

A dark, dense forest scene with glowing blue feathers and orange flames. The background is a dark, dense forest with various green plants and trees. Several glowing blue feathers are scattered throughout the scene, some appearing to float or glow. In the top right and bottom left corners, there are bright orange and red flames, suggesting a fire or a magical effect. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and magical.

IMPOSSIBLE

LYRA COLE

MIDASVERSE
BOOK ONE

Impossible

Midasverse, Book 1

Lyra Cole

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TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book contains heavy content related to mental health, specifically eating disorders, depression, and PTSD. There is sexual content, substance use, and references to graphic violence. If you're under the age of maturity in your jurisdiction, scram. If you are my blood relative, also a good time to scram.

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Coming Soon

To Julie

For loving me
(and teaching me how to love myself)
even when I'm a gumball

i like my body when it is with your
body. It is so quite new a thing.
Muscles better and nerves more.
i like your body. i like what it does,
i like its hows. i like to feel the spine
of your body and its bones, and the trembling
-firm-smooth ness and which i will
again and again and again
kiss, i like kissing this and that of you,
i like, slowly stroking the, shocking fuzz
of your electric fur, and what-is-it comes
over parting flesh... And eyes big love-crumbs,

and possibly i like the thrill

of under me you so quite new

ee cummings

Prologue - Mitigatory

HOLLIS

The biggest lie I ever told is that it was hard to close the bond.

It was the easiest choice I've ever made.

I feel it still, even though the others don't. One of the perks of being Pack Alpha.

It's not like it was before—I can't feel what they feel, or sense what they sense. Thank god. It's like standing on top of three separate manhole covers, trying to keep them all sealed with differing threats under each.

Risk is an angry gorilla, punching at the metal grate, making me fight to keep my balance. Even now, nearly six weeks after it all went down, he's thrashing every day, rocking me back and forth, screaming and beating his chest with his displeasure.

Leon is just a man. He's recognized he's trapped underground and is waiting for help. Biding his time. He won't

waste his energy trying to move an immovable force, even though he's probably strong enough to shove me aside if he really wanted to.

And then there's Joshua. A black hole, sucking the manhole inwards. I'm afraid to step on his grate, afraid I might shove the metal through myself and watch it crush him. Watch all of us get sucked in, one by one, and destroyed.

I'm pretending he's the reason I've shut it all down. It's a valid reason—the negative pressure from his bond sets my teeth on edge. It feels like fingernails bending backwards.

But while the difficulty of closing the bond is the biggest lie I've ever told, blaming it on Joshua is by far the worst.

Sometimes I think back to before the attack. I try to remember if I enjoyed the bond. I know I did—I remember the good times. The games of chess, the nights in the pack bed, the bonfires and vacations and lazy afternoons. But I remember them like they were stories read to me from a book when I was a child.

The memories that play like movies in my head, lit in bright technicolor? The bad times. The disappointment when I'd work late. When I'd chastise Risk for fucking off and making a scene in public. The fights Leon and I would get in about running the household—stupid shit like bills and chores. When Joshua would disappear and I'd say to give him space and Leon would roll his eyes and I'd yell at him for trying to make me feel guilty.

Things are much safer this way. Much more comfortable, even if I have to shuffle to keep everything in place. At least I'm in control. I tell myself that that's my job, that's what Pack Alphas are for.

That's a lie too.

1

Imposter

INDIGO

Walking around Adams Academy in May is an exercise in Ivy Leagues.

I don't see the faces anymore. It's *Dartmouth, Legacy* and *Harvard, Lacrosse*, and *Brown, Lazy*—a favored stereotype by those whose 'safety' school was, somehow, still an Ivy League. No, really.

Their transition from Adams Academy to Ivy League campus will be seamless. The stage is already set—Adams is all brick courtyards and cherry blossom springs and rolling hills with a view of the distant, glittering Potomac. Perfect practice for a perfect future.

Then there's me. Indie the Imposter. Failure to launch. Graduated with nowhere to go.

No, that's melodramatic. I had somewhere to go. Just no way to get there.

Virginia State. Partial scholarship. Deferred. Because even with a partial scholarship, Indie the Independent cannot afford the remainder of tuition, the cost of a dorm, and enough food for a brain to earn the grades previously aforementioned partial scholarship would require.

Indie the Independent being, of course, a state of mind, rather than a state of tax-status. If it were a state of tax-status, I'd be Indie the Intercollegiate come this fall, after finishing my gap year and saving up money washing dishes and assisting the drama teacher at my alma mater. As it is, I am Indie the Instrumental—that is, instrumental to my parents getting every possible tax break available to them. Turns out, filling out loan paperwork for me does not benefit them, and therefore has not and will not happen. Because god forbid I am Indie the Inconvenient.

I'm not bitter.

I swear.

I glide among the brochure-ready Adams Academy students feeling distinctly hollow. Or maybe just hungry.

Hair up. Bleached sneakers, poor disguised as grunge. Baggy clothes, gaunt disguised as heroin chic. Coffee buzzing in my veins, voodoo magic animating a patchwork doll.

I am huffing when I get to work. The dizziness is a solid thing, sending a column through my brain, squishing the grey

matter into my skull.

The nice part about no longer being a student is that my brain doesn't need to work to wash dishes. I just need to avoid losing consciousness, which requires far fewer calories.

The not-nice part about fewer calories is that I tend to lose time. I'm not sure if it's my brain eating itself or the monotony of sitting in front of a sink arm-deep in suds for six hours straight, but whatever it is, I find myself in the doctor's office without any memory of getting here. I remember the individual parts of the process when I focus—guzzling water in the bathroom, collecting coins to stow in the lining of my pockets, downing a protein bar and pinching my cheeks to get some color in them.

Dr. Mason purses her lips when she enters the exam room and sees I've pulled the paper gown on over my winter clothes, even though it's May—Indie the Incurable. I hold my breath—half anticipation over whether she'll make me change or not, half trying to look objectively larger.

She lets it slide.

Then we watch the little counter-balance weight on the scale slide together.

112.8.

Contrary to popular belief, I do not feel shock, horror, or disgust when the number—higher than last month's—settles into place. I put effort into getting it that high. I know I know I know. So I only feel slightly slimy. Slightly.

Dr. Mason purses her lips again. A permanent pucker.

“That’s good, right?” I ask. “Up from last time?”

“We’ve spoken with your parents, Indie—”

“What?” I can’t keep the sharpness from my voice. “You spoke with my *parents*?”

“Yes.” Dr. Mason’s voice is stern.

“I’m an adult. You had no right to do that.”

“We told them if your weight continues to drop that we think outpatient care might be the best solution,” she continues, ignoring me. “And Adams is not equipped to facilitate that.”

“*Solution* implies *problem*. I gained weight. What’s the issue?”

She stares at me. I wonder if the wrinkles surrounding her lips remain when she stops pursing them. I wouldn’t know.

She doesn’t see Indie the Incredible. She just sees Indie the Anorexic.

I hate these visits.

“If your weight drops below 110, we’ll have no choice.”

“My parents said they wouldn’t take me, right?” I want to laugh. She made a similar threat at the 115 mark, last month. Lo and behold, how the bar lowers when parents enter the equation. Literally.

“This is serious, Indie. If you drop below 110, that’s it.”

“That’s what?” I scoff. “I’m an adult. You can’t make me do anything. Neither can my parents.”

“You fainted twice last week, Indie. Your blood pressure is dangerously low. Your creatinine is too high. I’m willing to bet if we did an EKG we’d see an arrhythmia as well, wouldn’t we? When was your last period?”

“Two weeks ago,” I lie. I’ve never gotten my period. Just another upside. “And I didn’t *faint*. I just got dizzy.”

Dr. Mason’s lips form a flat line. A mix-up of their usual sphincter-like appearance.

“Can I go?” I ask. “Understood. Not below 110. Though my parents won’t want me back then either, promise. I’m nobody’s problem but my own.”

“We need to get some blood.” Dr. Mason sighs. “See Becky out front to schedule your next check-in.”

“Do I really need another? We just have this same conversation every time.”

“See Becky.”

I see Becky.

Then, rehearsal.

“Indie!” Rose jogs across the stage to me, all straight white teeth and auburn balayage and designer everything. She doesn’t hug me. I don’t know when we stopped hugging.

“Hey.” I sag to the stage, trying to catch my breath. I bend and pretend that it’s a stretch rather than saving myself from

the poprock-static going off in my vision.

Rose is not fooled. “When did you last eat?” she asks.

I do not like this question.

My system is simple: if people are around, I eat. If no people are around, I don't. After an accidental three-day fast in October when I was feeling reclusive and ended up going into hypoglycemic shock while alone in my room—Indie the Impressive—the system has been appended to allow for a protein bar in place of meals missed. Each one is 180 calories. A perfect day is a 2-bar, no-meal day. Another exception has been made for my multi-vitamins—85 calories, gummies non-negotiable—because I'm not actually trying to die, and I don't like my hair falling out. A final exception for coffee creamer. Because 35 calories from a sweet and creamy coffee that won't burn a hole in my esophagus is a fantastic replacement for a 400-calorie meal.

I used to eat a lot more. Cam and Rose and I ate lunch together every day, and usually dinner as well. Dinners faded out when I caught feelings for Cam and suddenly Rose had equestrian team practice and Cam had rowing and show choir and girlfriends and I had dishes to wash. Lunches faded out when I graduated and started working in the kitchen rather than eating them in the cafeteria. Even on the days when I could eat with Cam and Rose now, it seems like she's been busy with things like Honor Society and ASB and avoiding me.

“I had a doctor's appointment over lunch,” I sigh.

Rose's eyes narrow. She's one of those people who still thinks it's cool to have doctor's appointments with mysterious causes that pull you from class in front of everybody. I used to be the same way, until I realized that nobody actually cared if I was starving myself and still fat. It's only now that I'm skinny that it looks like I'm doing it for attention, when I no longer am. Indie the Ironic.

Rose is not a fan. She's always been the best of us. Smaller, smarter, younger, more desirable. Me getting skinny threw a wrench in our dynamic. She thinks the cotton gauze taped to the inside of my elbow is a cry for attention. Attention she'd rather have on her.

We got voted 'Dynamic Duo' for the yearbook before I graduated last year, but something tells me that once the wheels of her dad's private plane touch down in California this fall for her to attend Stanford, we won't be friends anymore. I'm still not sure how I feel about that.

Once rehearsal is under way, I find I don't much care.

I sit up in the booth with my headset on, my reading light clamped to the bible in front of me. My cues are in tidy lines in the margins of my massive script. I call the lights, the music, the curtains, watch the set pieces whirl around each other and come together, the same every time. The world dances to my commands, everything perfectly in place. I watch as Rose's Juliet and Cam's Romeo fall in love on stage.

When I was a student, I acted. It was so much easier than just being myself, showing people what they wanted to see,

playing my feelings by the book. I thought I wanted to be like Rose, pretty and desirable. Indie the Ingenue.

Now that I'm graduated, I get paid to stage manage instead, and it's even better. Nobody's eyes on me. In control of everything. Exhilarating and anonymous.

Rehearsal flies by. This is when I resent losing time. The show goes up in a few weeks, and when it ends, so will this last vestige of happiness. I don't let myself think about that. I call the show and clap at the end and flush when the director compliments the seamless transitions and well-timed cues. Stage-managing is hard, and even with my brain feeling like I've sent it through a blender, I'm good at it. I wish I could bottle the feeling to pull out at other times. Like when I have to look in a mirror.

We haze the freshmen after curfew.

I say we, but I mean Rose. She dresses them in taffeta and tiaras and feather boas and we all laugh while they perform showtunes in the woods behind Rose's dorm and silently thank the heavens that we aren't them.

We were them, once. The hazing is a long held Adams Academy tradition, passed from queen bee to queen bee over the generations. No freshman escapes unscathed—if you're privileged enough to be cast in a show your first year on the high school campus, you're going to pay for it. Can't let anybody's ego get ahead of them.

The smell of orange soda is cloying. I sip my vodka-water and try to pretend that my silence is mysterious and

sophisticated rather than exhausted and shy. An art I've perfected over the years of being Rose's number two.

I need to job hunt for next year. I need to eat. I desperately need to sleep.

I had some goldfish ahead of this, knowing I'd be drinking and not wanting to get completely obliterated. But vodka has calories, empty, useless calories, and how can I go back and put more in my body after wasting myself on poison and simple carbs instead? Indigo the Irrational. My stomach gnaws at itself. I pour gas on the fire with every sip of watered-down liquor.

The ick passes over me while I sit and try to keep things in focus. Drinking is never fun anymore. Not like it is for the others, stumbling around and kissing each other and pretending not to remember in the morning. Theatre kids, loud and proud and everything I wish I could stop caring long enough to be.

But I am Indigo the Incomprehensible. I play pretty and quiet and leave them wanting every time. So they won't find me wanting.

I find Rose in the crowd—she is laughing at something Cam said. Standing close to him. Watching a game of spin the bottle come into existence from the throbbing mess of adolescents.

She looks at me and something behind her eyes flickers. My summons.

The headrush is immediate and vicious when I stand. I try to save myself from the rolling blackness and wasp-like buzzing, but I'm drowning in it. I crouch, letting gravity force the blood to my brain if my body won't.

The dirt is cold and damp and I try to right myself, slowly, slowly, so slowly, fingertips dragging as I steady.

"Rose?" Cam's voice is laden with concern. I want to wave him away, but my weight is heavy on my hands, barely staying upright. Rose will be mad. I don't want him to see me weak. Problems problems problems, all I am is one big problem. I shouldn't have come. I'm not even a student anymore, it's weird for me to be hanging out with freshmen.

"I'm fine."

Cam's hands take mine and try to help me up, but my knees buckle and I sit in the dirt instead.

"Down we go!" Cam's eyes crinkle in his signature smile as he keeps hold of my hands and sits facing me. His teeth are blindingly white.

"Aww, is Indie being a messy drunk?" Rose's hand ruffles my hair. I lean against her and feel her shift away. She doesn't want me here. Neither of them do.

"I'm fine. Just dizzy. Go, play." I let go of Cam's hands and feebly shoo them both away. They go.

Originally, I starved myself because my stomach hurt and I was nauseous all the time and I thought that somebody would care and save me. Then I starved myself because people liked

me more the skinnier I got, and I thought that one of them would save me. Then I starved myself because for some reason, I couldn't stop, and I no longer wished for anybody to save me. Now I just starve myself. I don't have much desire to stop. And I know nobody will save me. Sometimes I think I might keep shrinking and shrinking and shrinking until I fold in on myself, entirely gone, and nobody will be any the wiser.

