please. He was there. He helped me. And he’s part of my pack.”

She hesitates before nodding and continues her exam. Every time she touches my back, I wince, and finally, thankfully, she lets Dorian help me back into my shirt.

“There’s nothing that requires stitches or any kind of major treatment. You and your friend got off rather easy, and all of this is rather superficial. I do think you should take a few days off from class, however. You’re going to be sore for a bit, and I don’t think you should be moving around much. You can make sure she rests, right?” she adds, when it’s pretty obvious I’m going to argue with her.

Dorian nods enthusiastically. “We’ll make sure they both take it easy for a few days. No lifting, not a lot of moving around, and whatever else they need.” The Doctor confers with him for a moment on ibuprofen and acetaminophen, then leaves the room as I sigh.

Before I can open my mouth, however, Dorian turns to press his hand against my lips and smiles. “You heard her,” he reminds me. “Don’t make me tie you down. I’ll do it, you know. If you don’t *want* to rest and get better, then I’ll *make you*, sweet girl.”

My eyes widen, and I bat my lashes at him, trying to look innocent. “I was just going to thank you, Dorian,” I lie sweetly. “For taking such good care of me. You’re really just so awesome. You and August both.”

He doesn’t believe me. The set of his mouth tells me that, as well as the amusement in his eyes. “Sure you were, Mercy. I really believe that.”

I freeze when the door to the dorm suite opens, still leaning over my open textbook and the iPad beside it. My bruised face still aches from yesterday, obviously, and this position is killing my back.

But I *just* need to get caught up on the anthropology reading from yesterday, and then I'll do... whatever it is Dorian and August *want* the two of us to do while we're under house arrest.

Which, while it may not be actual house arrest, it's starting to feel like it. Even though it's barely been twenty-four hours, the two alphas are militant on Foster and me taking it easy so we can get better as quickly as we can. It's unfortunate that they also think catching up with the notes I've borrowed from Eden isn't conducive to that healing, though I'm definitely not in agreement with that.

I stay still, listening to Foster's quips from the sofa and Dorian's quiet response that's too low for me to make out. With my door closed, I figure he's not coming in here. After all, I'd announced forty-five minutes ago that I wanted to nap.

They're not going to interrupt me during a nap.

Waiting another moment, I finally turn my eyes back down to my iPad, grimacing at the pain in my ribs that the movement causes. It sucks, but it's fine. It'll be worth it in the end, and—

There's a knock on my door that makes me gasp, and instantly I'm in panic mode as I gingerly lie back down,

blankets up and covering both my book and my iPad. Closing my eyes, I turn to lie on my side and do my best to pretend to be asleep.

I'm not afraid of either alpha coming in, but I really do want to get my work done. It helps me feel better mentally, if not physically, and I don't agree that it's *hurting* me or causing me to get better slower. Especially when Foster is my competition, and he has a mild concussion.

The door opens as I let out a slow breath, eyes still closed. Is this natural? This feels like how I normally sleep, and as long as I stay just like this and keep my breathing even, whoever it is won't be able to tell that I'm awake.

It's Dorian, though. I can tell by his scent as the footsteps come to stand beside my bed. Of course it's Dorian. August would have probably been easier to fool, and even if he had caught me, I could've just said something like 'oh, I'm sorry, I couldn't sleep' and he would've been pretty okay with it. Especially since he's just as into his academics as I am mine.

Dorian is a different story.

The alpha just stands there, and as it goes on, I start getting more and more nervous. *Don't change your breathing*, I remind myself over and over. *Don't open your eyes. Don't—*

"You don't sleep like that," he says, his voice a low drawl. His feet shift on the hardwood, but I still don't open my eyes. Hopefully, he still thinks I'm asleep. "You don't breathe like that when you sleep, and most of the time you take your hearing aids out. Especially if we aren't together."

Shit.

"But that means you *want* me to think you're asleep, so you're hiding something from me. If you were just lying awake in here, you wouldn't be pretending."

Shit.

"Anything you want to tell me, Mercy?"

Double shit.

“Because if you don’t admit whatever it is you’re hiding and I find it anyway, you’re going to regret it more than if you tell me now.”

He stands there silently for a few more seconds until finally I sigh and open my eyes to glare balefully at him.

“I’m not five,” I remind him, not sitting up. My books and iPad are still hidden, and I can’t imagine he’d flip the blankets to see if I’m smuggling in contraband or something. “You can’t just come in here and do some kind of drill sergeant inspection.”

His brows raise. “I was checking on you. Do you *want* me to do an inspection? Do I need to go through your drawers, flip the bed, or—”

“You don’t,” I assure him, definitely too fast to make it sound innocent. His eyes narrow, the smirk on his face evident. God damnit. “Look... I just thought you’d be, uh, mad at me if I wasn’t asleep. I’m just resting my eyes—”

“What’s in the bed, Mercy?”

“Me.”

“What else?”

“... A vibrator,” I lie, though I say it as straight-faced as I know how. “I was really horny, and I knew you wouldn’t get me off, and I always sleep better after I’ve come.”

His gaze sweetens, softens, and he leans down to cup my jaw in his hand. “You could’ve just told me that,” he purrs, and too late I realize he’s moving to sit on the bed.

Right where my book is.

“Wait!” I’m too slow. He sits down and narrows his eyes, then immediately gets up and flips the blankets back to reveal my iPad that’s under my calf and the anthropology book he just sat down on.

“Weirdly shaped sex toys,” is all he says, before dragging his gaze back up to my grinning, apologetic face.

“I’m trying something... new?” I suggest through a gritted grin. When he just looks at me, I sigh and sit up, wincing as I do. “Oh, come *on*, Dorian. You know I like to get ahead. And I can’t just do nothing.”

“You could go into the living room. You could do anything that’s not sitting over your textbook like Gollum guarding his precious. I bet your back just loves that, huh?” He reaches out a hand to trail his fingers up my curved spine and I wince. “You could’ve even done this out there, where I can try to help you make sure you aren’t overworking yourself, Mercy. You were in a *fight* yesterday and it’s been barely twenty-four hours. Can’t you just take it easy? For my sake and August’s?”

“It’s not that. I mean, it is. You won’t let me obsess over my least favorite subject and that’s not very cool of you.” He snorts at my words, dragging a hand through my hair. “But I’m not a doll, Dorian. I’m not made of porcelain. I’m not *fragile*.”

“I know you aren’t.”

“Do you?”

“But you aren’t made of titanium either, sweet girl.” Before I can protest, he picks me up, easily gripping my waist as my arms slide around his neck. A gasp leaves my throat as he walks toward the door, and even when I try to snatch my phone from the desk, he only turns a little bit further so that I can’t do it.

“I brought back food. I was going to wake you up anyway. But you aren’t a good actor at all.” Instead of going straight to the couch, he strolls to the fridge and opens it, holding it with his foot as he drags out two bottles of tea. They’re my favorite, not that I’ve ever told him that, and he walks to the sofa where the other two boys are.

Foster really *is* asleep. Or he seems that way to me. Curled up in August’s lap with his head pillowed on one shoulder, it’s difficult to see him so beat up.

He got it worse than me, that’s for sure. Not only that, but a lot of things about the fight really bother me. More than they

should, especially considering the fact that Dorian and August kicked the beta's ass and sent him on his way.

Right?

But why was he so fixated on Foster in the first place? My mind drifts back to the girl I'd met in the courtyard who had told me where to go. Luckily none of the boys have brought up how I knew, or asked who told me. I'm not sure I want to tell them just yet, I've decided. Not when my brain is still too slow to work out the missing pieces of what happened.

Because *something* isn't right. I know the boys are willing to brush it off as Amelia's desperate attempt at revenge, but I'm not.

"You're in your own head again, aren't you?" Dorian asks, tapping my hand with the bottle. I take it, unscrewing the cap as I curl up on the sofa beside him and lean against the alpha.

"Is Foster doing okay?" I ask instead of answering, directing the question to August. He's been incredibly attentive to both of us all day, running around like a helicopter parent and all, but I know how worried he is about Foster.

Since this has happened to Foster before.

There's something about *that* thought in particular that bothers me, but my head hurts so much that it's hard for me to work out any logical argument in my head.

"He's... all right," August says, reaching out a hand to run his fingers up my bare thigh. "Are you?"

"I'm fine. More than fine, actually. I—"

"She was in her room doing homework, curled up like a pretzel, and decided to fake being asleep when I went in," Dorian cuts in, casting me a quick, stern smirk.

"So spank me."

"I would, but I don't want to hurt you."

"A real shame then, huh?" I snort. "You've missed your chance." I unscrew the cap completely and take a drink of my

bitter black tea, only to have Dorian's hand on my wrist, his eyes on mine as I look up at him.

"There are always more opportunities, Mercy. It's not like you're going anywhere." His voice is a soft, growling baritone and I'm glad he can't read my mind. After all, it's pretty embarrassing how much I love it when he or August say shit like that.

But I also can't help but just worry and wonder how they feel. Though. I don't want to bring it up this soon. Do they know where the beta went?

"Do you know his name?" I ask, unable to help myself as my eyes fall on the tv. It's a comedy, something Foster would love, and he isn't even awake to see it. But I know August will keep it on for him, because this is *Foster* we're talking about, and August would murder for him. "That guy who attacked us."