2

Maimed

LEON

I go harder on the homophobes.

I wouldn't admit it if Wilder put me in the hotseat. I'm *Leon Midas*, I'd say. Calmly, to let him know how moronic his line of inquiry was. *I treat all my students the same.*

I don't.

The homophobes lump themselves together. They're less common than they were when I was a student, but they're still around. Their packs form quickly. It's always like that—a common purpose builds the bond faster. It's exactly what my class is meant to provide, with practice missions and military training. For the homophobes, they settle for a common enemy rather than a shared purpose. Low-hanging fruit resulting in low-quality packs.

I take pleasure in splitting them up. In crafting missions centered around their weaknesses. In watching them fail.

I wonder, if I had been a teacher before the attack, would I have done the same? Has the pain made me petty? Cruel?

My cause is righteous. My methodology, not so much.

I watch Anderson and James grab an alpha three years their junior and slam him into the ground. One of them kneels on the soft part of his belly. The other pins his legs, bending his knees backwards.

I blow my whistle, my rage splitting the air with a painful shriek. “Anderson, James, drop and give me fifty burpees! Wilson, you ok?”

He knows better than to say no. They could have smashed his kneecaps and he’d try to get up and walk away. He looks around, embarrassed to have been so easily overcome, his sweaty brown hair falling in his eyes. Drake is already on his way over—eighteen years old, bronze skin and blonde hair, a fine Pack Alpha in the making. He kneels next to Wilson, a scrawny fifteen-year-old, making him stay down while he examines his knees. He lifts each leg, testing the range of motion, the flexion, massaging around the kneecap with delicate tenderness. Helps him to his feet slowly. Keeps their hands interlocked as Wilson finds his balance and tests weight bearing.

Last Tuesday, I caught them making out in the locker room after class. It made me smile. It made the place where the bond should be inside me ache.

Drake thought that his pack would be him and Morrison. A dynamic duo, inseparable since arriving on campus four years ago, bonded through dozens of missions and classes and mixers galore. Then Wilson stumbled along a few months back, scrawny and younger and bright eyed and bushy tailed. And here we are. He thinks that Drake hangs the stars. He reminds me of Risk.

Anderson and James finish their burpees and glare at me, removed from the action. Anderson's birth pack is powerful. Allies of Eros Pack. My former pack. Me and Joshua. The legacy we were meant to uphold. The legacy we turned our backs on.

The field is whittled down now. Only a handful of alphas left standing.

This game is my reward for my early morning bootcampers after a hard work-out—flag football, minus the football. Like capture the flag, but every member of the opposite team is wearing a flag, and victory is won by tearing them all off and putting the entire opposing team out of commission. A good way to build camaraderie, test team configurations ahead of missions, let them blow off some steam, and subtly work on their agility at the same time.

The games can get a little physical—they are hormonal teenage alphas after all—but brutalizing members of the other team is forbidden, no matter their personal proclivities. It's a bitter thing, knowing that not only are there still homophobes

at the Complex, but they still feel brash enough to pull shit like this.

Anderson and James will whine about my punishing them later on. But we all know that if Wilson wasn't mooning around after Drake all the time, he'd have been spared their violence. And *that* boils my blood.

I blow my whistle when Drake and Wilson's team wins. I try not to smile too broadly.

"Ok gents," I boom, "drop your flags in the bag and hit the showers. Don't go scaring any omegas off with your BO, you hear me?"

The laughter is raucous. I shouldn't let twits like Anderson and James bother me—the other boys are ragging on each other, smiling and stumbling back to the locker rooms, the picture of good sportsmanship. They're always sore after the workouts I put them through—that's the point, and the easygoing friendships that result are plentiful. It's just a few bad seeds. I watch Anderson and James drop their flags on the field, fifteen feet away from the bag I indicated they should put them in.

I'm about to call after them and issue them both detentions, but then I decide to be petty instead. I'll just have the detention slips delivered to them. Hopefully in front of an omega they're trying to impress. Serves them right. My pleasure lasts about as long as it takes me to fuck up retrieving the flags.

It's the type of thing I wouldn't have thought about before. I'm standing closer to the bag, so I would have just grabbed it

with one hand, then bent over and picked up the flags with the other. Tossed them inside without a care, end of story.

I pick up the bag first, then arrive at the first flag and realize my error when I reach for it with what is *supposed* to be my left hand. For a moment I could have sworn I felt the electrical impulse in my fingers. The nerves carried it all the way down my arm, but then there's nothing but puckered, angry red skin in a stump where my hand should be. Bitterness pricks at my throat.

I set the bag on the ground and pick up the flag with my right hand instead. My only hand. The nylon bag is soft and floppy and I can't get the opening figured out with only one hand, already holding a flag. I put the flag under my chin and pin it against my chest, then try to get the bag open with *all* of my right hand, trying to avoid using the stump. No dice.

I look up, embarrassed by this. No kids have fucked around like this before—they always put the flags back in the bag, so all I have to do is pick it up and cart it back to the supply closet in the locker room. A one-hand job. Thankfully, nobody is watching.

I reach out with the stump and grimace when the soft cotton of my tucked in shirt-sleeve rubs against the raw skin. I need to take better care of it. I can't bring myself to look at it.

Eventually my right hand gets the opening managed, hooking it over my stump while I bend to keep the weight of the rest of the flags on the ground and place the flag inside. I

carry the whole deal over to the other flag and repeat, quicker this time.

I'm frustrated now—I fucking hate feeling deficient. Slow, incapable, and easily derailed by two twerps *littering*.

The locker room is emptying out when I arrive. Drake is hanging back, keeping an eye out while Wilson gets dressed.

“Drake. My office. Now.”

I don't know why I issue the order, but he nods immediately and says “Yes, Sir!” as I pass him to drop the flags in the closet.

He's still with Wilson when I come back, and that makes me smile. He won't waste time waiting in a hallway if it means putting his packmate at risk. His priorities are spot-on.

He follows me out of the locker room and into my office across the hall. As soon as the door to my office shuts behind him, he's turning, wanting to keep an eye on the door to the locker room. Wanting to keep his packmate safe.

“Don't worry, I'll watch the door,” I reassure him. “I won't keep you long.”

“Thank you, Sir.” He looks slightly chagrined as he turns back to me.

“That the first time they ganged up on Wilson like that?”

Drake's eyes are cautious—the teachers usually stay out of drama like this. We keep an eagle eye on all the students to keep things from going off the rails, of course, but rarely do

we get involved. It's better for the boys to figure shit out on their own. It's how strong packs get made. I don't know why I'm butting in.

“No, Sir,” he replies, voice tight.

I evaluate him. He's angry, but not at me. At the assholes picking on his packmate. Maybe that's why I'm interfering. It feels good to actually watch a Pack Alpha care for his pack. I wipe the bitter thought away. “Are you bonded yet?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Not fully. Brian and I were starting to wonder if maybe we weren't meant to bond. When we met Jake, we got it. It only took like two months to start having flashes. All three of us.”

I smile, nodding along as he speaks. Sounds about right. Pack bonds form slowly, little sparks of sensation growing and deepening to become the open flow of sensory input and emotions and consciousness that is a true bond. When there's resistance or a bond isn't forming, it usually means things aren't quite finished yet. Somebody else is going to come along and spin something new up.

It happened to Midas too—we thought we were complete, Hollis and Joshua and I. For months, nothing. And then, bam. Risk. It took two weeks after our first mission stuck with him for the flashes to start. An unheard of timeline, but that's just Risk for you. Everything at the speed of light. Everything intense. I'm struck by the memory of those first flashes, of feeling feelings that weren't *mine*. The foreign loveliness of it, of *knowing* them.

“Jake Drake,” I have to smile. “He happy about the rhyme?”

“Yeah,” Drake smiles. “We joke about it already. He prefers it to Wilson.”

I nod. “I have a handful of guys I spend an extra hour with after classes end on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Let him know he has an open offer to join us. I can teach him a little personal defense. It sounds like he’s in good hands with you and Morrison, but you shouldn’t have to guard him twenty-four seven. He’d probably appreciate feeling a little more independent.”

Drake’s eyes light up. “You mean it? He’d be thrilled. Brian has been teaching him a bit, but he’s embarrassed. He wants to impress us. He hates feeling like a burden—he doesn’t get that neither of us see him like that.”

His indulgent fondness reminds me of Hollis. In the before-times. Another bittersweet squeeze in my chest. “Tell him to meet here after classes end today. And Drake?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“He’s lucky to have you. You’re going to make a good Pack Alpha.”

“Thank you, Sir.” I can tell from his expression that he’s biting his cheek, trying to hold back his smile. The tick is so much like Joshua that I have to turn my face to hide my expression. The emptiness where the bond should be feels sharp inside me. If I move too quickly, something else in my

body might catch and tear on it, spilling my innards to a place where my pack should be instead.

My office is silent once he's gone. I look at the picture on my desk. My only personal effect in the sterile grey space. I reach for it with my left hand without thinking. Pain lances through my fingers. Or, where it *feels* like I still have fingers. I look at the space my hand would occupy and marvel at how empty space can send such confusing signals to my brain. I feel the urge to punch something.

I know I should do my physical therapy. I know I should clean the stump. Massage it with my fingers, to help with the sensitivity and break up the scar tissue, maybe prepare it for the possibility of a prosthetic once the swelling goes down.

I pick up the picture with my good hand and rub my thumb over it. We all beam at the camera, the sun in our eyes making us squint. Risk spent more time in the ocean than the rest of us combined on that trip, and his hair was a perpetual crust of salt and sand. I can see the grit of it in his messy chestnut waves. He looks so goddamn happy.

I remember the way Joshua smelled when he threw his arm over me for the picture—fresh rain and sun-soaked sand and an undertone of mint from the mojitos he sipped all day. His cheeks and nose are pink and freckled in the photo—his alabaster skin burns so fast. We all took turns slathering him in sunscreen, but there's only so much that SPF can do in the absence of *any* melanin.

And then Hollis. With Risk on his back, hand around Joshua's waist, eyes scrunched up with his perfect, glowing smile. High on life, high on us, letting his hair all the way down on *vacation*. We had joked about needing to get him away from his job ever since that trip. We only ever managed the occasional three-day weekend. He was married to the victory. This feeling, in the photograph? He thought he had to *earn* it. He thought simply *going* somewhere wouldn't give it back. I can't believe that though—his joy in this picture, it isn't because of some mission victory. It's *us*, purely *us*, Midas all the way down.

I can't look at myself in the picture. My body is a stranger's. No tattoos, muscles like a body builder, not an ounce of fat in sight. Two hands. Whole. I'm so *young*.

I should do my physical therapy. I should eat breakfast, before classes really start for the day. I should write up Anderson's and James's detention slips. I should start planning the next practice mission. Should should should.

I sit and stare at the picture, my eyes lingering on each happy smile, trying to find the us of now in the us of then.

3

Identifiable

INDIGO

I'm simultaneously standing on stage and sitting in the front row of the auditorium, looking up at myself.

The stage lights are hot, making me sweat. They cast shadows on my body. The overhang of my stomach. The flab on my arms. My double chin, jiggling as I speak my line. I can't hear anything; all I see is the unattractive angle of my too-big nose as I mouth the words.

Cam emerges from the wings right on cue, dressed to perfection as gallant Romeo. He crosses, about to speak his next line. Then he sees me.

He freezes. His face is a mask of revulsion. He's supposed to kiss me now. I stand there stupidly, waiting for it. Wanting it, in front of every single person in the audience. Sweat stains my dress. The fabric strains around the bulk of my arms and mid-section.

Cam turns away from me. He won't do it. He *can't* do it, can't stomach the thought of kissing me.

I watch my face. How will I react? As I wait, the me onstage grows heavier, my belly expanding until the mute button is unpressed and the sound of my dress ripping fills the auditorium, little buttons pinging off the set pieces as they go flying, unable to control my sagging fat any longer.

Up on stage, my newly naked, obese self turns and looks directly at me, smiling a grotesque smile, every inch and fold and roll of me undulating for the entire audience to see.

I wake with a violent shiver.

There's nothing new about the nightmare—the only time it changes is when we start a new show. I thought now that I'm not actually in the show, just assisting with it, they might stop. No dice. When we did *Mamma Mia* I was in a wetsuit, neoprene rending as my body expanded. During *Honk!* It was horrid green tights. Always something unflattering, until now. Juliet.

It's somehow worse when it's a beautiful gown that my body explodes.

I dress slowly, my numb fingers refusing to cooperate as I ask them to button buttons, zip zippers, and lace laces. I slide on leggings under my jeans, then a tank top, t-shirt, button-up, and sweater. Two pairs of socks this time. There is a lichen in my brain, mossy and tangled as I try to wake up.

I avoid looking in the mirror until the last possible second. I don't want to see myself—I never want to see myself. I know I should get rid of the mirror altogether, but the vindictive, cruel part of my brain won't let me.

Instead, I'm forced to stand before it, morning and night, examining and re-examining every little flaw until I'm able to reach the place of calm, cold detachment that feels safe again. This is when I feel best about my choices, and the shame from them is most distant.

You have to work double-hard when people knew you at your fattest. It's not enough to just get normal. You have to go out the other side, because their default mental image of you is fat. You have to provide more than just a new you. You have to provide a contrast. An opposite.

The fat hanging beneath my arms, below my chin, in my cheeks, the pooch at the bottom of my stomach, and curve on the inside of my thighs, the hint of cellulite in my ass. My hips, wider than they should be, my breasts pendulous and heavy and disgusting.

Every bite in front of my mouth is a decision—do I want to continue hating myself, or do I want to be beautiful? Healthy? Happy? Desirable?

Not romantically—I've given up on that altogether. Nobody would ever want somebody that looks like me, I've come to terms with that, even as my crush on Cam beats like a second heart within me. But my family. I understand why they made

the decision they did. I still feel a little residual anger over it, but with age and hindsight I get it.

I had hoped that they'd surprise me and come for graduation in June. Watch me in my billowing gown, long and lithe and perfect, everything they wanted and missed out on watching me become.

They didn't, of course. I was foolish to think I could be perfect. I know that now.



Fridays mean half-days and rehearsal all afternoon, so I get the rare treat of a lunch with Cam.

He's used to my neuroses about food, so even though it rained last night and the grass is wet, we head out to the hillside overlooking the gifted campus athletics field to eat. I don't like being in closed spaces where I can hear people chewing, and I don't like eating in big groups, and I don't like feeling like anybody is watching me. Cam, angel that he is, doesn't complain, bundling up and walking with me to our usual spot.