"Amelia's packmate. Her cousin, according to Cecily," August replies coolly. "You never heard his name?" Slowly, I shake my head.

"I don't even know if I have any classes with him," I admit with an apologetic shrug. "I've only ever seen him with her, and he'd be pretty hard to miss, don't you think?" Unless he slinks around in the shadows and only wears black, I suppose. But I still can't get the look on his face out of my mind.

And, well, the way he'd effortlessly slung me into the pavement like a rag doll, so hard I'd thought he'd broken my spine. I shudder at the memory, not fond of it or the pain I'm still in. Thankfully, since Dorian had paid for our medical bills outright, I hadn't had to call my mother to tell her about our insurance being hit by my visit.

Truth be told, not talking to my mother much at all this semester has been great. She's been contacting me less and less, which doesn't hurt my feelings as much as it should, I've found.

Not when I have the pack. Is this what other omegas feel? Is this what they crave, when my friends get all starry-eyed

and wistful about not having a pack of their own? All this time I've always thought it was about the sex or having a few extra partners. But I guess I was the idiot all along.

Because while the sex is mindblowing and fantastic, this isn't about that at all. This is about *them*.

And maybe it's fast and maybe I'm everything my mother likes to say I am... but I'd do anything for these boys.

Starting with trying to figure out why my brain won't stop playing yesterday's encounter over and over again in my head.

"Are you hungry?" Dorian is clearly trying to distract me, so my poker face might not be as good as I think it is.

"A little. I can wait until Foster wakes up, though," I admit, curling closer to him so I can scent him and draw that lovely smell into my lungs to savor it. He doesn't mind, and that's even clearer when he pulls me in with an arm around my shoulders and kisses me sweetly.

"Oh, Mercy," he sighs, his eyes only inches from mine. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Give me a convertible?"

"If you like."

My stomach twists in surprise at the answer, even though I'm pretty sure he's joking.

"Buy me an island?"

"Foster already called dibs on the island a year ago. Sorry darling, but you're too late on that one. And before you ask, August wants the city. So you'll have to be in line for that one too."

"That's rude." I look at August, gently kicking his thigh as I lean back on Dorian's shoulder with his arm draped over me. "What city is he buying you?"

"Montreal," August replies without hesitation, hand curving over my ankle and sliding up my calf. He kneads the muscle gently, putting just enough pressure on it to feel good before gesturing for me to give him my other leg as well. I do

and he repeats the process, over and over again, until I'm half-asleep on Dorian's shoulder and I barely notice when he takes the bottle from my nearly limp fingers.

I'd do anything for them. And right now, that really does mean figuring out this weird puzzle that they just don't *see*. If no one knows his name, though. And no one gets why I'm still worried about this after a police report has been made and, according to Dorian, he isn't allowed on campus... Then why am I still so uncomfortable?

Why do I feel like the problem isn't solved, especially with Amelia still haunting the halls? Worse, it feels like Amelia isn't the problem I'm really trying to solve here.

Finally, I decide to track down the girl who'd helped me yesterday. I know for a fact she has class right next to my literature room and gets out around the same time as me. No matter what, even if I need to fist fight Amelia, I'm going to find some way to talk to her so I can figure out what's bothering me so much.

Lucky for me, I don't need to implement my not-so-clandestine plans of kidnapping a girl who barely looks eighteen. Not when she shows up at our small archery competition with a neighboring school. As it's only the end of March, it's more of a practice than anything else. Just something to do so we don't forget how everything works. The season for us is in the fall, and this barely counts towards that or anything else. More or less, it's to see how the new girls on the team do. The ones who came to Winter Grove for the first time during the spring semester, or those girls who just decided they were interested in our sport.

Girls like fucking *Amelia*.

The bright side is the blonde girl comes with her. I've never seen her shoot before, so I'm pretty sure she's not actually into archery. That means she's hopefully an easy target wherever she stands or sits, if I can get her out of view of Amelia and get her into a conversation. Which, admittedly, still seems like a really big thing to have to do.

Which leads me to Cecily and Eden. The two of them listen to my explanation about the day Amelia's packmate attacked us. While he hasn't been on campus, that's not the real issue.

No one has seen him since the cops showed up at his apartment in town. No one knows where he's gone, or what in the world he's doing. And while he might not be in more legal trouble than he can get out of, the problem is that he could be back on campus without anyone knowing.

And planning to hurt Foster.

“Why would you think he’s trying to hurt Foster? Especially if Amelia isn’t trying? Let’s be real here, Mercy...” Cecily’s gaze flicks to the blonde who’s drumming her fingers on her bow, staring down at it as she sits in the stands. “Ever since then, she’s been the picture perfect wallflower.”

“I agree with Mercy,” Eden replies, surprising me. “Just this once. Something’s off about it. Something’s off about *him*. She doesn’t feel bad. There’s no way she feels any bit guilty over what happened, or what he was going to do. Maybe she didn’t want to watch him do it, since she was gone by the time you got there, but that doesn’t absolve her of anything.” Eden’s gaze lands on Amelia as well and the blonde tenses, looking up at us with lips pressed flat to glare across the archery range.

“I just want to talk to her without Amelia knowing. She’s literally terrified of Amelia. I think she’ll talk to me and tell me what I need to know. But only if Amelia can’t find out. Can you help me?”

“You could get August to help,” Eden points out. “He could keep her busy. So could Dorian, and she’d just love the chance to jump him, I’m sure.” But even before she’s finished talking, I’m shaking my head.

“They’re with Foster while he gets his stitches out, first of all.” I’d offered to go, but Foster had told me not to. He’d said he’d be fine, and that they’d come here afterward to watch me shoot, or at least pick me up and treat me to ice cream like I’m their kid and they’re taking me out after the big game.

And of course, with it being *Foster*, he’d been as condescending with his words as possible. I’d just rolled my eyes at him and given him the finger at the time, but my mind still wanders to him at the urgent care center. I’m sure he’s fine but...

No. He’s *fine*, I tell my brain. I have too much to worry about to add that to my plate as well.

“Second of all... I might be wrong,” I shrug. “Maybe this is nothing, and he was just a weird, calcium-overloaded freak of nature who really had it out for Foster. That’s always a possibility. So if it’s that, and she doesn’t tell me anything or it’s worthless information, then I don’t want them to know I went to any trouble to get it.”

I look between them, eyes wide. “Will you *please* help me? I don’t know how to do it without you guys, and I need this.”

“You know we’ll help you,” Cecily says, getting to her feet. “But we’re going to have to do it fast. You can’t stand there gossiping, all right? Amelia’s going to get suspicious if she can’t see her when she looks. Both of us can distract her. One at a time, I think?” She looks at Eden. “You could go in on her about something related to her shooting. Afterward, I could bring up last year. That pisses her off, I know. It should keep her focused on us for a little while. But you...” The redhead points at me and I pause, surprised at the look. My stomach does a little flip of anticipation, and my breath catches in my throat at the hard stare.

“You can’t fuck it up, all right? This has to go a certain way, or it doesn’t go at all. And you can’t give her any reason to be suspicious afterward. Don’t say anything about it. Be back in time for your turn to shoot. Even if it *is* something that we need to look into, we don’t want her to realize that her packmate has told you or that you know. Otherwise...” she trails off and grimaces. “Look, I don’t need there to be an otherwise. Unlike Dorian’s mom and dad, my parents will flip if I do something to cause any issues here. Got it?”

I nod my head, feeling like a dog she’s bossing around. But then again, isn’t that how she prefers her pack to run? And from what I understand, her boys *love* that about her, so it’s definitely a two-way street. On the other hand, it freaks me out. The moment Dorian tries initiating puppy play in the way that I’m pretty sure Cecily is into it, I’m calling it. No more adventures in the bedroom for me.

Clearing my throat, I nod at her plan. “Okay. Yeah, that’s... I can do that. If you can both keep her off of me for a

little while. Yes?”

“Yes.” Cecily dismisses me with a wave of her hand. “Go look like you’re headed for the bathroom. Give us three minutes, then you’ve got to make your move, all right?”

“Sure. Yeah. Absolutely.” My heart pounds in my chest as I go, walking to the edge of the bleachers and around them. The girl sits at the edge, her hands holding on to the lowest riser tightly. It’s my luck that she’s here instead of closer to Amelia, and even luckier still, that the bathrooms are just around the corner.

I go all the way there and step inside, but instead of heading for a stall, I lean on the counter and stare at myself in the mirror. It’s been almost two weeks since Amelia’s beta attacked Foster, and all this time, I’ve never been able to get certain things about it out of my head.

Why Foster?

And why do that girl’s words bother me so much?

Was it just because he’s a beta? Because he’s an easier target than Dorian or August? I’d be the most logical, but Amelia has never tried physical violence against me. Not even when I hit her first. Which, to be quite honest, was the most satisfying moment of my entire life.

I suck in a breath and study the still-fading bruises on my face. The worst of them are gone, and most of the cuts have healed, but my back still hurts and I often feel like someone put me in a rock tumbler on low and left me there for a few hours. Either way, at least I’m well enough to practice my favorite sport and for weird spy-shit.

Or whatever this is.

When I get to one hundred and fifty in my head, I figure it’s been long enough. I count too slowly most of the time, so I push off of the sink and go outside, surprised to find my path blocked.

The girl who constantly looks terrified stares up at me, her scent flaring and filling my nose with the bitter tang of fear. As

I'd realized before, she's an omega like me, but she's... different.

She's so fragile looking and soft.

Do I look like that to alphas and betas? Surely not, and especially not anymore. Casually, I push my hair back behind my ear, wishing she was as tall as I am. It's weird looking down at her. Especially when I need her to help me out.

"Umm. Hi," I say, clenching my hands. "Did you need to ___"

"I was just going to wash my face," the girl whispers, her eyes wide. Her hands tremble like I'm going to hurt her, and slowly I hold my own up in surrender.

"Could we talk, please? Just for a minute?"

"I can't. If Amelia sees—"

"She won't, okay? Eden and Cecily are making sure she won't notice. Please?"

There's suspicion in her gaze, but not just that. There's something like guilt that sinks deep into her blue eyes as if it's lived there for a long time. That hurts, especially when I see her push that feeling away, along with the fear, like she's had too much practice.

I want to help her, but I don't have the energy or the ability to do so right now. I can't just invite her into our pack. I can't just rip her away from Amelia and demand the alpha leave her alone.

I can only beg for her help and hope that she wants to give it.

"What do you want?" she asks finally, shoulders falling in defeat. "And can I wash my face while you ask?"

"Yeah, of course." I step back, allowing her into the bathroom as well. The smaller girl goes to the sink to turn it on, running the cold water over her hands. When she turns them over, I see the signs of old scars, and my heart constricts for her all over again.

I know what it's like to not want to be alive anymore, though it's been a long time since those thoughts swam through my head. I want to hug her, and tell her she never has to talk to Amelia again, and that I'd be her friend instead.

I want to tell her that it's going to be okay.

Instead, when I open my mouth, I ask, "I can't stop thinking about your warning. About how you told me where to find Foster. Were you... looking for me?"

She casts me a quick side-eyed glance, then lets her gaze fall back to the sink. "I knew you had the same class as him." She shrugs, her voice a whisper. "I thought I could catch you before you went into the building. And I couldn't find you close, so I thought maybe I'd find you near the campus center."

"You were right. I'm impressed, and I'm really grateful." Belatedly, I add, "I'm Mercy, by the way. But I don't think I know your name."

Her smile is grim as she splashes cold water on her face. "Why do you want to know? So you can tell *Dorian* and after all this is over, *he* can make my life hell?"

"No. Because you helped me save my beta and I want to know your name so I can be grateful properly."

She looks... stunned. Water runs between her fingers, but she doesn't look at me as she considers my words. "Elaine," she says at last. "It's incredibly old-fashioned, but it's a tradition in my family, ever since—"

"I really like it." She sounds frantic, like people have made her regret telling them her name before or made fun of her for it. "It sounds graceful. And maybe old-fashioned, but that doesn't make it bad." Her shoulders relax and she lets out a sigh, body relaxing as if she's finally, for the first time, not afraid I'm going to hurt her.

"But you're not here to compliment my name, and we don't have all day before Amelia realizes I'm not out there in the bleachers," she reminds me, unhappiness in every word.

“Yeah. I know.” But she’s right. I can’t just keep dragging this out. “Who’s her beta? I don’t even know his *name*. He’s her... cousin, right?”

Elaine sneers. “He’s only her *cousin* because her family calls him that. His name’s Blaise, and he’s awful. He loves hurting people. It doesn’t matter who it is, and no one likes him. How could they, when he treats everyone like garbage?” She spits the insult, teeth bared for a second before she licks her lips and closes them. “Blaise Whitely. But he wasn’t always that. Her family adopted him last year to get him out of trouble.”

“Trouble?” The alarm bells are going off again in my head, and I can’t help clenching and unclenching my fingers in the pockets of my hoodie. “What kind of trouble?”

Elaine takes her time as she finishes up and rips a paper towel free. She uses it to dry her hands thoroughly and avoids looking at me until finally, when she throws it away, the omega takes a step closer to me until we’re nearly face to face.

Except that I’m half a head taller than her and I have to look down into her dark blue eyes, which is still weird for me.

“Last year, he attacked Foster. He’s the reason Amelia couldn’t come here. Blaise hit your beta in the head and it was his unfortunate good luck that Foster could never remember his face.” Her voice is so... flat when she says it. There’s nothing in her eyes or her voice except the cold truth.

“So he’s...”

“Always wanted to go for it again to see if he can do it a second time. And it isn’t that Amelia wants him to or tells him to. Though I don’t think she minds that much. Mercy, Amelia is afraid of him. Everyone is. Maybe it looks like she has it under control, and that she knows what he’s doing, but that’s just not true. She doesn’t. In fact?” She shrugs her shoulders as she steps past me, and when I turn to look at her, she’s back to the terrified omega that had entered the bathroom instead of the girl whose name I’d complimented. “I bet she doesn’t have any idea where he is now, or how to get a hold of him. She’s just preparing to do damage control if he hurts someone.”

When I find Eden and Cecily again, the coach is explaining the rules of the practice match, I sit down between them and stare at my hands.

“Did you get what you wanted?” the red-head on my left asks, her voice just loud enough that my hearing aids can pick them up.

“I might have,” I admit. “That guy? His name is Blaise Whitely.”

“He’s related to Amelia, just like I said he was,” Eden grumbles from my other side. “Is that it? Was that all you wanted was to figure out his name?”

I shake my head. “There was something weird about how that girl approached me when Foster was getting attacked. I couldn’t get it out of my head, and I was right to keep fixating on it.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s the one who attacked Foster last year as well. The guy Foster could never remember, because of his injuries.”

Neither of them says a word as our coach goes on. Cecily sits up, her face dark with thought, and Eden leans back as well, her arms on the bleacher behind us. Have I given them a lot to think about, where this is concerned?

I, for one, am not sure where to go from here. I’ve gotten my answers, even if they weren’t the ones I thought I’d get. I hadn’t expected those words from Elaine. But then again, I was expecting something more than I’d gotten before.

And now I have it.

Belatedly I look up, blink, and stare at Amelia who’s sitting down the bleachers from me. She isn’t looking at me, and instead is sitting above Elaine while listening to our coach with a concentrated expression, like she actually cares about what we’re doing here.

At least, until she catches my eye. She blinks, brow furrowing in confusion as she looks at me with an alpha's directness. She isn't going to look away, but I don't want to either. Even when it becomes uncomfortable to continue meeting her gaze.

I know what you've done, I wish I could tell her silently. I know what you're hiding. What you should've told everyone from the start.

And soon, I'm going to make sure she pays for keeping this kind of secret and harboring hatred for Dorian's pack when *she's* the one that's in the wrong and always has been. Even if it wasn't her initially. Even if she hadn't been a part of Foster's attack before this year, it doesn't matter. Because she knows now, and she could've prevented the recent one.

She could've done something. Anything, actually, to make sure this never happened again. But instead, she's been too busy trying to get some kind of petty revenge and also making my life hell. Not to mention frightening Elaine out of her wits. God, I really hope there's not a cause for that fear. Especially when Amelia already has so much to answer for in my eyes.

Now I just need to figure out how to make her pay.

I don't know what to say.

Now that the archery competition is over and I'm back in the dorm on the sofa while the boys get dinner together, I just... don't know how to bring it up.

Do I just say it out loud? Do I wait and pass them a note, or sign it to them? Those obviously feel like stupid decisions, but still. I don't know how to tell these boys what Elaine informed me of earlier today.

Will they be mad?

Hopefully not at *me*. Though, I guess there's the chance of them chewing me out anyway and being upset that I stuck my nose further into their business when that part of their lives isn't something I should worry about. Even though I worry anyway, obviously.

Blinking, I glance up in surprise when August sits down on the sofa in front of my raised knees. His fingers wrap around my ankle, going up my calf over my leggings as he meets my eyes.

"You're thinking about something," he declares, not looking away. "I'd even go so far as to say you're worrying."

"Surely not," I reply with a crooked smile. "Why would you ever think such a thing?" His hand is warm even through the thin cloth separating it from my skin, and I can't help the soft sigh that leaves my parted lips.

“Well, Foster has asked you four times what kind of cheese you want on your grilled cheese,” he points out kindly. “And so I thought that either your hearing aid batteries have fizzled out, or you’re thinking really hard. Glad to see we don’t need to make a mad dash to the store for batteries, hm?”

“Oh, I always have a backup,” I assure him, biting my lip as he just waits for the rest of whatever I’m going to say. Too bad I don’t know what that is. But it occurs to me that August is the easiest one to talk to. He never gets mad. Never bitches like Foster. He doesn’t judge or get that look of worry and *leadership* on his face like Dorian does, either. Not that I don’t love talking to them, but August is... *August*.

My sweet, mild-mannered alpha who’s hot as fuck when he wants to be, and a warm, solid presence every other time I need him.

“Could I talk to you?” I blurt out, not knowing what else to do. I can judge my words by August’s reaction, and it saves me from talking to all three of them at once and worrying about each of their reactions.

“You can always talk to me,” he says, his expression falling into one of concern. “You know that, don’t you?” Well, I didn’t for a long time, but I know that now. Thankfully, he and the other boys have made it clear that I can come to them for most things... but I’m not sure this is most things.

“In private,” I add, eyeing Dorian as he comes to stand at the other end of the sofa.