We have a view of one of the strange PE classes that the boys on the gifted campus do—we know the school is co-ed, but these classes are always just guys. They look more like military bootcamp than PE, complete with olive green t-shirts and shorts and shrill whistle blows sending them from drill to drill.

Rose joins us a few minutes later, lips pressed into a thin line when she sees me sitting next to Cam. I scooch away from him, making room for her in the middle, but she heads to his other side instead.

Cam has a sandwich, clementine, and bag of chips, typical cafeteria bag-lunch fare. Rose has a protein bar. I have nothing. She glares at me when she sees this—I did mean to pack something, but I considered it a victory that I even made my coffee before staggering out the door to work this morning.

“I heard Gavin and Ben hooked up last night,” Rose says as she peels her bar open.

“Oh?” Cam says.

“Yeah. Finally, right?” Rose smirks. Everybody knows Ben is gay, except Ben. Everybody also knows that Ben realizing Ben is gay is something that should happen on Ben’s timeline. Everybody except Rose, that is.

That’s when I smell it—something acrid and strange and chemical. I sniff the air.

“What?” Rose asks.

“Do you smell that?” I ask.

“What’s going on down there?” Cam asks, pointing down at the field. The class of gifted guys had been doing a circuit of drills; wind sprints, burpees, and flipping massive rubber tires up and down the field. Now they’re all standing still, alert, heads flipping around as though looking for something.

“They’re probably smelling it too,” I say.

“Smelling what?” Rose asks, irritated now.

“Do you not smell it?” I sniff again. It’s a flat, foamy smell—a freshly unpackaged mattress or an office storage closet with paper and pens and printer cartridges.

Cam sniffs the air, and the sight of him lifting his nose and exposing his neck makes me want to lean in and kiss it. The instinct is so sudden that I jerk back. His eyes lock on mine, and for a breath I could swear he’s thinking the same thing. I watch his pupils dilate, his cheeks and lips flushing pink, perfectly kissable.

“Indie, what the fuck?” Rose says. “You are acting beyond strange.”

My eyes are fixed on Cam’s neck though—I am hyper-aware of the stirrings of spring, the fresh-cut grass and crocuses and daffodils and something else sweet I don’t quite recognize. But the plastic chemical smell is overpowering it all, and why does it feel like it’s coming from *him*?

I want to lean in and smell him, but that’s insane. Usually I can barely hug Cam, and now something in me is rising that wants to straddle his lap and nuzzle his neck and have him *hold* me.

“Ok, actually though, what the fuck,” Rose murmurs, eyes fixed down on the field again. The teacher—trainer?—is a giant blonde man, and he looks more frantic than any of the students, his head whipping left and right, searching for *something* none of them can seem to find. It makes me antsy, like I want to scan my surroundings for danger.

“Indie, are you ok?” Cam’s brow furrows with concern. I want to reach out and smooth his worries away with my thumb. I want to cup his face and pull it to mine. He bites his lip and before I know it, I’m shifting my weight, getting ready to throw away years of masking and disguising my feelings for him because the need to kiss him, to gently brush the lip he’s holding between his teeth and show him every inch of tenderness inside me, is just too strong. He’s leaning towards me too—does he want this as badly as I do?

But then his attention zeroes in on something below.

“What the...” he trails off.

My heart thuds in my chest, humiliation coursing through my veins at what I was just about to do. What is wrong with me? Did I think I was just going to *kiss* him? Out here? In broad daylight, at lunch, in front of Rose, in front of anybody who might walk by and see him rejecting me? Was I really about to ruin our friendship, one of my few anchors to this planet it sometimes seems, because he was *biting his lip*?

“Indie.” Cam’s voice is more insistent, and I yank myself from my pity party to look at what he is.

And what I see is terrifying.

On the field below, the class has found what they were looking for before. Now they stare at it intently: us.

“Ok, that is creepy,” Cam breathes.

They’re so far away that I can barely make their faces out, but I can *feel* the weight of their attention like a red laser beam

on my chest. And somehow, I know—it isn't Cam, or Rose, or the three of us that they're looking at. It's me.

A single moment of stillness, and then there's no other word for it: they *stampede*.

Every single guy is suddenly sprinting, full bore, across the field and up the steep grass hill towards us. Their instructor is a single moment behind them, blowing his whistle frantically as he sprints to catch up.

He's faster than the rest of them, and as we watch, holding our breath, he breaks out ahead of the pack, grabbing guys by the arm or elbow and tossing them backwards as he passes, making them tumble down the hill.

For a second, I think I must have made a mistake. I turn and look behind us, wondering what they're running towards.

"Uh, Indie?" Cam gets up, his half-peeled clementine falling on the grass and starting to roll away down the hill towards the approaching stampede.

"Oh, fuck this," Rose snorts, standing and brushing her uniform skirt down before wobbling up the grass hill in her Gucci sandals. Dress code has always been optional for her.

Cam pulls me up by my arm, taking a few big steps backwards while I lurch and stagger behind him, my headrush turning everything staticky. He gives up and turns to run in earnest.

I take a few steps, trying to ignore my dizziness, but then give up. I'm too weak. My heart is pounding erratically and

my vision is tunneling and a dull roar is roiling around me; whether it's the gym class stampede or the blood in my ears I can't really tell.

I'm sure they'll stop. What the hell do they have to run towards anyway?

As they get closer though, I see their faces. They are all bright red, wide eyes fixed on me, veins pulsing in their temples and foreheads and necks. The only one not looking like that is the teacher. His head is whipping back and forth, between me and the herd, as though gauging whether he'll truly beat them to me or not. He broke out pretty far ahead of them at first, but midway up the steep hill they started gaining on him. He's still ahead, but just barely.

When they're about ten feet from me and I can hear the seesawing raggedness of their breathing, I start to feel fear. They're not slowing down. They're going to mow me over and I'll be powerless to stop them. They'll break my bones, grind me to dust.

The teacher reaches me a millisecond before the first student, and I realize as he looms over me that he is a *giant*. I am five foot ten, and he must be nearly seven feet tall. For a breathless moment our eyes lock and I take in the vibrant green of his irises, then he bends over, hooks his arm behind my knees and at my low back, and lifts me.

"Hey!" I shriek, but he pays me no mind, lifting me like I'm nothing and continuing up the hill, away from his students, barely breaking his stride.

When he gets to the top of the hill he stops, shifting me awkwardly in his arms to bring his whistle to his lips. Then he blows. My eardrums split as the whistle pierces the air inches from my head.

“Hey!” he barks. His deep baritone voice makes me shudder.

Despite having just sprinted directly up an incredibly steep hill, his breathing is deep and steady. The boys we’re now facing aren’t quite as polished. Some of them bend at the knees and gasp, but others seem to be struggling to hold themselves back from us—from what? I wonder. Attacking us? Is that why he’s holding me? To keep them from assaulting me? But why?

“Back to the locker room. Shower, change, and every single one of you report to Darber for your detentions. NOW!”

One by one the guys turn and head back down the hill, some muttering apologies before breaking into a light trot. A few linger, their eyes still locked on me. They look... hungry. I shiver in the teacher’s arms, and watch as he stares each of them down, a penetrating weight in his gaze that bears no questioning. One by one the lingerers turn, ducking their heads and following their classmates back to the gifted complex.

Without another word, the teacher starts carrying me back down the hill, following them.

“Um, excuse me?” I ask. “Can you put me down?”

“No,” he grunts. I glare at him. His blonde hair is cropped short, his features chiseled. He has a nick on his chin from

shaving, and a spot he missed on his left cheek by his ear.

“Hey!” Cam’s voice from behind us sounds frail compared to the rumbly growl of the teacher, who completely ignores him, carting me down the hill, towards the gifted complex and the stampede of men that just tried to... what? Eat me? Kill me?

“Where are we going?” I ask, trying to hide my panic and failing. The teacher doesn’t answer. Cam stays at the top of the hill, watching us go. Rose is nowhere in sight. *Thanks guys*, I think to myself.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm down, and that is when I smell him. Cloves and cedar and something else that isn’t a smell so much as a feeling. My heart stops in my chest, my entire body stiffening as desire washes through me, making my abs clench and head buzz. It is one of the most intoxicating scents I have ever experienced, better than any Old Spice varietal or high-end cologne.

The way I felt before, when I was about to kiss Cam? Like a drop of water in the ocean of my wanting for this stranger who carries me like a child in his arms now. Like a pale ghost of the vibrant, electric lust that floods my body.

If I weren’t so weak, if my heart weren’t pounding so hard, if my head didn’t feel too heavy to lift, I’d be circling my arms around his neck, reaching up to press my head into the crook of his shoulder, rubbing myself there and feeling the balmy heat of his skin warming mine.

“What...” My voice trails off stupidly as I look at him and see him staring down at me with a mix of... what? His brow is furrowed and his green eyes are stormy with something I can't parse. The intensity of his eyes frightens me. I pale, clamping my mouth shut and trying not to breathe too hard. What the hell is going on?

4

Moonstruck

LEON

It was as normal a Friday as Fridays could get, in the aftermath.

I wasn't expecting fate to slap me in the fucking face.

Our routine had grown comfortable, if not pleasant. Me at the Complex, watching younger alphas have what we've since lost. Hollis at the Coalition, shuffling papers and taming his ego. Joshua surviving, subsisting, a pale shadow at home. And Risk in the woods, finding false solace in the numbness of routine.

The ache of my hand almost fades on days like today, when it's just class after class after class. Alphas repeating the exercises they already know, gossiping about forthcoming mission assignments or class finals or omegas that have caught their eye.

The ache where the bond should be never fades. Teaching helps distract me. I am more alive experiencing my students' lives vicariously than with my own pack. The anger at Hollis simmers constantly in the back of my mind, concentrating into something denser every day.

He wants to satisfy the Coalition. He's doing damage control. Like we're the problem. Like if we could just pull our shit together and see things his way, everything would be better. Funny how he wants us to think like him, but has closed the literal window into his brain that would make it possible.

Then I scent her that first time, and it's game-over. There's no politics in it, no redemption arc, no sense to the feelings she invokes in me. Just her, bergamot and black tea and springtime blooms. Fate.

She's light as a feather, a bag of bones in my arms, and she smells better than the best sex I've ever had.

Which is saying something, because I've had a lot of sex. All of it in the beforetimes, of course.

I was considered quite the catch back then. We all were. Midas Pack used to clean up. We could have had our choice of omegas on rotation, but we never indulged. We wanted our own, despite what the Coalition might think was best. We batted off their demands that we engage in the politics they'd created out of our base instincts.

It was easier to just go out to clubs in the city, pick up unsuspecting betas who didn't know what we were. Sometimes alone, but often as a group. Girls wondered how

they'd gotten so lucky, to have four dudes dotting on them for a night.

It never quite scratched the itch, but we all agreed on the omega front—not until we were ready to settle down.

Just wait till I tell Hollis I've met our fated mate. A teenager. A sick one, from the looks of her. He'll have an aneurysm.

Until he scents her.

I spare quick glances down at her, not letting my eyes linger too long. I don't want to make her spike worse. I don't want to pop a boner in the middle of campus, unable to hide it with both my arms occupied holding her.

She's skinny. Terrifyingly so, every bone visible under her skin, the cords of her wasted muscles stretched to fit her frame, visible where her baggy clothes gape away. Her eyes are liquid brown and massive, hiding beneath a sheaf of dark brown hair draped across her forehead. She doesn't reach to move it. She is pale, her lips chapped, her lashes long, and she has big purple circles under those perfect cocoa eyes.

Her scent changes me. There's no other way to describe it.

I've become accustomed to our forest. Hollis's pine, my cloves and cedar, Risk's woodsmoke and Joshua's petrichor always blend to feel like a cozy, rainy evening in. We mix in a way not many other packs do, and it definitely helped inflate our influence in the befores. A pack is stronger when they blend like that, and stronger packs go further when they have big ambitions. Hollis was always pleased by that.

Most omegas are sweet or fruity, and we've been tempted in the past by the appeal of peppermint or the toothache-inducing sugar rush of marshmallow. This one is different. She's bergamot, black tea, sweet pea and springtime blooms. Embracing the forest that we are, with a quiet promise that spring is coming. It always does, and we'll be around to see it, just like any other. *Hope*. The sun will rise, the night will pass, the storm will end.

It's an intoxicating feeling as I carry her to Wilder's office. I do my best to hold my breath, not wanting to get swept away by the hormone carnival going on in my body right now. I need to focus, if I'm going to face Wilder without further embarrassing myself.

My stump aches, and I inadvertently attempt to stretch my fingers before the signal fizzles out at the useless bundle of scar tissue capping my left arm, still pink and fresh and raw. I swallow, knowing I must look terrifying to the little one in my arms.

She's scented me by now, I can tell. And she's terrified out of her mind, not knowing what the fuck her body is doing, reacting to me like it is. I want to tell her, *don't worry, little bird. It's just me that makes you feel like that, other alphas won't be so bad.*

But what I mostly want to do is scream at Wilder. *What the fuck is a spiking omega doing at Adams? With no supervision, outside for every alpha and their Uncle in the vicinity to start rutting?*

My eyes are scanning the tree line as I make my way towards the admin offices. I know the Complex is safe. I know, I know, I know. I know Risk is out there, along with dozens of other alphas, as well as the electric fence and ground sensors. I don't need to worry.

Still, my heart thuds in my chest. A combination of PTSD and the dawning awareness of the precious little creature cradled in my arms. Shame twists in me as her scent washes over me again.

My mind flashes back to the smell of burnt sugar, the raw wet copper of blood, the whited-out terror, muted only by the screams of alphas dying. Of my pack, suffering. An inferno of pain where my hand used to be.

I shake my head and it jostles her. She lets out a little, "oh!" and I slow down, fighting to keep my arms from shaking. It's not because she's heavy—by god, she's anything but.

"Sorry," I mutter.

Going inside is a blur. Bare hallways and lockers and the musty scent of paper and batteries and school. I march straight past Bertha at the desk in the office, shouldering open Wilder's door and kicking it shut behind me. It slams, rattling the sconces on the wall and decorative bric-a-brac bullshit on his built-in bookshelves.

"Leon, what—" his voice breaks off as he catches sight of what I'm carrying. I watch his nostrils flare as he scents her, and if I didn't have her safely locked in my arms, I'd be over the desk, pinning him to the ground and baring my teeth and

growling my claim out over his throat. He quickly schools his features into something more acceptable.

I set her down and she lands unsteady on her feet, her hand shooting out to grab my arm, clinging to me for stability. I keep one arm around her waist, waiting until she lets go. I can tell she doesn't want to, and I don't want her to. She has no idea what her instincts are doing right now.