Immediately he frowns, eyes narrowing. “Are you okay?” he asks immediately, and I let out a nervous breath.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I promise. “I just... Can I please talk to August? I’m not going to keep it from you, all right?” Trying to make Dorian understand that I don’t know how to word this in a way that they won’t be mad.

The two alphas trade a look. Dorian opens his mouth, but it’s August who says something first. “Dorian.” His tone is almost admonishing, and he raises his brows. “You are not about to act offended. You’re intense sometimes. And if it’s

something that all of us need to know, I won't let it be a secret." His words are firm and more adamant than I think I've ever heard from him, except maybe when he was arguing with Foster about going to the urgent care center after the fight.

Dorian scowls, grimaces, and seems to be going through all the stages of grief in about five seconds before starting all over again. "Fine," he says, and I hate the way he sounds when he huffs about it. Like he's *disappointed* in me. But when he meets my gaze, he shoots me a crooked smirk. "Maybe I'm just a little jealous," he chuckles, surprisingly not sounding forced. "First the secret card game training, now the secret... this. I'll start to think you like August more than me."

Slowly, I grin until I'm sure it's just as sly as his. "Please. How can you say that when I don't let anyone else put ears on me, feed me Goldfish, and meow for them?"

That mollifies him. I see his expression change again, becoming amused more than anything, and he snorts. "Fine. But Mercy? Whatever it is, I hope you know that you *can* tell us."

"No pressure, though, right?" I laugh, eyes darting to August. At least Foster, who normally has a lot to say, has stayed in the kitchen and not argued too. But I can see his head tilted to the side and turned slightly in our direction, so I know he's listening. "And uh. Can I have cheddar on my grilled cheese? Unless I don't get one because I'm being a bad girl and keeping secrets."

"You get *sharp* cheddar," Foster sniffs, watching as August pulls me toward his bedroom. "Because you're being unnecessarily spicy with us tonight." He smirks and I match the look as that part of my worry disappears almost instantly.

Only to be replaced with suffocating anxiety as August closes his door and goes to sit on his bed. He stares up at me patiently, until finally I sit down on his desk chair, facing backwards, and rest my arms on the backrest.

"So... I'm afraid you're all going to be mad at me," I admit. "And Foster? Well, I'm afraid he'll freak out. I thought that, you know, since you're never mad and all that, maybe

you'd be the *least* upset with me and that wouldn't be so hard to stomach."

Worry creases his brow, and he opens his mouth to say, slowly, "Mercy, unless you've killed Foster and secretly replaced him with a sentient sex doll, I can't imagine any of us would be *mad* at you for anything."

I can't help the choked snicker that leaves my mouth and my shoulders fall, the tightness of them somewhat reduced. "Well, I don't think I've done anything quite that bad," I admit. "But man, don't tempt me. Also, don't tell him I prefer sharp cheddar, okay?"

"Deal. If you tell me what's wrong instead of making me play twenty questions," the dark-haired alpha purrs in agreement, the sound doing a lot for my frayed and frazzled nerves.

This time I take a breath, hold it in my aching chest, and say quietly, "I didn't just *know* Foster was in trouble. Or guess or anything. I didn't see it, or miss him and go exploring. There's a girl that's in Amelia's pack named Elaine, and she was looking for me. She wanted me to know and told me where to find him." When I pause, it's to search the intrigued expression August wears before I go on. "But some of the stuff she said about that beta, Blaise, stuck with me. She talks like he had some kind of prior problem with Foster, or that he wanted to finish something he'd started before." This time when I stop, August just looks utterly confused.

"And even though my brains got rattled around like a scrambled egg, I couldn't stop thinking about that. It was such a weird way that she phrased it, and I couldn't let it go, no matter how much I tried. Cecily and Eden helped me get her away from Amelia today. I mean... it wasn't really difficult. I kind of cornered Elaine in the bathroom, which sounds a lot worse now that I say it like that."

He still just isn't saying anything, and nausea rises in my chest.

"I asked her what she meant. And why would she say it like that. She told me..." I take a breath, because I don't know

what he'll do when I tell him, and I'm trying to delay this for as long as possible. "That guy, Blaise? He's Amelia's adopted cousin, but he wasn't always. And he *does* hold a grudge against Foster. Because last year, before you guys came here, he was the one who hurt Foster. And according to Elaine, he's only doing it now because he wants to see if he can get away with it twice."

The room is quiet for longer than I'm comfortable with. I can hear my heart beating in my ears, pounding like a drum as August takes in the information. He leans on his hands, staring down at his lap with his brow furrowing.

"You're mad at me. You're absolutely irritated that I stuck my face in your business. I'm sorry, August. I didn't know, and I didn't want to say anything when it was just a stupid suspicion or something. I just thought—" I'm not prepared for him to stand up sharply, and when he comes to stand in front of me I'm suddenly and wildly afraid he's going to hit me.

But he doesn't, because he's *August*, and he's *pack*. Instead, his scent surrounds me like a cloud. It quiets my pounding heart in my ears and when I breathe in, it causes my body to give up the mad attempt at panic. Slowly, he reaches up to cup my face in his hands. "How could I ever be mad at you for trying to help our pack, my darling, gorgeous omega?" August purrs. "How could any of us be mad at you for being *perfect*?"

"That's... not what I was expecting you to say," I admit, standing up when he urges me to. "I'm afraid Dorian will be upset. That *Foster* will be upset. Are they—"

"Dorian gets upset at any threat to any of us. You can't change that in him, princess," he purrs comfortingly. "He's not going to be mad at *you*, and that's the difference. Just like I'm not mad at you. Foster..." He shrugs with a dry smirk crossing his lips. "Who knows? He won't be upset with you, but he's unpredictable at the best of times. You know that."

"Are you going to make me tell them?"

"Every single word, perfect girl. Straight from your own mouth."

Great. Just *great*. Because I'm going to have a great time saying it again with a fuming Dorian and a crazy Foster listening this time around. It's obviously just what I wanted.

Dorian and Foster are quiet when I finish, and not even August's comforting arm around my waist is enough to keep me from worrying that they'll be upset at me. Already I can see the gears in Dorian's brain turning, and the way his eyes are stormy and troubled. He's pretty easy to read, truth be told, and I search his face for any sign of that anger turning on me.

Until suddenly Foster cackles. I look at him in surprise and Dorian flicks his gaze to the beta as well, a brow raised. "You find it funny?" he asks, voice low and unfriendly.

"I find it hilarious," Foster agrees, enthusiasm in his voice. "How many times can you get lucky enough that I forget your face due to a head injury? And how long have I been living rent free in his head, huh? A whole year? That's dedication." His grin is savage, though, when he stops talking to show it. "How absolutely pathetic. And now he's, what, waiting in the shadows somewhere to catch me off guard?" He shakes his head. "What an absolute fucking joke."

"Well, that's... not quite I thought you'd take it," I admit, staring at him. "And I'm glad you're taking it, uh, well?" I don't know if this is him taking it *well* or him completely losing it.

"Yeah," Dorian agrees quietly. "You're taking it so well that I think you can sleep in my room with me tonight, and I'm locking up the cutlery." Foster grimaces at his words, but silently I agree.

"We're going to do something though, right?" August asks, his chin on my shoulder. Absently, I reach up to sink my fingers into his hair, glad that he's been behind me the whole time I've been terrified that they're going to freak out.

"We're going to do something," Dorian assures me, lips pressed together in a frown. "I'm sure we can get him to out himself if we try. I don't think it'll even be that hard."

“What if we talk to Amelia?” I ask, drawing his shocked look back to me. “I don’t think she was bargaining on him doing that. What if she wasn’t so okay with it the first time, either? Misplaced blame is a thing, and I don’t think even *she’s* bad enough to think it’s okay.”

“That’s optimistic of you,” Foster mutters, taking a drink from his bottle of root beer. “She got your scholarship taken away. She tried to get you kicked out of here, Mercy.”

I know he’s right, and I don’t argue. But still, I don’t think he’s *as* right as he wants to be at this moment. About Blaise being awful and an idiot? On the money. But about Amelia?

There’s a solid chance I’m wrong, I know. And I pitch in my opinions as they discuss a way to get Blaise to show himself where the campus police will find him, and ultimately the cops. They’re right about that, at least. Once he’s caught by someone, he’ll never be able to come to Winter Grove again. Probably, Amelia won’t either if what happened last year is anything to go by.

So why do I still feel so... unsure of their plan? I mean, using Foster as bait in any situation makes me uncomfortable, even when he’s enthusiastic about the idea and trying to plan what he should *wear*. They don’t need me for this. And I’m not about to curb stomp a beta who wants to kill Foster, no matter how much I want to. I’d probably break my delicate ankle.

But that only gives me the opportunity to think about my *own* idea, that maybe they’re not exactly right. And that possibly Foster doesn’t have to dangle like a worm on a hook for Blaise to come out and play. At the end of the day, however, it isn’t my decision. And with August’s arm wrapped around my waist and his knee shoved between both of mine in his bed, I do my best to shove it out of my brain and let in his purrs instead. Then I can finally go to sleep and think of better things to do with my time than plot epic revenge plans in ways the boys haven’t thought to.

No matter how tempting it might be.

My mom's random texts about me 'eating well' have soured my appetite just as well as everything else has.

While the boys have assured me they'd be fine if I didn't want to go with them to lure out Blaise, they'd invited me all the same.

But here I am anyway, staring down at my cut-up pancakes with a frown and a stomach that seems to gnaw at itself painfully.

Thanks a lot, Mom. Now there's a good chance I'll pass out while taking care of stuff today, and that's not exactly a prospect I want to deal with. So I suck in a breath and grab the apple on my tray, biting into the crunchy green fruit as I wait.

But I don't have to wait long. Cecily and Eden are quick to arrive with their trays, though instead of meeting in our usual place, we're in a back corner of the dining hall and facing the lake. Back here, no one can hear us if we don't want them to, and I definitely don't want them to.

"What do you guys think?" I ask, fiddling with one of my hearing aids. It's a nervous habit I've never learned to stop doing, but I force myself to drop my hand back to the table after a few seconds, so I don't *break* the hook that goes over my ear. "I'm assuming you both read all of my texts?"

"I think your pack is a bunch of hard-headed boys," Cecily shrugs. "But I'm not that surprised. It is Foster's welfare at stake, after all. Did you think they'd go along with something a little less brain dead?"

“Uh, kinda?” I reply, setting down the half-eaten apple. “They don’t strike me as the type to want to start a fight.”

“But two of them are alphas, and one is a psycho little beta,” Eden points out snidely. “They’re not going to sit down and write out terms of surrender for the enemy when they want to take care of this themselves.”

“Yeah, and that’s not going to help anyone. I doubt Dorian could ever get expelled...?” I glance up at Cecily as I speak, and she eyes me like I should know the answer to that already. “So I know the others won’t either. But I think this is just creating a lot more trouble than it’s worth.”

“It’s lucky I agree. Lucky for you. Not so much for me,” Cecily sighs, head in her hands. “But I also agree with your idea. Amelia’s the head of their little pack, and I don’t buy for one moment that she doesn’t know where her ‘cousin’ is like she claims.” She shakes her head and Eden stirs her cereal before bringing a big spoonful to her mouth.

“I guess the problem is finding her,” I admit, but suddenly Eden grins and hurries to swallow her mouthful.

“I’m just so excited that, for once, I’m the one with an answer here. And the one to tell you that it was obvious all along how we’d find her.” When Cecily and I just look at her, she snorts. “Both of you have met her, haven’t you? And doesn’t she seem like just the most *dedicated* girl on campus? Present company excluded, of course, Mercy. You’re as dedicated to finding any troublesome shit you can as anyone ever could be.”

“Wow. Thanks,” I mutter wryly, but it doesn’t dampen Eden’s mood that I seem less than enthused at her tone.

“You’re welcome. I’ve noticed that no matter what, she’s never missed anything. Not a class, not an archery practice. Nothing, unless she absolutely has to. Even when she’s been in obvious distress. Even with that broken nose when she came back, she showed up at archery. Isn’t that just inspiring?” Eden raises her brows, and I can see a bit of disappointment when it’s obvious neither Cecily nor I understand what she’s saying.

“So you want us to... fake some kind of event she feels like she has to go to? It feels a little last minute, and wouldn't she be suspicious?”

“Yeah, she would.” Eden takes another bite of cereal. “That's why I've already done it. I did it last night when you texted us. She got an email from the official club account saying we were rescheduling last week's practice, remember the one that got snowed out? To today. And that anyone who intends on competing this year needs to show up so we can go over some team things. You think Miss Perfection is going to miss it?” Eden snorts. “No way. And besides, I asked those attending to RSVP. She did so in ten minutes flat.”

“Wow.” I'm more impressed than I thought I would be. “Holy shit, Eden. That's...”

“Incredibly unlike you,” Cecily finishes for me. “Smart, even. Did you think of it all on your own?” Eden rolls her eyes and elbows her friend, who doesn't deign to do so in return. “What time did you set this special archery meetup for? And are you sure no one else is going to show up?”

“If they do, it's just bad luck on our part,” Eden admits. “Since she's the only one who got the email. Not only that, the rest of the team got emails that the room in the gym we practice in would be closed for maintenance today, just in case anyone was planning on coming in and setting up the targets.”

“Literally, I'm floored,” I assure Eden, forcing myself to take another bite of my apple, grimacing, and spitting it out. Both of them notice, naturally, and give me varying looks of confusion. “It's a long story,” I promise, hoping they won't want to hear.

“Well, we have two hours,” Eden replies sweetly. “So, we have the time.”

Loudly. I sigh and shove the tray away from me, my elbows thumping hard onto the table. “My mom sucks, okay? She helped me into an eating disorder a few years ago, and it's hard to not hear her voice in my head. Especially when she texts me with shit like ‘hope you're eating well!’ Smiley face included, of course. It just brings back a lot of shit that I don't

like to think about, and I always have a hard time eating for a while after one of those texts.”

Eden’s eyes narrow as she looks at me. “Does she know you struggle with eating now because of what she’s said?”

“Indubitably.”

“And she still says shit like that?”

“Often.”

“That’s what they made the block button for,” Cecily suggests, sounding kinder than usual. “You don’t need to deal with that, Mercy.”

“Yeah, but...” I trail off, biting my lip. “Look, she’s my *mom*. I can’t just go completely no-contact with her.”

“Low contact exists, too.” The red-head speaks to me so *gently*, like she’s worried about my mental health. Like she actually cares and is trying to give good advice. It’s different enough that I’m really praying that she isn’t possessed, since my day is already full and I don’t think I’ll have time to learn Latin and fit in an exorcism before dinner. “You don’t deserve someone who doesn’t respect your boundaries.”

I don’t know what to say.

“Or someone who literally makes you unable to *eat*,” adds Eden, already at the bottom of her cereal bowl. “That’s absolutely ridiculous.”

“That’s my mom,” I murmur, head on my hand as I stare down at all the food I’m not going to be able to eat. “Always has been, and I don’t see her changing anytime soon.”

My heart hammers in my chest as I stand just outside of the gym. I can hear movement inside already, and I know it has to be Amelia.

Or a janitor. Please, God, don’t let it be a janitor.

Cecily had asked if I wanted her to go with me, but I’d told her no. After all, there are three entrances to this part of the gym, and I need them on the other doors so that Amelia can’t

shoot me and run. That would be pretty awful, all around, and I'd prefer she feels trapped enough that she doesn't try to nail me with an arrow.

"You can do this, Mercy," I murmur. "It's a much better plan than the pack using Foster as bait. A much *safer* plan. You can do this." It's an easy plan, too. Amelia has to know where he is. I'll get her to tell me and call the cops. Easy.

Just... easy. Right.

Before I can overthink this, I shove my way into the gym, the doors slamming back on their hinges as my eyes land on Amelia. Belatedly, I realize Elaine is here as well, sitting on the floor against one wall with a chem book in her lap along with a notebook. She looks at me before Amelia does, eyes wide and lips parted.

Amelia turns a moment later, frowning in displeasure a moment before her face falls in confusion. "Where's your bow?" she asks suspiciously. "What are you doing, Mercy?"

The other doors push open too, and while Eden comes closer to us, Cecily just leans against hers with a predator's sneer as she watches Amelia. It occurs to me, not for the first time, that I never, ever want to be on Cecily's bad side.

She'd probably kill me.

"Funny story, actually," Eden admits, arms crossed. "There is no practice. None of us are here to shoot."

Amelia whirls to look at her and Cecily, before looking back at me incredulously. "Is this a fucking joke?" the blonde hisses. "What, my cousin beat up you and your beta, so now you're going to try to hurt me?" Her eyes go to Elaine and from the corner of my eye, I see the omega stand up.

Please don't try to help her, I beg silently as Elaine moves, following her movements until I see that she's moved to sit in front of the door I'd come in from.

Is she... helping us?

"I just want to know where your cousin is. No one's going to hit you or stab you or whatever you've dreamed of doing to

my pack,” I shrug. “Just tell me where Blaise is, and we’ll go.”

“I don’t know—”

“Well, here’s the thing,” I cut her off before she can finish, and smile unkindly at her. “I don’t believe you. And even if I did believe that you don’t know exactly where he is right this minute? Let’s be real. You could call him and find out.”

Her eyes darken and she looks at the four of us, her eyes fixed on Elaine until I sidestep so her attention is back on me. If she’s going to hit someone, I’d rather it not be her terrified omega. “I don’t *know*,” Amelia says again, carefully. “I’m not lying to you, Mercy. I don’t know where he is. And he isn’t answering my calls. I’ve tried finding out—”

“No, you haven’t.” Elaine’s voice is soft, and her eyes are wide when I look back at her. “You texted him yesterday and I know he answered you. I saw the message.” She looks between us, then adds, “He’d been staying in her dorm up until two days ago. After that, he left and said he’d figure things out.”

My attention lands back on Amelia, and when she takes a step towards Elaine, I move to be more in the way than I was before.

“Don’t,” I warn. “Please?”

It’s the please that gets her. I see her face fall into incredulous disbelief, and she looks at me in surprise. “*Please?*” Amelia spits. “You’re not really asking me, Mercy. You wouldn’t have brought everyone here if you were.”

“True,” I admit. “But will you listen to me? For just a minute?”