As she steps back, she catches sight of the sleeve tucked in on my left side, no hand in sight. Her eyes widen and she swallows, her little Adam's apple bobbing in her throat. Jesus Christ, I can see every fucking vertebra in her neck. My brow furrows and I have to avert my gaze, my right hand circling gently around the puckered scar tissue through the cotton tucked in at the end of my useless left arm.

"What is this?" Wilder has his headmaster voice on now, academic and arching and superior. I clench my remaining fist, irritation flashing.

"Do you know who she is?" I nod at her.

She has her arms wrapped around herself and she's shivering. I shrug out of my jacket and lay it over her shoulders, then turn back to Wilder.

He is looking between us, his mouth open but no words coming out. She tugs the jacket tight around her, dipping her nose and breathing in deeply when she thinks I'm not looking. I want to wrap my fucking arms around her instead of some useless coat, but that's going to have to wait.

“Wilder!” I bark. She jumps, and I mentally curse myself.

I’m all out of sorts, all my instincts off, warped by her intoxicating scent. If she keeps smelling this strongly, she can’t be more than a day or so out from her heat. I try not to think that, try not to feel the sensations it brings up in my body.

“She was up at Adams.” I grit my teeth when it becomes clear he isn’t following me. “On the hillside, overlooking the field. The breeze caught her scent and my class went into a frenzy. I barely got to her first. That’s thirty rutting baby alphas, in case you’re not grasping the seriousness of what I’m saying here. What the *fuck* is an omega doing up at Adams? With no supervision?”

“Oh, like every single other unawakened omega up there you mean?” Wilder’s voice is caustic. He’s recovering quickly from his shock. I wonder what surprised him so much—my sudden appearance, her sudden appearance, the looks passing between us, her scent, or the fact that it appeared like a stiff breeze might blow her over and keep her down. She is seriously emaciated.

A protective instinct in me wants to find food for her, guard her while she eats it, but I shake it off. *Focus, Leon.*

“She’s clearly not unawakened anymore.” I turn to her, taking in the sharp angle of her shoulders and cheeks. “How old are you, little bird?” I use the nickname before thinking and watch Wilder’s brow shoot up when I do.

She turns to me, eyes wide. “Nineteen.”

Now that we're not mid-crisis, I have time to appreciate her voice. Young, but deep. Complicated, like her scent.

"Well, there's your answer." Wilder sits back down. I hadn't realized he had flown to his feet when I barged in. "Docs probably thought she was a beta. You have your period, girl?"

"Excuse me?" Anger flashes in her eyes and I can't help a swell of pride in my chest. She might be small, but she is mighty.

"What's your name?" I ask, forcing my voice to be gentle even as I glare daggers at Wilder. Her eyes linger on him a little longer before turning to me.

"Indie. Indigo."

"Indigo," I breathe. A beautiful name for a beautiful girl. And she is beautiful, in a tragic, starved way. I want to feed her, watch her fill out and glow. I can tell she will, with a little love. She's already sparking as it is, something vibrant and bright within her. *Focus, Leon.*

"I'm sorry for my colleague's *very* rude question, Indigo," I continue. "This is a very... unusual circumstance."

The phone on Wilder's desk rings, making Indigo jump. Again. She's a flighty one. *A little blue jay*, I half-smile to myself. *My little blue bird.*

Wilder glares at both of us, holding up a finger telling us to wait as he picks up the receiver.

"Headmaster Wilder, is this an emergency?" He cocks his head, raising a brow and looking straight at Indigo as he

listens. “Mmhm, yes, I believe we’re one step ahead of you. She’s standing in my office right now, actually. Oh? That sounds like something you can handle,” his voice drips condescension. “Yes, ok. Ok. Yes. We’ll send someone to collect her things. Obviously. Of course. Goodbye.”

He hangs the phone up, then looks at me, ignoring Indigo completely. “That was Diana Mason, telling me one of her anorexic betas just blew her hormone panel off the charts. Indigo Wolfe. A middle school recruit who tested likely but never manifested. Graduated last summer but stuck around for her gap year. Good thing too, I suppose. Probably starved off her own puberty.” He turns and assesses Indigo, looking down his nose at her.

I want to clock him for speaking so cruelly. So she *is* sick. Very sick, if her shivering, bony frame is any indication. And he has no right to be so crass when discussing her condition.

Anorexia.

“What were you saying about my things?” Indigo asks, ignoring the comment about her weight and puberty entirely. I’m impressed. And concerned.

“We’ll send somebody to collect them for you. Leon here can show you to your dorm.”

“I live in East House, up on main campus.”

“Not anymore.”

Indigo swallows. “I didn’t agree to move.”

“Your consent isn’t necessary.”

“Ok, enough.” I raise a hand, stopping Wilder from spewing any more bullshit. “Indigo, I’m so sorry. This must be overwhelming. Would you mind taking a seat outside and allowing me to chat with Headmaster Wilder here for just a moment? I’ll be right out to explain everything. I’m sure you have a lot of questions. The lady at the desk is called Bertha; she can get you a bottle of water or some tea.”

Indigo looks between Wilder and I. For a moment I think she might snap back at me like she did at him, but I suppose some part of the last twenty minutes has given me a modicum of trust in her book, though I can’t imagine why. She nods slightly and turns to leave. She has to use her entire bodyweight to heave the heavy oak door, and I lurch to grab it when she struggles to get it all the way open. It flies open under my hand—her struggle made me think I’d need to use more force than I actually did. I bite my lip. She really is weak.

She nestles herself into one of the leather chairs in the waiting area, drawing her knees up to her chest. How she does that and still fits in the chair, I have no idea. I nod at Bertha, who immediately gets up and offers her water. I wait until Indigo accepts, watching her take a ginger sip before stepping back into Wilder’s office.

“Are you *trying* to scare her shitless?” I seethe the moment the door closes. I don’t want Indigo to hear me yelling, not when we first meet. Not when I want forever with her. *Focus, Leon.*

“She’s just another omega,” Wilder waves his hand dismissively.

“No, she isn’t.”

“Get some food in her and take her to the dorms,” he continues like he didn’t even hear me. “We’ll get her weighed and set up a feeding tube or something. Diana said they had a rough appointment yesterday—apparently she’s quite belligerent, but her parents signed the omega agreement, so the timing is actually ideal. She’s ours to do with as we please. We’ll get her weight back up and she’ll probably have her first heat in the next few weeks.”

A muscle in my jaw flexes. So, she’s a ward. A ward he’s planning on force-feeding and pressing into service without any education or awareness of who or what she is.

“Are you joking?” I ask, struggling to keep my voice calm.

He raises a brow, not speaking. Like he’s waiting for me to continue.

“She’s scared, sick, and alone, and you want to force-feed her and then leave her at the mercy of a group of alphas she will no doubt think is fucking *raping* her?”

“She’ll be in heat, she’ll want it.”

I see red. I want to climb over the desk in front of me and piece Wilder apart, watch him scream and cry and cower as I dominate him, send him groveling to the floor. I’m suddenly grateful for the lack of bond. Risk would already be here, knife in hand. Hollis’s disapproval would be deafening. But I’m

Leon. I'm not the one who gets violent urges. Who he has to worry about.

"She has no idea what she is." I force my voice to remain even. "She hasn't had the *years* of education that the other omegas get."

"She'll get a crash course. We have great teachers here. Why are you so bent out of shape about this?"

"Outside of the fact that you're talking about ruining her life?" I fume.

Because she's mine.

I almost say the words. I come so close to letting them slip that my mouth is open, the air passing through my vocal cords, my lips parting with the concussive force of the letter *B*.

Then I stop.

She has no idea what she is. She isn't a part of our world. She is sick, and young, and if her parents signed the omega agreement, *alone*. Ripping her from her life and then staking a claim on her in the next breath? I can't picture a way that would go well.

Plus, she's not mine. She's *ours*. And we are a sorry excuse for a pack right now.

Not to mention, Wilder could block me from seeing her, if I admit to it. A fated mate bond is nothing to be messed with, but with his middling dominance and small-mindedness, an alpha like Wilder would jump at the opportunity to step on

Midas Pack, golden boys of the Coalition. Well, *former* golden boys.

“She’s an omega, Leon.” Wilder fills my silence. “It isn’t *ruining her life*. God. Why are you so dramatic?”

“I like to think of it as empathetic.”

He cocks a brow at me. “You think she’s cute, don’t you? Her scent got you a little muddled, Midas?”

I bury the snarl in my chest. “Just being a decent person.”

“Good,” he barks a laugh. “Don’t get any ideas. She’ll be in heat long before Midas Pack gets back on the pack list.”

“What? We’re at the top of the list. Have been for years.”

“After everything that’s happened, you can’t seriously think the Coalition would grant you an omega,” Wilder scoffs. His eyes flash to my stump. I cross my arms, hiding it from sight. “You’ve been off the list since you were all demoted. Didn’t you notice you haven’t been sent any heat-sheets?”

I haven’t. Been too busy keeping Joshua from developing bed sores and Risk from OD-ing. On second thought, I guess I can understand losing our spot on the list. Dread pits my stomach. Indie can’t go to another pack. She just can’t. I school my features into passivity. Wilder can’t know.

“I’ve been busy trying to do right by the students,” I say through gritted teeth. “Of which she is now one.”

“Look, just keep your cool, take her to her room, answer her questions, and keep your hands to yourself.”

“Unlike the alphas you’re going to fucking sell her off to?” I growl. I can’t help it.

“I can find someone else...”

“I’ll do it. And Wilder, by God, if you try to force-feed her or rush her into heat before she’s ready, I will *ruin* you.” I have more dominance than him and we both know it. He’s gotten a bit big for his britches since the... whatever. He thinks he has something on me, but it isn’t true. Even down a hand, I’ll fucking piece him apart.

“What, did you think we’re going to *suppress* her? We can’t risk her tossing her dinner, Leon, she doesn’t have the calories to spare. We’ll find a good pack for her; she’ll be fine.”

“No.”

I didn’t mean to say it out loud, but I’m out the door before he has a chance to argue, his startled face freeze-framed in my mind.

Indigo is still curled up in the chair in the waiting room.

“Are you ready, Indigo?” I ask, my voice softening at the sight of her. Wilder may be a jackass, but she doesn’t need to feel my rage right now. She needs softness, sweetness, slow movements and kind words.

“It’s just Indie,” she corrects me.

“Indie,” I say. I can’t stop my voice from caressing the word. Indie Midas. A chill goes through me. “You ready?” I fight to stay calm. *Focus, Leon.*

“For what?” she asks.

“We’re going to go to your new dorm. I’ll answer your questions on the way, I’m sure you have many.”

“Yeah, like what the fuck?”

Her sudden snark makes me crack a smile, and I can see that only pisses her off more. I do my best to bite it back and fail.

“I’d be pissed too,” I raise my hands in surrender. Hand. Fuck. Her eyes lock on the stump. I drop my arms. “Everything will make a lot more sense in a day or two. Give me a chance to explain?”

“You’ve made a mistake. All of you. And I’m going to miss rehearsal if I don’t get back to campus. Dr. Mason clearly got my blood mixed up or something, and that asshole is not *tossing* my room. Take me back.”

She is still pretzeled into the chair when she makes the demand, her folded body in stark contrast to the order. Her scent has calmed now but is still a mainline of euphoria straight to my chest. Her anger turns the sweet pea almost peppery. Risk is going to fucking adore her.

“I’m sorry, Indie,” I say. “I can’t take you back. I can explain why as we walk.”

She glares at me for a moment, then at the door to Wilder’s office, as though remembering how comparatively horribly he treated her. Then she nods.

“Ok. This way then.”

She gets to her feet, clinging to the chair for a moment. She has a headrush, I can tell. I instinctively move to her, but one of her hands flies out to stop me.

“I’m fine,” she says through gritted teeth. “No need to carry me again.”

“I was just going to offer you my arm for balance,” I hold out my left arm without thinking, and she looks at the stump where my hand should be, then raises a brow. I move to swap arms, but before I can, her little hand darts out and rests on my forearm, a few inches above the stump. I have a long-sleeved t-shirt on, tucked in on itself to hide the scar tissue, but still. I don’t think anybody has touched me like that, not since the attack.

I realize when her frail hand rests on my arm just how painful the stump is. It throbs, every heartbeat pulsing with pain.

Today was technically supposed to be my first day cleared for duty. According to the Coalition assignment, Monday was supposed to be my first day on the job. I started two weeks ago anyway. Being around the house right now, watching Hollis mope and Joshua suffer and Risk self-destruct, I just couldn’t do it.

I’d been trying to be careful with the surgery site, but sprinting full-bore up that hill was more cardio than I’d done since everything went down.

Indie seems ok as I guide her outside, looking around us at the buildings and scenery and passing alphas.

“Ok,” she says once we’re out of the stuffy admin building, clearly more comfortable in the open air. “First question; what happened to your hand?”

I can’t help but laugh.

“What?” She asks.

“You’ve just been stampeded, forcefully relocated, given a boatload of bad news, and you’re going to ask about *me*?”

She shrugs. “I’m curious.” She’s also breathing hard, and we’ve walked maybe fifty yards total. I subtly slow my pace down so she won’t be self-conscious.

“What if I was just born without one?” I counter.

“You think you still have the hand. You keep reaching for things and then having to swap.”

I sigh. “I’m not ready to talk about it.” I try to be honest. “It was recent.”

“How recent?”

“Six weeks as of yesterday.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh. Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

We walk in silence.

The cafeteria is loud. Lunch has started, and I don’t want Indie to get overwhelmed by the masses of show-off alphas and over-eager omegas, so I take us around back instead. Her spike is fading quickly, but she’s still strong enough that she might cause a stir if she went in. I leave her standing outside

for a moment, running into the kitchen and scraping together a bag of snacks. Fruit, protein bars, apple sauce, crackers. Simple, small things. I put them in a bag so Indigo won't be able to see what they are, then re-emerge. She's leaning against the wall outside, like she couldn't manage to stay upright without support.

I breathe in her scent, taking as much as I can while I can. She's still pungent and addictive.

We don't speak, heading all the way to the omega dorms in silence. Her breathing gets heavier and her scent stronger as she starts to sweat. By the time we make it to the squat brick building that comprises the omega dorm, I'm moving so slowly I feel like I'm practically standing still, and Indie is gasping for air, making a valiant effort to hide her exertion from me. I want to pick her up and carry her. I want to make her rest. I open the metal door instead. The dorm minder is expecting us and waves me by, so I take her down the hall to the first blank door—all the girls have nametags on theirs, so it's obvious which rooms are available.