She lets out a breath and shrugs her shoulders, dropping the bow to cross her arms over her chest. “Guess I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

I ignore that. “My pack thinks you’re literally the worst,” I inform her, seeing irritation draw her face tight. “They think you set up Foster to be hurt by Blaise... and you know what else? They think you did the first time, too.” Her face falls, but I don’t stop. “We know that he’s the one who hurt Foster and

got away with it. And they know he wants to do it again. If they find him first, they're probably going to make him regret breathing. And then they're going to turn on you. They're not going to hurt you, not like that. But you know Dorian's family. Is that what you *want*, Amelia? Getting kicked out of Winter Grove would be the very least of your problems."

Slowly I walk toward her, each step deliberate as I hold up my hands, unclenched, so she knows I'm not about to break her nose again. "*Did you* tell Blaise to hurt Foster last year? Did you tell him to do it again this time?"

"Of course not!" For the first time I can hear the panic in her voice, and she reaches up to tangle her fingers in her hair, eyes closing hard. "You really think I'd do that? You think I'd have my friend hurt someone like that? I didn't! But then everyone thought I did, and I lost my admittance into Winter Grove. And it was *your pack's* fault. They wouldn't listen to me back then. So I don't care what happens to them now. This wasn't my plan, okay? But they're getting what they deserve."

"Yeah, I don't think either of us believe that."

"Fuck you."

"And you are definitely not my type. Look, I'm not going to sit here and say that you're a good person. You actually tried to get me kicked out, knowing I can't afford to be here on my own." When she opens her mouth, I hurry to add, "If you're about to call me a slut or whatever, can you save it? It's not that original, and I don't care what you think of me."

She sneers and says, anyway, "You're only here because you're just a toy for the richest pack on campus."

"Yeah, see, not that original," I assure her. "Doesn't matter to me what you think. It matters to me if you're the type of person that's okay with your adopted cousin trying to *kill* someone. And if you're okay taking the fall for it."

When she lunges forward, Eden makes a sound in her throat and Cecily moves forward, eyes narrow, but I shake my head at them when Amelia only grabs the front of my hoodie

and yanks me up onto the balls of my feet. I grin, though there's no humor in my face, I'm sure.

"Still not my type, but nice try." I work to pry her hand loose, still talking. "If they find him first, they're going to tell everyone that you helped him get away. That you came here to set this up. Is that what you want? Is Blaise going to tell them you didn't?"

Her arm falls, thankfully letting me drop to the floor. "I've met him a total of once but I'm going to be honest here; he doesn't seem like someone who'd be reliable in a situation like this."

"He's *pack*," Amelia snarls. "He's—"

"More psycho than Foster, and that's saying something." My heart pounds in my throat, and I try hard to keep the fear off of my voice and hopefully out of my scent. I'm not afraid of what she'll do to me, exactly. She could hurt me, but with the other girls here, she couldn't do much more than that.

I'm afraid this isn't going to work, and the pack is going to end up doing something they'll regret.

"Just tell me where I can find him. Or better yet, tell him to meet you somewhere. If you do it my way, I'm not going to do what the pack does. And I'll make sure everyone knows that you helped find him. Don't go down with him, okay?" I'm pleading by this point, and slowly the fury in Amelia's eyes turns to fear and trepidation instead.

She steps back, glaring once more at Elaine.

"Why would you help them?" she asks, her voice barely loud enough to be heard. "You're my *pack*—"

"You're not the same," Elaine replies sharply, voice trembling. "Not who you used to be, anymore. You were so nice. I thought..." she trails off, shaking her head. "Please, Amelia? Just tell them where he is so we can be done with this. I can't do it anymore."

Somehow, that's the thing that does it. I can see it in her face, and when she pulls out her phone and brings it to her ear, I have to hold my breath.

“It’s me.” Her tone is clipped, eyes fixed on mine. “Can you meet me at the pool in thirty minutes? I need to talk.” She closes her eyes hard and lets out a breath. “I just *need to talk*, okay? Don’t fucking say that to me. Will you be there?”

Whatever he says doesn’t make her look any less happy, but she agrees and hangs up on him to look at me again. “There,” she says, her voice flat. “Blaise is going to be at the pool in thirty minutes, like I said. Can I go now?”

“No.” Cecily’s voice is sharp as she prowls around Amelia, sharp eyes fixed on her face. I’m surprised by it, but I don’t say anything. Surely Cecily has a good reason to say no. “Because you could walk out those doors and call him to tell him that campus police are going to be waiting for him.” From the corner of my eye, I see Eden on the phone, and I assume she’s talking to them. “So we’re going to wait here until my friend hears that he’s been found. And we’re going to have a little *talk* about your future here at Winter Grove.”

She certainly doesn’t sound friendly about it, but I don’t have anything else to say. Except...

“Thank you.” My words are firm, and both of them look at me in disbelief. “Thank you for being not as shitty of a person as you could’ve been. I meant what I said. None of us are going to say you had anything to do with this.”

She doesn’t reply, but that’s okay, because I don’t know what I’d say if she did. So instead, I walk over to sit beside Elaine and sigh, wondering if I have a hunger headache or a migraine coming on.

When the door to the dorm opens, I'm lying on my back on the sofa, popcorn balanced on my stomach as I stare at the television. Even with my hearing aids in, I still take the time to read lips instead of just listen, just to make sure I've still got it.

Though I do look toward the door when it opens, breaking my concentration and smiling at my dark-haired, pet-play loving alpha.

Dorian walks straight to me, not stopping until he's close, and then he keeps moving, leaning down so he's on his hands and knees above me on the sofa and my heart flutters in my chest, ribs constricting.

He doesn't look angry. He's... smiling? I'd expected irritation, not smiles. But here he is, looking at me like I've just done the best thing in the world. Not that I agree, because it wasn't that big of a deal, and it would've been more dramatic if he'd fought Blaise with August there to help him.

"Well, look at you," he purrs, moving the popcorn tin to the coffee table. "Sitting there like the cat who just ate a canary."

"How old-fashioned of you," I reply quietly, still searching his face for any spark of irritation. "How was your day? Did you have a good time? I tried to call, but you must've been busy." I'd called and texted, but when they hadn't answered I'd shrugged and decided they could find out whenever, instead of *right then*, like I'd intended.

Well, right after campus police had taken Blaise in their car so that my pack couldn't try to nail him to the curb or something.

"I underestimated you." He leans down until his face is just above mine. "My perfect little omega. Our wicked little thing. I didn't think you'd get Amelia to give in like that."

I can't stop my grin, nor can I help the way I tilt my chin back as he leans in to nip at my throat. He purrs as he does, and one of my hands goes up, fingers knotting in his hair. "Sometimes I have good ideas, you know," I point out, sucking in a gasp when he bites hard enough to leave a mark. "And good instincts."

"Once in a while," he agrees, sitting up and right on my hips so I can't get up. "Now I know why you didn't want to come. Foster was a little hurt, you know. He wanted you to come to his rescue again, I think."

"Where are they?" I ask, belatedly realizing the others aren't here. He moves, finally letting me up, and I stretch as I do. "Are they coming too?"

"Yeah," Dorian promises. "They'll be here in a few minutes. We thought we'd take you out for dinner tonight."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." He moves to wrap his arms around my waist, nuzzling my jaw. "Fuck, you smell so good. When's your next heat, exactly? I want to knot you so fucking badly it's unreal."

I can't help but giggle, turning my face into his. "You've got a couple weeks, sorry to say," I tell him, biting lightly at his jaw. "And if we're going out, I'm going to shower." I poke his arm until he lets go, though he pulls me in for one last kiss before I extract myself from his grip and walk to the bathroom that's on the side of the dorm I share with Foster.

Once there, I'm quick to strip off my clothes, the shower that's bigger than the one in my house sputtering momentarily when I twist the knob. If I hadn't known that this place was fancy, I would from the bathrooms. Especially this one. It's large enough to not be cramped, and the shower is flat to the

floor with just a four-inch lip to step over to get in. Not to mention it has *two* shower heads instead of one, like someone's expecting two people to be in here at once.

Not that it's exactly a bad idea. The walls are tiled, not shiny linoleum, and when I turn off the overhead light so that the only brightness is what filters in the small, high window above me, the room is perfect. I step in, the hot water feeling amazing on my skin and the tile under me is already warm from the spray.

Honestly, I could live in this bathroom and be okay with it. All I'd need is a mini fridge.

As I'm working some conditioner into my hair, I pause. The air changes, bringing with it a tropical scent that reminds me of a piña colada.

Foster's scent.

That's the only warning I get as arms wrap around me, pulling a gasp from my throat as he nips at my shoulder and gives a soft purr that I can *feel* rather than hear. Especially since I can't hear much of anything, and he'd have to shout at me if he wanted to talk.

But I turn to face him, not leaving the circle of his arms, just in time for the beta to kiss me. His length brushes my thigh, and I'm surprised to find that he's already into this more than I thought he would be.

Well, it isn't like I'm *not* becoming quickly into it as well.

Thankfully, there's enough light cast by the window that when he pulls back, I can read his lips when he asks, "Is this okay?" I can also tell he's doing his best to enunciate, and the pure effort makes me smile.

I nod, wrapping my arms around his neck to pull him against me. His fingers tease my hips, running up my spine as he kisses me again, deeply. His tongue explores my mouth like he hasn't done this a million times, and when he pulls back, it's just to tease my bottom lip with his teeth and release another purr that I feel where my body is pressed to his.