I make sure to choose a forest-side room. One side of the building looks out on the manicured center of campus, the other on the woods. Somehow, I just know that my little bird will crave the woods.

The room is cozy, with the typical bed, desk, and dresser. Large windows with a deep-set sill show the verdant dark trees. The sill is wide enough that Indie might just be able to sit up there. I imagine what she would look like in profile, her

head turned away from me, taking in the peaceful view in quiet wonder.

“A queen-sized bed?” Indigo asks.

“For nesting,” I offer, leaving my fantasy behind to turn back to her.

“Nesting...”

“Yeah,” I hesitate, realizing she has no idea what that is. What *any* of this is. She must be so confused, and I have no idea where to start explaining it all to her. “We’ll get you linens, and your stuff will be brought down for you from Adams.”

“So, this *isn’t* Adams. And I *am* being kidnapped.”

I grin wryly. “Not exactly. Your parents actually agreed for you to come here. A long time ago.”

Her brow furrows. “Ok. Explain. SO much explanation required.”

“Where should I start?” I ask.

“How about what the fuck happened just now? The hill? That asshole?”

I bite back my smile. At least her read on Wilder matches mine.

“What happened on the hill is called a spike. And the beginnings of a rut.”

She looks at me, confused.

“Ok, let me go further back,” I start again. “When did you first come to Adams?”

“When I was eleven.”

I nod. That makes sense—she probably pre-tested, they got her parents to sign the agreement, and then she never manifested. If things had gone according to plan, she would have landed here years ago. Only dumb luck had her still on campus instead of somewhere out in the world, alone for her first spike. I shudder at the thought.

“Was your arrival a little sudden?” I prompt.

“Yeah.”

I watch something happen behind her eyes. A flicker of a memory, maybe. Not a good one. I can guess what it is—so many unsuspecting beta parents are terrified by the omega crash-course they receive when the Adams reps come to visit. They hear things like *heat* and *knot* and *alpha* and sign off their custodial rights, right below the line with the dollar sign and all the zeros. Indie made her parents very, very wealthy today, and she has no idea.

“It’s fine,” Indie waves her hand absently. I hadn’t realized I was making a face.

My eyes narrow. She’s too used to doing that—waving away her own discomfort. I wonder if her parents abandoning her was a trigger for her eating disorder. The thought makes me even madder. They probably wouldn’t care. Probably signed the contract so fast they smeared the ink. The anger surges in

me, irrational and outsized in the face of my omega, sick. *Mine.*

“What does that have to do with today though?” she prompts. I snap back to the present.

“Well, you were sent to Adams because you took a blood test that showed you might manifest a secondary sex outside of the norm.”

“Secondary sex?”

I wish Joshua were here. He’s always been the patient one of us, soft and analytical and able to explain things simply and effectively. I wonder if telling him I’ve met our fated mate would get him out of bed. Or if it would just send him into an even deeper spiral, feeling unworthy of her.

“There are two primary sexes,” I begin. “Then three secondary sexes, two each for men and women.”

“I don’t get it.”

“So, you’re generally assigned male or female at birth, or a tiny minority of people that are intersex, correct?”

“Unrelated to gender.” Indie’s tone is ready for a fight on this, but I just nod.

“Yes,” I agree. “Unrelated to gender. This is just sex as assigned at birth. On top of just X and Y chromosomes, everybody has a secondary sex as well. We call them alpha, beta, or omega. The vast majority of the population is beta, but a small minority of people assigned male at birth can be

alphas, and an even smaller minority of people assigned female at birth can be omegas.”

“Are you serious?” Indie’s tone is disbelieving.

“Yes. Secondary sex characteristics dictate a lot of our physiology.”

“Like what?”

“Scent glands, intelligence, physical strength.” *Anatomy*, I don’t say. Not yet.

“Scent glands?”

I rub the back of my neck—if I try and get into anything technical, I’m gonna fuck it up and scare her more.

“Joshua would explain all this better.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. Just... what you need to know is this: alphas are bigger and smarter than beta males. More... virile. Omegas are far more intelligent than beta females, especially when it comes to interpersonal skills. They also tend to be smaller than beta females. And they have a killer nurturing instinct.”

“And I’m an omega,” Indie says slowly.

I nod.

“But I’m not small.”

“You are,” I laugh.

“I’m not *short*,” she sighs, exasperated. I wonder how frequently people comment on her weight. I resolve not to,

whenever possible.

“No, you’re not,” I agree. “It’s no surprise they missed you.”

“But I thought my blood test showed something?” Indie asked.

“It did,” I nod. “I’m not the best person to explain the testing. You can test as *likely* but not *guaranteed* to manifest a secondary sex other than beta. That’s what happened with you. Adams is built to keep an eye out for kids that come from beta families but might turn out to be omega.”

“Everybody at Adams is alpha or omega?”

“No,” I smile. “It’s still a snooty-ass regular boarding school. Everybody here at the Complex is though.”

“Oh.” I watch things click into place as she smiles at my remark. “So, they did want me here,” she laughs. It’s a bitter sound, not her real laugh, I can tell.

“When a potential omega is discovered, the school reaches out to the family and offers a scholarship to Adams, in return for a promise of guaranteed attendance to the Complex. A way to keep close those who might manifest.”

“Guaranteed attendance?” Indie asks.

“Yes,” I sigh. “In return for compensation.”

“So... you’re saying I was sold.”

“Kind of. But don’t panic, your life is still yours after...” *Fuck*. There’s no way in hell she’s ready for all this. “After a sort of graduation,” I finish lamely.

“But I have to be... here.”

“Yes.”

“And this isn't just a gifted school, is it?”

“Not at all. It's not even a school. Well, not *just* a school.”

“Ok, and what if I don't want to be here? What if I want to go back up to Adams and continue with my life, that I was very much enjoying?”

Was she enjoying her life? A quick glance at her collarbones practically poking through her skin and the jaundiced circles beneath her eyes tells me she wasn't. I sigh. “I'm sorry, little bird. You can't go back.”

“Why?” her voice is sharp.

“The Complex is designed for omega education. It will teach you what you need to know about your biology. How your brain works.”

“Ok, so what, I can't do both? Is it a full-time job learning what my body does? Seems to be working fine without intervention so far.”

“But it won't,” I say.

“What?”

“Well,” I begin. I don't know how to say it gently, so I just say it. “One of the main things that sets omegas and alphas apart from betas is their sexual development. Omegas don't get periods like beta women. They have heats instead.”

“Heats.”

“Yes.”

“Like a dog?”

I grimace. “Yes.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am completely serious.”

“*Heats?*”

“This is what the Complex is for,” I sigh. “*Normally*, you would have manifested when you were twelve or thirteen, maybe fourteen at the latest. It’s called pre-awakening, and it’s essentially the beginning of puberty. You come to the school, learn all about alphas and omegas and what is going on with your body and what to expect with your first heat. It gives you time to find a pack.”

”A *pack?*”

I laugh at the face she makes. “Yes.”

“Like... wolves?”

“Sort of.”

She’s speechless, her expression aghast.

I chuckle. “I’m part of a pack, you know. You don’t have to act so horrified.”

“You’re an alpha?”

I nod. “We’re called Midas Pack. There’s four of us.”

“Four of you? What, all alphas?”

I nod. She cocks her head, thinking. She clearly understands how heats work—it's always awkward when a beta-born omega arrives and doesn't even know what a heat is for other species, much less their own.

“I'm supposed to find a pack for my heat...” I watch her connect the dots. “Are you being serious right now? What is the pack for? To fucking... *breed* me, or something?”

I grimace. Her crash-course to omega-hood is not going well, and I have nobody but myself to blame.

“So, yes?” her voice is shrill, and I can sense I'm losing her.

“No! Or, at least, not necessarily. Your heat is... painful, if you don't have a pack to guide you through.”

“*Guide me through.*” Her expression is scathing.

“You'll see,” I sigh, my heart racing. I don't want to scare her off, and I can scent her fear, black tea becoming over-brewed and bitter. I can sense her panic coming on. Her face is going pale, her body hunching in on itself as she processes everything I've told her.

I bite the inside of my cheek, struggling to hold myself back from going to her. Taking her in my arms and soothing away the hurt. I want to purr for her. The rumble is deep in me, rolling against my insides, craving release.

“This is fucking stupid,” she finally mutters. “I'll pass. Can I go home now? I'm not gonna be a fucking omega, or whatever you think I am, so I'd prefer if you just let me be so I can get back to campus. I'm going to miss rehearsal.”

Something twists in my stomach. She has a whole life she'll be leaving behind. She's shaking now, unfurling her body from the bed.

“Indigo—Indie, you're not going to be able to go back up to Adams.”

“Yeah, thanks but I'm not going to accept that.”

She stands, her determination somewhat weakened as she hunches over with a white-knuckled grip on the bedpost, waiting for her dizziness to clear.

“Look, Indie,” I reach out and take her arm, feeling through her layers and my jacket just how thin she is. Jesus Christ.

“Please don't touch me,” she tries to pull away. God, she is so weak. I let go anyway, stepping back. It's more important now than ever to show her she still has her own autonomy. No matter what bullshit Wilder might spew. She turns to the door, still half-bent, a ghastly white cast to her features.

“Indie.” I let a tiny hint of dominance enter my voice. Not enough to truly compel her, but enough to get her to listen. To ground her to the moment she seems primed to fly away from. I hate myself for it, but she's going to pass out if she tries to run. She might pass out anyway—she's shaky as she turns to face me. “You are an omega. I'm so sorry that you found out so late, and that you have such a fantastic life back at Adams you'll be leaving behind, but it isn't safe for you to go back. And you won't want to, not once you've fully awakened.”

“It isn’t *safe*?” she picks up on the one part I wish she wouldn’t. Her body is searching for reasons to panic, to keep the adrenaline rushing. As soon as she lets go of panic, she’ll crash. The fear in her eyes tears a hole in me.

A flash of memory fires off in my mind. *Fuck*. Not now. Not *now*.

“Yes, safe,” I say, my voice growlier than I intended, a cold pit in my chest. “There are more alphas than omegas. By a lot. Every pack wants an omega. Some will go to great lengths to get one. It’s why the school reaches out to potential omegas. To get them in one place where it’s easier to protect them. Better to invest in over-educating a random beta than to have an omega awaken in the wild and be at the mercy of the first rogue alpha to scent her.”

“Are you saying I could be *kidnapped*?”

Broken bodies littering the road. A petite omega in the midst of them all, just as dead. Joshua on his knees, eyes unseeing. Risk thrashing beyond him. Hollis’s body, slumped in a heap.

I swallow. “Yes. Or worse.” Another explosion of red in my mind makes me shudder. Hollis, dead. A grief I can’t even comprehend, just a gaping maw of darkness.

Indie pales.

“So please, little bird,” I rasp, “don’t try to escape.”

Something in my throat thickens and I fight the black tunnel forming in my vision. I can’t flash back, not worse, not now.

But I feel it coming, the sharp copper smell of blood taking over my nose, my hand pulsing with phantom pain.

“Leon?” Indie’s voice is distant and frightened. I slump back, sitting heavy on the desk, hearing it crash into the wall under my weight. I’m paralyzed, mind retreating, unable to stop my fall.

The memories eat me alive.

Inconceivable

INDIGO

Leon slumps against the desk across from me, his eyes flashing between pure terror and a somehow even more unnerving emptiness. He's frozen, his only movement his right hand rubbing rough circles around the stump of his left arm.

I'm cold all over, my own panic fading. Everything is a jumble inside of me, and I feel strangely numb watching the giant man disappear into himself. I vaguely realize we are doing the same thing in different ways.

My mind is reeling. It's all too much, and now Leon is gone too. Should I get help?

Every facet of my life floats through my mind—the play, gone. Cam and Rose, gone. My room, freezing and drafty but safe and mine. Mornings in the kitchen washing dishes, chapped hands and the smell of detergent.

My phone is gone, lost in the stampede. I couldn't call 911 if I wanted to, yet here I am in this tiny room with this strange man who smells so strongly of cloves and cedar it makes my brain go fuzzy. He's shuddering now, in the midst of some sort of episode.

"Sorry," he grunts. "Just need a sec." His voice is ragged.

Omega.

The feeling in my belly earlier, when I first smelled Leon, is starting to make sense. I hadn't understood it, hadn't been able to parse it. It was the secondary sex characteristics he was talking about, it had to be. Pulling me towards him. Just chemicals. I don't actually *like* him. Right? How am I supposed to trust myself now, when there's so much I don't know?

He makes a high-pitched whimpering sound, and my stomach drops. The same spot his scent stirred in me is magnetized, pulling me towards him. He shouldn't *whimper*. It's wrong, so wrong it sets my teeth on edge.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm going to him. I'm thinking of all the times I've been alone, so alone, shaking and hurting and desperately wishing for somebody to hold me. I know it isn't wise, not if he's in the midst of an episode of some sort.

"Can I touch you?" I hear my voice as though from far away.

He nods jerkily.

I reach out awkwardly, placing both hands on his chest. I can feel his heart pounding, a runaway beat in his musclebound chest. Before I know what I'm doing, I'm rubbing up and over his shoulders and wrapping my arms around his neck. He's tall, so I have to stretch, even with him sitting. I lay my head on his shoulder. His heartbeat thrums, fast and frantic. He jerks once, but I don't let go. Something inside me tells me to stay.

His breathing is uneven.

"Shh," I murmur. I don't know what I'm doing—I'm behind my eyes, observing my own actions like they're somebody else's. This is stupid of me, stupid to touch a man in the midst of a flashback of some sort. If this is PTSD from losing his hand, I could make things so much worse by touching him in his most vulnerable state.

Leon's arms come up, resting around my middle back. My heart skips a beat, my thoughts skittering out. His touch yanks me back into reality, the comfort of mentally detaching gone as the soft cotton of his shirt presses to my cheek. He is a furnace, heat radiating from the ring of his body around mine. His breathing steadies and something in the set of his body tells me he's returned to consciousness.

I try to pull away. He doesn't seem to notice. Even though his grip on me isn't that tight, I'm unable to pry myself free. I'm just weak.

"Leon?" I ask, trying to pull away again. This time he lets me, and I sink back against the bed, looking at him.

He's breathing deeply, eyes closed.

“I’m very sorry,” he murmurs. A bead of sweat rolls down his temple, and he bats it away with his stump, wincing at the contact.

“It’s fine.” I hesitate. It isn’t, really, but what am I supposed to do? I’m losing my shit too right now, I can’t really fault him. Everything is silent, and I feel a distinct urge to crawl under the bed and hide.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Just a flashback,” he answers my question before I can ask it. “They’ve been happening less. I thought I was past them. I’m so sorry.”

“From when you lost your hand?” I push, even though I know I shouldn’t.

He nods, surprising me. His hand is still circling his stump. “It was fairly traumatic for us.”

“You were all there?”

“Yes. On a mission.” His tone leaves no room for further questioning. “But enough, we’ll have time for that later. I’m sure you have more questions.”

“Later?” I echo.

He looks at me then, and the way his eyes flash sears something inside me. My knees buckle, and I lurch backwards, sitting on the bed. He blinks at me, like he’s waiting. He doesn’t answer my stupid question.

“Um,” I hesitate. *Heat. Omega. Alpha. Complex. Custody. Pain.* “You said my heat would be painful. And the headmaster said it would be soon. How soon? How painful?”

“We don’t know how soon,” Leon hedges. “We’ll go to the med hall for testing and they might be able to pinpoint it. It’s going to be unpredictable, Indie.”

I gulp. I know why, and he does too, but he doesn’t say it, and I’m thankful for that.

“In terms of pain... it won’t be painful if you have a pack. And Indie,” his jaw flexes, like the words are hard for him to say, “you’ll need a pack. Even if it isn’t one you want to mate with.”

“Mate?”

He’s got to be fucking kidding.

He isn’t. He looks at me evenly. “Yes. That’s what we call it, finding a mate. In an ideal world, every omega would find her pack, they’d bond and that would be that. Unfortunately there aren’t enough omegas to go around anymore, so it doesn’t always work out like that.”

“To go around?” My vision tunnels.

“No, that’s not—I’m sorry. That was crass. It’s not like that.”

“Really? So, if I decide I don’t ever want a pack, that would be ok?”

“You won’t decide that,” he growls. I glare at him. He sighs. “Indie, you’ll find your mates.”

I don’t know why, but the certainty in his voice feels disrespectful. He swallows once, returning my stare.

Something inside me wants to avert my gaze. After a moment, it becomes so unbearable I look down.

“That’s your omega instincts,” Leon says softly. “You’ll never want to stare a fully mature alpha in the eye for too long.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I mutter.

“Look, Indie, I know this must be overwhelming. I can’t imagine how you feel right now. But being an omega... it’s a very, very special thing. You’ll see, when you get to meet some others and start class.”

“I’m struggling to believe that.” I fight to keep my calm. I thought I was too exhausted to panic again, but it’s rising in me anyway. It was the stare-off that did it, my body’s inability to look Leon in the eye. Is that how it’s going to be from now on? I start shaking, and it’s not from the cold.

I’m suddenly very aware of how frail and small I am, how big and strong Leon is, how incredibly easy it would be for him to physically overpower me.

“I think I want to be alone,” I whisper, my voice hollow. I can feel my heart racing again. My blood is thin as water, useless to power my brain or body. My limbs are mush.

“Indie, are you ok?” Leon is peering in my eyes now, but his voice is high above me, his face at the end of a black tunnel that grows longer with each passing second.

“My turn,” I half-smile, my own voice sounding fifteen miles away, but unlike Leon I’m not just tuning out. My vision

blacks out entirely, a dull roar coming over my ears. For a moment, reality winks out.

I was standing, leaning against the bed. Now I'm not.

“Shh, little blue jay, little bird, you're ok, everything will be ok,” Leon's voice croons above me. I'm rocking slowly. My thoughts feel like they're being conducted via molasses. Every part of my body aches, except for where he's touching me, his skin like fire against mine. He's touching me.

I fight to open my eyes, but they weigh a million pounds, and when I do all I see is gray static and red pops.

A deep rumble starts up, running through my body. It resonates with my bones, unfurling the ties holding them together. My body spools apart, melting like warm butter. Every vibration is liquid heroin in my veins, a wave of calm washing away the flighty panic. A magic eraser for my terror. My heartbeat slows, matching the ironclad rhythm of Leon's.

“You with me, little bird?” Leon asks, the rumbling stopping when he speaks.

I try to answer but all that comes out is a garbled mess. I have words, but they won't come.

“Shh, I know,” the rumbling starts again.

“What—?” I finally muster together enough syllables to form a word.

“Your nervous system freaked, and you went down. It's ok. I caught you, you didn't hit your head or anything.’

The absence of the rumble feels like I'm missing my own heartbeat. I tap my hand against the source of it, asking for more. There's a soft growly chuckle, then it starts up again.

Finally, my eyes are light enough to open. I'm looking up at Leon. The thing I tapped, the nice rumbly thing, is his chest.

My eyes widen in horror. I freeze in his arms.

"Shh, it's ok."

"No," my voice is weak. He has no idea—this is exactly what panicked me to begin with. But in his arms, my body is suddenly finding it very difficult to be as terrified as my brain. Mentally, I tell my body to cringe. But it's like I've been injected with a paralytic—no part of me responds. I'm not even sure I can feel my fingers or toes.

Everything is still moving slowly. I feel stupid. I wish I wanted to be put down, but all I want is to curl deeper into him. The light coming through the window is too harsh, I wish it were gone. I tuck my head into Leon's chest, hiding from it.

"Fuck," I hear him sigh, so quiet he probably thought I wouldn't hear. "Do you want the light gone, little bird?"

I nod, keeping my face hidden. We're moving then, but I don't open my eyes, not until an electronic sound begins whirring and the red hue in my lids disappears.

That's when I look again. The room is dark now, blackout blinds covering the windows.

"You'd probably be more comfortable in a nest," Leon says softly.

“Nest?”

“Before you go into heat, you’ll always want to nest. You’ll want lots of blankets and pillows.”

I’m only half listening to him. When he speaks, the rumble in his chest is almost like the other rumbling. I want that one back.

Like he can read my mind, he starts doing it again. I smile. I’m drunk on it, I realize. It’s the only comparison I can come up with, though the euphoric blur of the rumble is far better than the static grey fuzz of alcohol. I wonder if it’s an alpha/omega thing. I wonder just how many alpha/omega things there are that I don’t know about.

My ignorance scares me. I knew Adams. I know nothing here. Before I know what’s happening, I’m crying.

I won’t go back. I won’t see Cam again, or Rose, or watch the show I worked so hard on go up. I won’t see my parents again, maybe ever. They stopped loving me years ago and just decided not to tell me. I had to find out like this, in a stranger’s arms, in a strange place, utterly alone.

“Shh, shhh,” Leon croons. My sobs only come harder, and after a moment he sighs, then starts rumbling again. It’s the only thing that helps. And that realization is perhaps the most heartbreaking of all.

6

Mutinous

RISK

Left right left right left right left right.

There's a tulip starting to bloom on the patrol route.

I avoid it the first twenty laps.

Then I make sure to step on it every time for the next twenty.

It would die anyway. I am an enforcer of fate. An act of god.

Left right left right left right left right.

My brain has a thousand tracks and I circle this one instead.
Dirt and grass and barbed wire and chain link fence. Alphas
and omegas. Omegas and alphas.

Left right left right left right left right.

I use half my mental tracks to watch the other half go insane.
Then I try to swap. Taking turns. Playing nice.

Left right left right left right left right.

I try to play movies. White noise. Memories, but only the good ones.

That's dangerous. My memories aren't neatly filed. They're tossed in a drawer. Tangled. Messy. Pull one, you have no idea what's coming out.

Tonight, it's Joshua on his knees. Wrists above his head, held tight. A beautiful sight. Tinged with terror.

Me, flopping like a fish. Trying to do everything at once. Trying to obey. Bad bad bad.

I breathe hard. I try to focus on left right left right left right left right.

I thought they were going to kill him.

I think I might be evil.

I saw her on her knees too. I didn't care. Not an ounce. Not one iota. Just him.

Left right left right left right. One track walking. One track scanning the treeline. Nine hundred ninety eight tracks unoccupied. Static in my brain. Magnetically attracted to the badness that emerges when one tricky track wends its way into the memory drawer.

I twitch. The memories. Several tracks dedicate themselves to trying to make me kill myself. I try to dedicate the rest to not. I'm not the DJ anymore. Not in this mix. Cacophony. My head hurts.

Still breathing though. Spite is the greatest motivator.

Three tracks are empty blackness. They were my favorite tracks. The ones I played loudest. The ones I loved most. The ones that have been silent for six weeks now.

My fingers twitch. I fight the urge to light a cigarette. I wouldn't even take a drag. I'd just put it out on my skin.

It's funny. Before, I'd do that too. On purpose. I'd laugh. Show the burn to Grayson or Conrad or Jessalyn or whoever else was around and high enough to find it funny. Make a smiley face of scars on myself. Pointillism. Art.

It isn't smiley when it isn't on purpose. When it isn't my pain to control.

I don't go home after work. No point. Don't like being alone and not alone.

No Joshua. No Hollis. No Leon. Bodies, no souls.

I go to the club instead.

Also bodies. No souls. But easier to pretend.

I don't have a soul either. I don't think.

Grayson is inside. Leather pants. No shirt. Metal barbells in his eyebrows, ears, nose, nipples. A ring in his lip. A glint in his eye. A pill in his hand. For me. So sweet.

I swallow dry. I sit next to him. We watch the bodies together.

Drinks keep showing up. Different colors every time.

Bodies undulate. I try to decide which shape I want tonight. Soft and round or skinny and sharp or flat and hard. I ignore

the smells. They're all ash.

Grayson makes neat lines of powder on the table between us. He uses a single to suck one up his nose. I wish Hollis weren't Hollis. He'd use hundreds. It would be glorious.

I accept the wilting dollar. The powder is bullets punching through the soft membranes in my nostril. It doesn't play nice with the liquor. Or maybe that's the pill. Ash, all of it.

Saturdays are crowded. Orange and blue lights. Cigars and cigarettes and spliffs and joints. Whiskey and vodka and tequila and regret. Breasts—perky heavy saggy pear-shaped fake flat full. Eyes—jaded empty glazed sad hurt scared. More tracks are occupied. Absorbing it all. Better.

Jessalyn dances badly. Or maybe I see badly. The pill makes things swimmy. Tracks go static. Much better.

When she finishes, she comes over to us. Still topless from the stage. Ones stuffed everywhere. She brings a peace offering—a pipe. Homemade. Piece of shit.

“What's inside?” I ask.

“What you want?” she asks.

“Ups.”

“Ok.”

Grayson comes with. We wait for her together outside. Topless and night time don't mix. Unless you're Grayson. He doesn't feel anything.

He tries to kiss me. I'm too swimmy. I need ups.

Pretty pale blue rocks. Jessalyn helps me light—still too swimmy. The crystals glide in the bowl when they melt. Then I'm shaky. So shaky.

Grayson tastes like metal and nicotine and I decide he isn't the shape I want. Jessalyn tastes like rum and sour milk. Wrong too. All wrong.

The wrongness angers me. The tracks in my brain devote themselves to it. An electrical storm of rage out of a sour milk kiss. My knuckles slam into the cinderblock wall of the club. BAM BAM BAM.

Joshua is the right shape. *Joshua* isn't home. Not really. None of them are.

I don't know which Hollis I hate more. Dead dead or dead alive. My yearning is fire scorching me.

"Risk!" Grayson's arms are around me, trying to hold me back. But I'm superhuman. I'm *alpha*.

I growl. He lets go. He's alpha too. Technically. Packless. Misfit. Like me.

But. I have more dominance.

The pale blue ices my veins. Just like Joshua's eyes. I want to use it. I want to hurt Grayson. Just to see. Like ripping legs off a bug. Like ants under a magnifying glass. Like peeling skin back from sinew and muscle and bone.

His eyes are wide. His pupils are shot. My anger vaporizes.

I go back inside. The dancing and the noise and the chatter and the smells occupy more tracks in my brain. Not enough. But more.

A girl dances on me. I watch her muscles coil under her skin. A thread on her thong is loose. Caught in the crease of her thigh. My cock is a dead thing between my legs. She gives up.

I pull my knife from my pocket. I play tic tac toe on my palm. Not deep. Cat scratches, really. Another few tracks filled.

Still not enough. *What else what else what else?*

I've taken everything the world has. It isn't enough.

The knife presses deeper in my palm. Just one spot. Pin prick. Deeper. Crucify me. Let me be reborn. Or not.

Impotent

INDIGO

I wake feeling like a phone left in rice overnight. Not even rice, more like those little desiccant packets that draw the moisture out of dried goods. I am crackly and stiff, my skin stretched to parchment over my bones. Every movement is creaky and painful. My face is itchy with dried tears.

I pulled myself together long enough for Leon to leave yesterday, then promptly fell to pieces once more. The tears didn't last long—I couldn't even say why I was crying. None of it feels real.

The day looming in front of me is daunting. Empty, with no plans and no friends and no rehearsal or admin work to fill it. I am meant to have a purpose; I work, I learn, I rehearse, I laugh at the right times and tell the right jokes and get the right answers and reap the rewards in red circled 100's and busy groupchats and audience applause. Even in my gap year I've

been taking classes online, trying to figure out what I might want to major in should the pipe dream of college ever come true for me.

I wonder what Cam and Rose are doing with their morning ahead of rehearsal at noon. Probably brunch—Rose loves to drive off-campus for Saturday brunch. They split where they go, sometimes to bougie suburb brunch spots, sometimes to divey places that don't card so they can get bottomless mimosas.

I never joined those outings—even the seediest brunch spot was out of budget for me, and I hate spending money on food I'm only going to pick at anyway. I usually stayed in bed, resting and conserving enough energy to survive a six-hour rehearsal later.

So, all things considered, other than the change in location, my Saturday morning isn't very different from how I would usually spend it.

I roll over and try to sleep more—I don't know what time it is, I just know I don't want to be conscious yet. It's no use though—my brain has awakened. Everything is fractured.

My anxiety transmutes to anger when I'm too tired to sustain it any longer. How could they do this? Just drag me out of my own life and dump me here with no explanation. How is this fair?

An all-too-familiar stomach ache comes on. The kind I got when my parents first dumped me at Adams eight years ago. I thought I'd see them at Thanksgiving. I thought they'd answer

my calls. I thought that I'd see my little sister Lise again. I saved every art class project for her, so she could pin them up on her corkboard wall in her bedroom at home and have something to remember me by when I went back.

They didn't answer. I never saw her again. She's twelve now, and if you asked me to pick her out of a line-up, I'm not sure I'd be able to.

I'm working myself up quite nicely when a knock sounds on my door.

My things hadn't yet arrived when I fell asleep yesterday, so I'm in my crumpled clothes still. I get out of bed and stagger a few steps before the headrush hits. My brain goes ice-cold, my vision going entirely grey and fuzzy, little artifacts floating in my vision when I try to stand.