I don't need to hear him to love this. Sure, him saying my name is great, but his touch is *perfect*. Though when his fingers drag downward to grip my ass tightly, it's also pretty clear he wants to do more than kiss.

And I'm certainly not going to complain about that, either. I run a hand up his chest, cupping his throat as he pulls away for a few moments as before coming back to tease my hole with slick fingers.

It's still new, even though we've done this before. Still a sensation that makes me shudder and stand on my tiptoes in response, though he mouths my shoulder until I relax. My psycho beta is patient enough that this never hurts, and as he opens me up on his fingers, I know it won't this time either.

By the time he's got three fingers in me, and I want him to do more than this. I arch into him, my fingers teasing his cock as I pull away just a little. This time I feel him chuckle, and his hand on my hip keeps me where I am so he can continue just as slowly as he wants.

Until he spins me around in the shower, my arms pressing to the wall under one of the showerheads. He presses me forward, one hand on my hip as he kisses down my spine and lines himself up with me.

Just like before, I take a breath, my heart lurching as I feel his tip brush between my thighs. Maybe I'll be used to this one day, but not yet. As I did last time, I have to remind myself to relax, and remind myself how much I loved this during my heat.

Foster is so careful. He goes in slowly, sinking into me inch by inch until finally his hips press against mine, chest against my back as I shudder.

It's such a different feeling, though not particularly a bad one. The discomfort is bearable, especially when he reaches around me to tease my clit. That causes me to jerk back, and the sound I feel leave him is one of surprise and pleasure.

His lips move on my ear, and while I can't see them, I can feel the familiar shape of my name against my skin. The beta

locks an arm around my body, just above my navel, and moves slightly, pulling back only to sink in again.

But neither of us are *that* patient. It isn't in our nature, after all. Soon, he picks up his pace, though not so much that it hurts, until he's thrusting into me hard enough that it's a good thing I'm pinned to the wall.

Though in reality, there's no other way I'd want to take him right now. It's so *perfect* to be here, his arms holding me against him and the cold tile that's such a great contrast to his heat. One of my hands goes up again, and I drag his head forward so I can kiss him, just as his fingers find my clit once more. The teasing makes my muscles tighten, and I swallow his groan as he gives a particularly harsh thrust. So I do it again, and I'm met with a similar result, and this time a growl is given from his lips to mine.

When I try to do it a third time, however, Foster grips the base of my throat, his fingers moving harder against me. There's no teasing now, but instead, a concentrated effort to his actions as he moves. Soon I feel him murmur against my skin, and he sinks into me one last time before stilling, his touches becoming more lazy and sedate.

I want to come as well, but I don't mind. Savoring the moment, loving the feel of him against me and the way I can feel his harsh breaths on my shoulder. I always want him, and the others, and to have him like this, spent and relaxed, is *everything* to me in this moment.

Until he steps back, and before I can move he spins me around, pressing my back against the wall as he kneels between my thighs and stares up at me with his bright blue eyes and slightly parted lips that curve into a smile as he grips my thighs to hold me still. As I watch he leans up, just enough that he can lick a line up my slit to my clit, where he stops to lick and tease with his teeth. Gasping, I arch under him, hot water running in lines down my body that feels like it's on fire from his mouth and how he'd just fucked me. I bury my fingers in his hair, nails scratching his scalp, and Foster moves his hands so he can spread me open for better access.

And I'm definitely not complaining about that, either. Or the way he's so insistent. His face is pressed against my body as he uses his mouth to bring me closer and closer to my orgasm.

"Please, Foster." I don't know how well I'm speaking the words, or how loudly. I don't even know if he understands them. But his movements become more insistent, and he grips me more tightly as my thighs begin to tremble and seconds later I come with a gasp, holding onto him more tightly as the fingers of my other hand brush my oversensitive nipples. My hips rock in his grip, though he keeps them mostly flush with the wall as he eats me out through my orgasm, as if he's trying to taste every inch of me.

Finally he stands up, staring at me as he wipes his mouth on the back of his hand, and looks down. His hands come up to where mine had been, teasing my nipples lightly as I had, and even though I've come, I shudder and lean into him to brush my teeth against his throat.

This time I feel his chuckle, and he moves his hands so that instead, he's gently massaging the conditioner into my scalp.

Is there anything better than being pampered after an orgasm? I don't think so, and I'm going to soak up every moment.

When August leaves his bathroom after showering, he stops when he sees Foster and I in just towels on the couch, my head on Foster's chest and his body almost horizontal. "Adorable," my mild-mannered alpha purrs, coming over to kneel down beside us. "Has anyone ever told you both that you're just the cutest?"

"No," Foster drawls, fingers drawing lazy circles above my collarbone. "Say it to us with feeling."

I can't help but snicker, my lips pulling up into a wry grin. "With feeling," I agree. "If we don't believe it, you're not doing a good enough job."

“Well, in that case...” August moves to grip Foster’s hair and kisses him *hard*. I can hear the beta’s intake of breath, and his fingers pause on my skin to grip the base of my throat instead. August forces his head back against the armrest, lips and teeth working against his mouth before he pulls back with a purr and looks down at me. “Your turn, darling omega,” he chuckles, and he’s on me before I can reply.

His mouth is perfect. He tastes of himself and Foster, and I can’t get enough of it. Though, while I’d rather explore his mouth, he proves quickly that he’s in control, and that he’d rather re-acquaint himself with mine. His hand splays against my stomach, over the towel, and he pulls away just enough to purr and tease my lower lip with his teeth before he sits back.

“You’re adorable,” he says, Dorian walking in from his bedroom already dressed. “Do you believe it now?”

“And if you don’t, can you wait until we’re driving to get him to do that again?” our stern alpha sniffs. “We need to leave soon, and if I have to supervise both of you doing that, then you’re going to be sorry later tonight.”

Regretfully, Foster and I both get to our feet, and my beta rolls his eyes with a theatrical sigh. “That’s not very fun of you, Dorian,” he informs the dark-haired alpha. “We were having a moment.”

“Have it later,” Dorian shrugs.

“And when you say ‘we’ll be sorry’ can you spell that out for me?” I ask, teasing. “Because usually that isn’t much of a threat.”

Dorian eyes me solemnly, though I can see the hint of a smirk teasing his lips. “Go. Get dressed, *now* you heathens.” He dismisses us with a wave of his hand. “They won’t hold our reservation for that long.”

“Oh, what a pity,” Foster murmurs when we’re both nearly to our rooms. “What could we ever find to do instead?” He turns towards his door, though at the last minute snags my wrist and yanks me to him for one last kiss.

Dorian's growl breaks through, however, and Foster lets go with a laugh. "I'm going, I'm going," he snickers, heading into his room while I do the same, unable to hide the smile on my lips.

I'm not sure exactly what to do with myself when Elaine comes to sit beside me.

Dressed in a light hoodie that reaches mid-thigh and pink leggings, she's certainly brighter than me in my heather gray sweatshirt and black leggings, though we're both dressed well enough for the early May weather. She sits beside me on the bench near the dining hall and chews her lip lightly, like she's not sure what she's doing here.

"So my pack is gone," the omega says after a moment or two. "Amelia has decided to go back to Royalwood and, you know, Blaise is in a lot of trouble and all. I've heard Foster's mom is pressing charges, and she's backed by Dorian's family."

"Yeah. I heard that too," I agree, drawing one knee up to my chest. "Will you go back to Royalwood as well?" I ask, after a moment's hesitation of her not saying anything.

"Maybe. I don't think Amelia wants anything to do with me anymore. She... wasn't my alpha anyway. Not in a way that counted, I guess." She glances sidelong at me, her eyes wistful, and I frown.

"But you wanted her to be." It occurs to me she was in love with Amelia, and what she did for my pack probably hurt her quite a bit.

"*Wanted*," Elaine corrects. "Once upon a time I thought she'd return my feelings. But then she met you, realized you were with Dorian, and everything kind of went to shit from

there, honestly.” Her smile is wan and her face looks pale. It causes her dark sapphire eyes to stand out under their long, thick lashes. “But she’s not the same as she used to be before all of this. I don’t want her anymore. I don’t want to be in her *pack* anymore.”

“Then don’t go back.” It seems simple to me. If she doesn’t want Amelia, which I support, then why go? “Winter Grove is an amazing school, but you don’t need me to tell you that. Stay here.”

“I don’t have anyone here,” she reminds me, her words cautious.

“That’s not true,” I counter, flexing my leg and drawing my other knee up instead. “You have me. It would be nice to have another omega as my friend. Well... as long as you don’t date a serial killer and leave when I discover it. That would kind of suck, and I’ve already crossed it off my bucket list.”

She snorts in spite of herself, mouth curling into a soft smile. “You’ll forget about me,” Elaine dismisses with a shake of her head. “You won’t remember after summer break. You’re going home to Chicago, and I’m staying here in Winter Grove until I figure out what to do. You won’t remember me next year.”

“Funny thing about that, actually,” I tell her, my tone mild as my heart beats a little quicker at the words. “I’m not actually going back. My mom and I? We don’t get along. She has this thing about me eating, see? She thinks I shouldn’t, but I like food. I *love* food.”