"Hold on," I mumble, bending over at the waist to try and get blood back into my head. My fingers and toes tingle and for a sweltering moment I think I'm going to vomit.

"Indigo?" a feminine voice sounds from the other side of the door.

"Just a sec!" I call. I try straightening again—every inch my head rises is accompanied by a matching increase in static in my eyesight. My pulse throbs in my ears. I need to drink some water. And eat.

It isn't going to get better. I stagger to the door, white knuckling the bed to stay semi-upright. I open it and then turn and slump into the small chair at the desk. Instant relief. Until

the spinning sets in. I squint my eyes, trying to block out the way the room is swinging from side to side in front of me.

I can vaguely make out a small woman standing there. She smells of strawberries and cream; those little pink and white swirled hard candies, not the real deal. I loved those candies when I was a kid—my mom used to clean an office that had them in a bowl upfront for clients. I wasn't supposed to go with her to cleaning jobs, but childcare was expensive, and I would always sneak a handful until a secretary yelled at me one time. After that I stayed home alone. I think I was six.

There are two cardboard boxes at the woman's feet and a tray in her hands. A large book sits on one side, a takeout container and bottle of water on the other.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah.” My voice is tight with the effort of not keeling to one side. The dizziness is swinging my head in circles. The silence is awkward. I am clearly not ok. “Just a little light-headed,” I amend. “It'll pass.”

“Maybe breakfast will help.” I smell her even more strongly as she comes closer. Then I smell the container—eggs and bacon and maple syrup and pancakes. I can make out each scent individually without needing to look. There's also something sweet and fresh. She opens the container and I see that it's a little bowl of mixed berries, frosted with cold next to the steaming hot eggs and pancakes and bacon.

I'm starving. The food smells criminally good, and I fully intend to eat some of it, just not with her watching me. I take

the bottle of water instead, downing half of it in one long gulp.

Then I really look at her. She's tiny, maybe five feet tall, and she has a curvy, hourglass figure. Dark brown curly hair and pale rosy skin. She's pretty. I don't meet her eyes.

"I'm Ms. O'Brien, one of the instructors here. I teach omega physiology, behavior, and psychology classes. How are you doing?"

I shrug.

"Do you prefer to go by Indigo or Indie?" she asks.

"Indie."

"Ok. Well, Indie, I just wanted to come say hi. Usually newly awakened omegas take my 101 class together, but that's targeted at eleven- and twelve-year-olds. You're a bit of a unique case. I talked to Headmaster Wilder and he agreed that since you're on a compressed timeline, we can do private tutoring instead. I'll be able to teach you the basics so you don't get blindsided by your heat. Does that sound ok to you?"

"Yeah, I guess. What's the book?"

The cover is mostly blue, with a group of smiling kids in a yellow framed image in the center. They are in neon windbreakers and baggy jeans. The title reads, *The Basics of Omega Physiology, Behavior, and Psychology*. It looks like the textbook for my Spanish class, outdated and retro.

"This is the textbook for the advanced omega studies course I teach. I thought it would be better to give you this than the stuff written for the pre-teens. Figured I'd bring it early in case

you wanted to read ahead. It seems like you didn't get the best introduction to all of us yesterday."

I remember the feeling of Leon purring against me. Everything else feels kind of fuzzy and overwhelming in comparison. Then I realize she probably meant the stampede, and I blush. "Yeah," I say. The smell of the food is making my head swim.

"Do you want to eat?" she asks.

"Not hungry," I answer reflexively, then curse myself. "I mean, I'll eat when you go. Don't want to waste your time watching me." *Read: I don't want you watching me.*

She gets the message. "These were outside your door when I arrived." She nods at the two cardboard boxes. "I'm assuming they're your things? They'll bring the rest later, I'm sure."

I don't have the heart to tell her that there is no 'rest'. That's my life: two cardboard boxes.

"There's a map of campus underneath the textbook," Ms. O'Brien goes on. "It isn't too big of a place so you shouldn't get lost. I circled where my office is. Trainer Midas showed you the cafeteria yesterday, right?"

Trainer Midas. Leon is Trainer Midas. I nod.

"Awesome. Make sure you get lunch and dinner, ok? You can get it to-go if you don't want to brave the cafeteria alone. On Monday they'll figure out a class schedule for you and probably assign you a buddy to show you around. Do you have any questions until then?"

I shake my head no, even though the word ‘class’ should be setting off alarm buzzers in my brain: I am safely graduated, thank you very much. All I can think of is the food. The fluffy pancakes, grease-soaked bacon, the scrambled eggs smelling of butter. My stomach growls.

Ms. O’Brien leaves and I fall upon the food. I didn’t eat yesterday, so this is ok, even doused in maple syrup and butter and salt. One meal is allowable. Especially since I won’t be going to the cafeteria. I don’t know if there’s a meal plan or assigned seating or what the hours are, and I have zero intentions of allowing anybody to watch me fumble around like a fool while I find out.

I open the textbook while I finish the food, flicking to the first page and letting my eyes scan the images on the page before I start reading.

The first anatomy diagram is on page seven. I lose my appetite when I see it. It’s a male’s... thing. And it’s *deformed*. Nothing like what was in the diagrams in health class up at Adams. Nothing like what I imagined Cam would look like, in my most private and embarrassing thoughts. My eyes remain fixed on the graphic image long past the point of appropriateness. I force myself to flip the page and look at the corresponding female diagram. Better.

I lose the rest of the morning to the textbook. To knots and fated mates and nesting instincts and compulsion dominance and nutritional needs and IQ boosts. Each page is worse than the last.

You *bite* somebody to mate with them? And get some sort of psychic bond as a result? There's such thing as a 'perfect genetic match'? Calling it 'fate' seems hilariously corny in the context of the rest of the book. *Fated mates*. Gag.

The bit about purring is right after the section on mating bites and pack bonds: *Purring is an intimate act usually done within the confines of a bonded pack, a rumbling from within the chest akin to that of a cat. Alphas and omegas can purr to express pleasure, joy, or love. Purring is often done to comfort a packmate's stress or anxiety. The purr of a Pack Alpha is particularly potent.*

Leon purred for me. It's the only thing that comes close to describing what happened. The back of my neck feels very hot as I reread the words. It felt so *good*. But it isn't hard to read between the lines; to do it *outside* of a pack bond is wrong. Right? I *was* freaking out, and it *did* help, but still... packmate.

Thinking of Leon just brings the anatomy diagram back to the forefront of my mind, and then I'm embarrassed and flipping the page and trying not to think about that.

It's dark outside when I finish. An entire day lost to this nightmare. I emerge into the hallway feeling groggy, my head throbbing with an eyestrain headache. I'm in search of water and a bathroom, but instead I find myself in a lounge where three omegas sit together. One has pin-straight blonde hair, another has a mousy brown pixie cut, and the last has long brown waves. Their scents all blend together and make my

teeth ache—caramel and butter candy and vanilla ice cream. They're all curled into chairs with notebooks spread open on their laps, studying—or, pretending to, if their loud whispers and giggles are any indicator. The blonde looks up at me when I enter, and both of the others look at her before turning to face me as well.

“You're new,” she says.

I nod. “Nice to meet you.” I don't sound very nice. She doesn't look very nice. “Can you tell me where the bathroom is?”

She points to my left. I see the sign, nod my thanks, and leave. It's only as the door is swinging shut behind me that I hear her voice, melodic and sinister, “well that's *tragic*.”

“Is she new? How can they think she's an omega if she's that tall?” another sniggers.

“And *bony*,” the first voice snorts.

“Shhh, she can probably hear us,” a third voice chastises them. Then their voices drop so I can't hear what they're saying anymore. I just know it's about me.

My cheeks burn as I look in the mirror. I *am* bony. Just like I meant to be. And still, it isn't enough. I pick apart my features in the mirror. I just don't understand why the universe had to make me ugly. Fat, and ugly, and omega. No. I shake my head. I hate feeling like a victim.

I *fixed* the fat problem. Which takes away the power of the ugly—better to be skinny and ugly than fat and ugly. People

don't notice as much. Which just leaves the omega problem.

The textbook talked about suppressors. I don't have to be at the mercy of my hormones—my first order of business on Monday is figuring out how to get some of those. Every problem has a solution.

My rationalizing weakens the hold of the self-loathing, but I still feel the unpleasant emotions swirling in my gut. Some things can't be outsmarted. But they can be starved.

I pee and splash water on my face and stare myself down in the mirror, watching my features turn to ice. I sweep by the omegas when I leave the bathroom, cool and aloof. I've practiced for this moment. I feel their eyes on me as I go by. I'd rather be their enemy than their victim.

Their voices trail behind me.

"They're going to drop the class if Wilder won't do anything about Midas and his agenda."

"Jake is obnoxious anyway, he thinks he's so *special* with Shawn and Brian picking him."

"I know. I'd much rather be an Anderson or James than a fucking *Drake*."

I grab linens from the labeled shelf in the hallway and duck into my room. Midas and his agenda, hmm? *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*. Seems like I might have another reason to appreciate Leon.

8

Marooned

JOSHUA

The embarrassing part is when I have to get up to use the bathroom. Or, the coming back part. When I have to witness what my room looks like to the others when they stand in my doorway, trying to coax me out.

The shades have been drawn since the mission. The floor is strewn with clothes. The bed is soiled to a degree that should disgust me, but the energy it would take to change the sheets is a nonstarter.

Leon has tried to do my laundry, but I won't let him. My usual fresh rain scent has turned moldy. Alive in the curtains and carpets, damp and permeating.

Hollis hasn't let me accumulate any trash. He brings me food each day, even though I tell him not to, and takes out the prior day's dishes. Pack Alpha turned maid.

It's depressing.

Figures.

I slide back into the sheets.

Every moment I'm in bed has a sense of urgency for what I'm missing outside. The drive to force myself up and *do* something removes any possibility of rest. And every moment I *am* up, even just to pee, a tether draws me back. A tenuous connection that might snap if I go too far. I don't know what will happen if it snaps. I just know it will be bad.

The ball of hot despair turns, grating against my innards with its sharp edges. It's always there now, driving me towards action that doesn't exist. The thought of the long hours of consciousness in front of me brings the despair back, razors in the back of my throat.

The flashback hits me after a few minutes of stillness.

It's always the same thing. Nothing graphic, no visuals or sensations, not really a memory at all. Just the feeling of absolute, complete certainty that we failed. The dread, black and tar-like, coating the inside of my body as I watch our precious charge at the mercy of the alphas.

I try to fend it off. It will take and take and take from me until I am gasping desiccated sobbing breaths, curled around the aching hollow inside me. It will take even then, far beyond when I have anything left to give. The only thing that stops it is sleep.

She's gone.

She's gone, a pack is broken, and I am still here, a useless piece of shit lying in bed too pathetic to even face his own demons. I know I couldn't have saved her. I'm not a moron, I saw how many alphas there were. But I could have *tried*. Hollis might feel ashamed that he wasn't able to do more, but he actually *fought*. He was unconscious. I was right there, watching. Subdued. Passive. Useless.

I pull my pillow over my head and thrash it with my hands, trying to batter the loathing out of my skull.

There's no distraction from it, nothing I can do. Everything around me is washed out. There's no joy to be found in reading, or playing piano, or cleaning, or cooking, or talking to my packmates or seeing the sky. I try to remember why I ever wanted those things. They're just words now. Notions. The only real thing is the despair of knowing it's all gone wrong and there's nothing I can do.

I'm the failure. The one it all came down to, and I didn't fire a single shot. I watched her save herself the only way she could. Because I was too weak. First too weak to protect her, then too weak to save her. Weak, pitiful, Joshua.

When I roll over to put the pillow back, I see a scrap of paper on the mattress. It must have been hidden beneath my pillow. I unfurl it and read the words scrawled inside:

*Pain—has an Element of Blank—
It cannot recollect
When it begun—or if there were*

A time when it was not—

It has no Future—but itself—

Its Infinite Contain

Its Past—enlightened to perceive

New Periods—of Pain.

Risk's handwriting is carved into the paper, punching holes through in places. There are grey smudges on either side where his thumbs rested. I rest my own over them, reading the poem again. Tears prick my eyes—the absence of the bond never feels quite as painful as when Risk is forced to communicate without it. His handwriting is illegible to most people, wobbly like a second grader's. But he knows how my mind works, how I feel seen. And he sees me.

Emily Dickinson.

His choice of poet is more than just the words on the paper—back at the Complex, before we were bonded, before we were even friends, I used to tutor him in English. Dickinson was one of the first poets we studied together. He was so proud when he did his own research and found out that she was likely queer. From that point on, no matter the poem or poet we were studying, he would find some way to read into it as gay. The memory feels hollow now, like it keeps needing to stop and buffer in my mind, refusing to fully load. It used to make me laugh.

I fold the paper neatly and tuck it under my mattress next to the others—there are dozens now, little scraps of poetry he leaves me when I'm asleep or too out of it to realize he's come into the room. Each one is a dagger of kindness and shame.

No thoughts come. Pressure and lack. The black tar is still sticky-slick inside of me, the doomed feeling pulsing behind my eyes. Everything is background noise. I'm background noise. I can pretend my pack is out there, doing better things. I don't have the bond to tell me otherwise. The only thing that disrupts my game of pretend is the hot shame when any of them comes in and tries to pull me from my perpetual pity party.

A knock on the door. Speak of the devil.

It opens without my permission, and the smell of evergreen pierces my musty rain.

“I come bearing breakfast.” Hollis has a plate in his hand. The smell of eggs turns my stomach.

His eyes fall on the plate of dinner he brought last night, untouched on my bedside table. His eyes narrow, but he doesn't say anything. He just swaps the plates, putting the revolting smelling eggs down.

“Please take those away.” I cover my nose. “They smell awful.”

“Is there something else you'll eat?”

“No.”

“Joshua...”

“Please don’t.”

“They came by my desk yesterday again about you.” He ignores the pile of laundry on the chair across from my bed and sits.

I shake my head—I can’t deal with this right now.

“You’re the only reason the case file is still open, Joshua. As soon as you talk to them, we can start putting it behind us.”

“They already know what happened.”

“Not your side.”

“It doesn’t change anything.”

“You’re going to start getting penalized after ten days missed. That’s Tuesday, next week.”

“Oh no,” I mock.

Hollis sighs. “You can’t keep going like this, Joshua. Let us bring Dr. Gray here. He can give you something to help.”

“With what?” I hate how caustic my voice is. “The fact that I’m a failure?”

“Don’t say that.”

“Would you just leave me alone?”