Elaine’s eyes widen. “I’m sorry,” she apologizes immediately, pink tinging her cheeks. “I didn’t know—”

“Don’t be sorry,” I interrupt, a half-smile rising to my lips. “Really, it’s fine. I’m working on it, and going low contact with her this semester has worked out great. I’m staying just outside of town, actually. My...” I trail off, surprising myself.

I’ve never used the word like this outside of a conversation with my boys.

“My *pack* has a house here. Like I said, it isn’t far. You could come over. Or I could come here. We could make it really hard for me to forget about you.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Waiting for your pack?” she asks curiously, glancing around for the boys. “Warn me? I don’t think they’d like to see me all that much.”

“I don’t think they’d have any problem with you at all,” I assure her. “They’re just a little unintentionally terrifying, is all. You just have to ignore them when they get pretentious.”

“Funny.” The voice behind me is mirrored by the citrusy, bright scent of Cecily that I’ve come to find familiar. “Did no one give you that same advice? I *almost* feel like someone did...” She taps her face thoughtfully. “Who could have told you to just stay out of their way?”

“Certainly neither of us,” Eden agrees, draping herself on the bench between Elaine and me to give us both a quick grin. When she moves to stand and I’m able to see Elaine’s face, I’m shocked.

She’s not even looking at Eden.

She’s staring up at Cecily like she’s seeing a god. Almost immediately I have to stifle a smile, and when I peek up at the red-head, it’s clear that she’s not oblivious to Elaine’s affection.

“You know, little omega.” Cecily leans down, her voice just above a whisper and barely audible to my ears. “That’s the second time you’ve stared at me like that. Why don’t you try saying something to me, hmm?”

“I’m...” Elaine looks at me, nervous, but I just try to smile helpfully. Cecily scares me too. I’m not one to help her here, only here to urge her on. “I’m Elaine,” my new friend stutters. “I wasn’t trying to be rude, or anything—”

“I know,” Cecily chuckles. “Are you going anywhere for the summer, Elaine?”

The omega shakes her head, eyes still wide. God, I hope this isn’t what I looked like when Dorian’s pack first started talking to me.

I'd be mortified.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Dorian Wakefield swings out of the dorm, backpack over his shoulder. He spots us and walks over, looking between Cecily and Elaine, who can't take her eyes off of her newfound obsession.

"I stay around here as well. I'm sure Mercy's told you her pack has a house. Well, we do too. If you get tired of town, maybe we can meet up sometime." Cecily doesn't wait for an answer, only turns to look at all of us with a very on-brand smirk. "I just wanted to tell you all to have a good summer," she adds, when Dorian eyes her carefully. "That's all. Oh, and I've sent you my tail recommendations, all right?" she adds, gaze flicking back to my alpha's. He grimaces and looks at me, but that just makes her smirk grow. "Have a good summer, all of you."

"I won't be around," Eden assures us. "Her packhouse is a fucking sex den, and I'm going to Europe. See you next semester." She doesn't wait for any of us to reply, just follows after Cecily with her hands shoved into the pockets of her jeans.

The way Elaine takes a deep breath isn't lost on me, and I press my lips together to hide a grin.

"Hey, uh, Mercy?" she asks, chancing a look back in my direction.

"Yeah?"

"Tell me Cecily isn't a suspected serial killer."

I can't help the snort of laughter that leaves me, nearly causing me to choke on the breath I'd been taking. Dorian looks at me, wide-eyed, and moves to stand beside me, which causes Elaine to jump right up.

"I'm sorry," she says to him, like he's accused her of something. "About Amelia, and Blaise, and—"

"They're not your responsibility," he tells her, smoothly cutting off her apologetic ramble. "I don't know why you're saying sorry. And you're welcome to come to our house over

the summer, if you want.” His hand falls onto my shoulder as Elaine looks there, seeming both nervous and pleased.

“Okay. Umm. All right then. I’ll see you both...soon?” She’s so unsure that I just want to hug her, but instead I just nod.

“You have my number, so there’s no reason we won’t.” She’s gone a second later, fleeing as if she can’t get away from us fast enough. Luckily, I’ve come to realize that’s just *Elaine*.

“What did she mean about asking if Cecily was a killer?” Dorian asks, and I move to look up at him. “I said we could be friends if she didn’t date a serial killer, basically. What’s with the *tail* recommendations?” I’m not letting that go, and I certainly can’t unhear it.

His grin turns playfully malicious. “Well, you won’t be able to get away from me all summer. And we can fit in a lot of card games between now and when the fall semester starts, my delightfully wicked girl.” As he talks, the boys’ sleek grey car pulls up to the sidewalk, and the window rolls down to reveal a frowning Foster.

“Come *on*,” he grumps. “You’re not in a movie, you two. And I want to get home and make sure everything’s where it should be. Plus, we’re setting up a bed for Mercy in my room, remember?”

“We are?” Dorian asks, glancing at him. “I thought we were putting it in the office.”

“Nah, Mercy’s my best friend,” Foster says in an overly sweet voice that’s not the least bit friendly. He tips his sunglasses down, eyes narrowed. “She wants to sleep in my room.”

“I don’t remember saying that, actually,” I say, getting to my feet and stretching my arms over my head.

Foster rolls his eyes, and in the backseat August rolls the window down to glare balefully at us. “We still have to stop by the administration building, but we need you for that. Are you coming?”

“Yeah, we’re coming,” Dorian agrees, turning to look at me.

But I shake my head. “I want to walk, actually,” I explain, raising my hands in surrender. When Foster makes a noise, I turn to sneer at him. “Don’t act like that. I’m *living* with you now. It’s not like I’m about to run off back to Chicago.” The conversation with my mother hadn’t exactly been a fun one, but Foster had certainly been rather distracting during that with his face buried between my thighs, while my mom had argued point after point with me about what I should be doing with my life.

Quite honestly, I barely remember the call at all, thanks to Foster.

“You’re okay?” Dorian crowds up against me, and before I know it, August is at my back, having escaped the prison of Foster’s car sometime in the last few seconds.

“I’m fine,” I assure both of them, kissing both August and Dorian sweetly before shoving them away. “I just want to walk a little.” August gets back in the car and Dorian raises his hands in surrender, laughing as he slides into the passenger seat.

On the other hand, Foster just glares at me. At least, until I go and ruffle his hair, causing the beta to scoff and yank me down for a quick, sweet kiss. “Admin building,” he reminds me, letting me go much easier than the alphas had. “See you there?”

“If I get lost, you have my permission to put a GPS in one of my hearing aids like an ear tag,” I agree, and he grins, gives a little wave, and drives them up the road toward the building where I’d almost gotten expelled.

I wasn’t lying. I like to walk, and I like the silence. Especially right now, when it’s spring in New York and just warm enough that I barely need my hoodie. My steps take me through campus, and it’s amazing how much has changed.

And in reality, how much *I’ve* changed. I know that I have, especially since last semester. A lot of that has to do with the

pack... but quite a bit of it doesn't.

A lot of it is just *me*.

And I like this new me that I've found at Winter Grove. The version of me that broke Amelia's nose, and the one who somehow managed to fall in love with the three most vile boys I'd ever met.

"I thought you'd be gone by now." The voice is brittle, and followed by one of the worst scents that's ever had the audacity to crawl up my nose like an animal looking for a place to die.

I barely need to turn to know who it is, but I do anyway. Today's not the day, and Petra is *not* the one to make this day suck for me.

"Playing roommate lottery?" I ask, watching as the light breeze blows her pale blonde hair around her face. "Did they tell you that your room isn't a single, so you'll have to try to get along with someone again? Can you give me their name so I can send them a letter of warning?"

She's not amused, but I sure as hell am.

"I'm just glad you left so easily," Petra shrugs, like it's going to hurt my feelings. "It's been great not having you there."

"It's been *fantastic* not being there."

"I never liked you."

"Petra..." I step forward until her scent is burning my nostrils and we're only a few inches away from each other. She just stares at me, but I continue to smile. "Let me tell you something. I know my opinion doesn't matter to you, but I want to say it, anyway. I've now lived with the girlfriend of a *serial* killer who spent almost every day eating lunch with us before she went out and murdered people. I broke the nose of a girl who tried to get me kicked out of Winter Grove and then tried everything she could to hurt my pack. I jumped on a guy's back who was built like a tank and fought like King Kong smashing airplanes. And I can assure you that I would rather share a room with all three of them for my entire four

years, with no weapons whatsoever, then spend one night with you. Not even one. And I'm *pretty sure* if I went around and surveyed the other girls of this campus, they would enthusiastically agree. Think about that. A *serial killer* is more desirable of a roommate than you."

For a moment, I think she's going to spit in my face, but instead she just sneers. "No one cares what you say, Mercy Noble. You're just a—"

"See, you're wrong again there, so I'm going to go ahead and stop you. What am I, though? An omega? *Middle class*?" I snort. "So what? I have a pack that cares. Friends that care too. And you?"

She readies herself for whatever I'm going to say, but I just step back and shake my head. "You don't have any of that, huh? We all have summer assignments, right? Maybe you should try being less of a shitty human being so that next semester, when you have the opportunity to ruin someone's year, you just, I don't know, don't?"

She still doesn't answer, and I'm happy about that. Instead, I just salute her theatrically and turn, hands shoved in my pockets as I continue my walk to the admin building with longer, faster steps. Excited to get there, where my boys, my pack, wait for me so we can go home.