I don’t have the energy to be angry. I’m the reason the pack bond is closed, the reason I can’t feel them like a second heartbeat in my chest, the reason that Hollis is relegated to desk jockeying and Leon is a glorified PE teacher and Risk is losing his mind every day. He *needs* the bond, but with me

around, he can't have it. Hollis thinks I can be helped, but he's wrong.

They'd be better off if I were gone.

I feel it then, a sliver of the bond opening up. Hollis isn't very good at controlling it, he never has been, but I sense him pulling back the shutter he's had on our connection for the past month and a half, letting me in for just a moment.

He sways in his seat, my blackness hitting him head-on.

The bond is disorienting after so long, even with just Hollis. He's holding the others out, afraid that my darkness will infect them. I feel him though, loud and clear—stretched, afraid, angry, hurt, ashamed. What does he have to be ashamed of? He did nothing wrong.

His energy is the most intense—I didn't realize how *sluggish* I am until his energy touches me, buzzing in his body, waiting for things to be done with it. He's restless. He hates his life now, hates his pack falling apart, feels powerless to do anything about it.

Mostly, I feel him straining to fight me. My emptiness. To float rather than drown.

Before I can gather anything else he slams the bond closed again, locking me out. Losing him feels like a part of me being ripped away. I let out a wordless cry at the loss, my body having just started to re-animate. Leeching off his energy. The ache in my chest intensifies with the renewed absence.

"I'm sorry." His voice shakes. "I just, with Risk—"

“Don’t,” I stop him. “I know. I’m sorry. I can’t...”

He waits, but I won’t finish. Whatever this is, this half-state I’m subsisting in, it can’t last. There’s no way back.

I turn away from him so he won’t see my face. I can’t do that to him, not when he has the others to worry about. His future, so promising, shuttered because of me.

“Joshua...”

“It’s fine,” I mutter, my voice tight. “I’m fine. Don’t be late for work.”

“Leon will check in on you when he gets home, ok? Please try to eat.”

“Sure. Bye, Hollis.”

He leaves the eggs behind.

Intent

INDIGO

“Hey! Hey you! New girl!”

I don't think the voice is meant for me—this is my first time leaving the dorm since Friday, and the only people I've spoken to outside of Leon and Ms. O'Brien are the three omegas gossiping in the dorm on Saturday night. But when I turn around, a boy—an alpha, I guess I should call him—is waving and jogging towards me. He looks like a surfer, with bronze skin and long blonde hair that's already somehow bleached from the early summer sun. He's also big—not as big as Leon, but over six feet, and growing muscles to match his height.

I vaguely recognize him, and a flash of panic grips my stomach when I realize he's one of the alphas from the stampede on Friday. He stops about ten feet away, noticing my fear.

“Hi,” he says. “I’m Shawn, Shawn Drake. I’m one of the guys that mobbed you on Friday, and I just wanted to apologize. That was so uncool, we all just got caught up in it, you weren’t even spiking too hard or anything, it was more of a competitive thing between us once somebody *did* go for you, ya know? And I know that’s no excuse but, damn, I’m just sorry. Totally embarrassing. Are you ok? All good? Midas is gonna kill us today in class if that’s any consolation, I’m guessing it will be windsprints ‘til we puke.”

I can’t help but smile. I wonder if this is the Shawn that the blonde girl in the dorm was talking about. He has a big nose, but it’s distinctive rather than ugly. He smells like the beach— salt air and sun. How is that even a smell?

“It’s ok,” I find myself saying. After reading the textbook and learning about alphas and their violent tendencies I didn’t expect to forgive one so easily, but Shawn has this easygoing sweetness to him. Already I’m finding it hard to remember the crazed expression he wore on Friday when he was just another face in the mob. He’s all rosy cheeks and twinkling eyes now. “Thanks. For apologizing. You guys were definitely terrifying.”

“Sorry.” Shawn rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. His ocean scent is light. Not unpleasant, but compared to Leon, not attractive either. I wonder if it’s normal to use one alpha as a benchmark for all others. Given that I’ve only really met three, I don’t feel too guilty. “Outside of our atrocious welcome, how you liking campus so far?”

“No idea.” I shrug. “About to go talk to Ms. O’Brien and see what the hell all this is about.”

“I can’t believe your first exposure to all this was a spike. How old are you?”

“Nineteen,” I answer. “I graduated last year.” I wonder how many times I’ll need to have this conversation. I watch his brow furrow as he thinks this through, but then he sees something over my shoulder and a stupid dopey grin spreads over his face instead. I turn and find a younger alpha approaching, gangly with a mop of brown waves falling into his eyes.

“Hey you,” Shawn holds out an arm and the boy goes straight to him, wrapping his arms around Shawn while Shawn kisses the top of his head. The boy turns and looks at me. “This is the poor omega that the afternoon class mobbed,” Shawn explains. “This is my packmate Jake,” he introduces the boy to me, and I watch him puff up a little when Shawn uses the word *packmate*. He smells of linen and clean air. “I never got your name, did I?” Shawn asks, hitting his forehead. “God, I’m really blowing the whole introduction thing.”

“It’s all good,” I laugh. “I’m Indie. Nice to meet you both.”

“He apologized, right?” Jake’s voice is deceptively low for his relatively small frame. “He was going on *all* weekend about how embarrassed he is.”

“Yes,” I laugh. The boys are cute together. I wonder if they’re bonded. After the weekend’s reading, I know alpha bonds don’t have any sort of bite like there is with omegas.

They form more organically, usually through shared experiences and memories that act as anchor points to form connections.

“Ok, I am *so* going to be late for pre-calc, tell Brian I say hi ok? Nice to meet you Indie!” Jake turns to Shawn, looking like he’s going to lean in and kiss him, but then he sees something over my shoulder and his smile fades. He gives Shawn a quick side hug instead. Shawn’s expression darkens as Jake walks away. I turn and see two alphas, one of them about Shawn’s size, the other a hulking monster. The hulking monster was the one leading the charge on Friday, about to reach me when Leon swooped in. He’s glaring at Shawn, or maybe me, his dark eyes and spiky black hair making him look like a demon.

“He was in front,” I murmur.

“That’s Jared Anderson and Michael James. I’d recommend steering clear.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” I breathe. Everything about them screams malice.

“Well, Indie, I am decidedly late for my first class, so maybe I’ll see you around? Let me know if you want a tour or anything, I promise no more stampeding on my part, though I make no assurances for others.” His eyes sparkle and I can only laugh as he trots away.

I’m still smiling when I knock on Ms. O’Brien’s office door.

“Oh good, I was worried you were lost!” she chirps as she opens it for me.

“I got waylaid by an apology.” I step inside. “One of the alphas from Friday’s stampede.”

Her office is a tiny room with a window facing the courtyard. She’s hung sheets under the fluorescent lights and the result is a warm, cozy space, soaked in her strawberries and cream scent. She sits behind a large wooden desk with two leather chairs facing it. Behind her on the wall, two large posters show the anatomy diagrams from page seven of the textbook. My cheeks flush and I glance away.

“Oh, isn’t that nice! Who was it?”

“Shawn,” I answer. “I think Shawn Drake?”

“Oh, he’s a lovely boy. Pack Alpha, if I were a betting woman. I’m glad you got to meet him! Did you meet Brian and Jake too?”

“Jake, yeah,” I smile. “Are they bonded?”

“Oh,” Ms. O’Brien looks a little guilty, “They will be, I think. I like to follow the pack formations, it’s easy to get caught up in the drama around here,” she waves her hand dismissively. “I teach all the omegas, so it helps me play pseudo-matchmaker sometimes.”

My smile falters.

“Why don’t you take a seat?” Ms. O’Brien moves behind the desk and gestures to the chairs. I sit in one and face her as she settles herself. “Did you get a chance to crack the textbook open over the weekend?”

“I did actually.” I pull it from my backpack. I put sticky notes in all the spots where I had questions, and the result is a pink sheaf of tabs sticking out from the pages. Ms. O’Brien smiles when she sees it. She watches as I pull my notebook out as well. “I marked places where I had questions,” I continue, “and I went ahead and made a list for today of the ones I’d like to go over first.”

“You are quite the academic, aren’t you? I saw your transcripts from Adams this morning, very impressive. Where should we begin?”

“Suppressors.” I barely wait for her to finish speaking, opening the book to the section on them. “I want to get on them as soon as possible.”

Ms. O’Brien’s face freezes. She looks at the book instead of me when she answers. “That won’t be possible, Indie.”

“Why not?”

“You read the section, you know there are side effects.”

I did read the section. Depression, infertility, suicidal ideation, weight loss, nausea, hair loss, seizures, liver or kidney failure. Those were just the common ones. “Yeah, sure,” I shrug. “That’s my choice to make though, right?” I would gladly go bald if it means never having a heat. Would probably help keep the alphas away too. Indie the Inimical.

“Not quite,” Ms. O’Brien says. “You’re a ward. Your legal guardian gets to choose. And your legal guardian is the Complex currently.”

“I’m nineteen years old. I’m a legal adult.”

“Not quite. Omegas aren’t legal adults until they’re fully manifested.”

“So... after my heat? That’s so backwards. What am I, a slave?”

“A ward. I promise that’s a good thing. For the suppressors, the doctor will give you a definitive answer, but it’s likely going to be a no, Indie.”

“Why?”

“The doctors will be able to give you better answers,” she dodges. “Do you have any other questions for me?”

I scowl at her dismissal. I try to gather my thoughts. Rather than spend yesterday in self-pitying misery, I spent it planning. I cross out the first question on my list. So, Ms. O’Brien is a no-go on the suppressors front. I wonder if Leon would be willing to help instead.

I look at the next question on the list. “I’d like to go back up to Adams,” I begin. “I understand my hormones are unpredictable, but I’m stage managing a show and I don’t understand why, if I use de-scenter, I can’t attend rehearsals. There’s a month left until the show, and stage managing is really hard and kind of important and they need me to be there. If I took suppressors too it would essentially be like I’m not an omega at all.”

Ms. O’Brien’s eyes pierce me. I realize they’re hazel. I thought they would be brown, but now that they’re filled with

an ocean of pity, I can see that they're actually a tawny green color. "Indie, you *are* an omega. The sooner you can come to terms with that, the easier things will be."

"I just don't understand why that means I have to lose my entire life," I counter, my face burning. I *hate* being pitied. "Why keep everybody separate? Why not intermix and allow us to be normal?"

Ms. O'Brien thinks about that. "Because you're talking about beta normal. Your normal isn't their normal. It isn't too different, but it's different enough that blending the two wouldn't allow you to find yours. And the number of betas in the world far surpasses the number of alphas and omegas. Their normal would win out every time. The Complex creates a safe space for you to find your normal, free of that influence."

I'm shaking my head. "Their normal *is* my normal."

"No, it isn't. I understand the temptation; you've been raised in that normal for years. Which is why it will be so difficult to unlearn it and find your own. A clean break is better, not to mention safer. The Complex offers far better protection for you than Adams, should you spike or go into heat."

"It's the same campus though! The same fence, the same security, why is one set of buildings better than another?" I can't help but raise my voice.

"The threat isn't just *outside* the walls, Indie."

I open my mouth to argue, but then what she said truly hits me. “What?” I say, dumbfounded.

“An omega’s hormones are potent. Betas can’t technically rut, but they are affected by hormone spikes, and the students and staff aren’t vetted or trained the way that ours are. We’re not trying to trap you here to make you miserable, Indie. The goal is to set you up to have a happy and fulfilling life. As an omega.”

I chew on my bottom lip as I think about that. I can’t imagine Cam or any of my male teachers acting untoward with me. Even when I spiked on Friday, Cam didn’t seem to notice. Did he? The way he was leaning towards me, was that my hormones duping him too?

I scratch out the question on my list, refusing to let myself remember the humiliation of almost kissing him.

Scanning the list of questions, I realize I don’t want to ask the rest.

“Indie, is everything ok?”

“I just want to see my friends again,” I strangle out.

“Oh Indie.” Ms. O’Brien’s voice feels as jelly-like as the tears choking me. “You can text them, and they can come visit you on the weekends down here. We aren’t trying to rip your entire life away.”

I can’t imagine Rose in the courtyard here. She always felt resentful that her perfect grades didn’t secure her an invitation to the elite campus, though she’d never admit it. Now I know

why. I wonder if she'd even believe me. I barely even believe it; if it weren't for the scenting and the dominance I felt rolling off Leon on Friday, I'm unsure I would have bought anything that the textbook talked about.

"My phone got smashed," I say. I had saved for months to purchase it, a used, four-generations old iPhone. It had been on the grass next to me when Leon scooped me up. Now it's probably smashed into the dirt under some alpha's boot, never to be found again.

"Well, that is very unfortunate. You're welcome to use my office phone if you'd like to call them?"

I almost smile at the thought of Rose picking up a call, any call, whether from a contact or from an unknown number. Hell would freeze over first.

"That's fine," I shake my head, trying to quash the ache of missing my friends. "That wasn't even one of my questions coming in." I pick up my notebook and realize my hands are shaking. None of the questions seem very important now. I wrote so many down, but I'm struggling to remember why they mattered. Rose and Cam are gone. Life as I knew it is gone. Ms. O'Brien seems so eager to indoctrinate me into her world, but all I can think about is the one I left behind.

She blathers on about the Complex when I don't read out another question for her. Apparently there's a whole second government in the US dedicated to alphas and omegas called the Coalition. It's based in DC just like the US government, and they're closely tied together—the current president is an

alpha, and the head of the Coalition is one of his packmates. Ms. O'Brien says that that's fairly typical, for one pack to hold both governments. I only vaguely register what she says. My mind is on the play.

My first time stage-managing. I was good at it too. Only I could call all the lighting and sound cues. I have no idea who'll do it now—my show bible was in my boxes of things I opened on Saturday. They'll need it back at some point. I won't be able to get it to them.

“Are you listening, Indie?” Ms. O'Brien interrupts my thoughts.

“Yeah, of course,” I nod.

“So, what's your answer then?”

Busted. “Ok, sorry, I actually did tune out. I didn't mean to ignore you, I'm sorry.”

“It's ok. I was just saying that there's going to be a mixer on Wednesday night, and I think you should go. Your doctor's appointment after this will help pinpoint your heat, but a mixer will give you a chance to meet a few packs and start the courting process. It sounds like you might be on a short timeline, so it's better to get a jumpstart on things.”

“What? No. No way. This is why I want suppressors—I'm not going to sleep with some random group of dudes I don't even know. That's insane.”

“Indie, I understand it's daunting, but you are in good hands. You won't be forced into anything; you'll get to meet several

packs and choose the one that makes you feel comfortable—”

“I said no.” I get to my feet, the ferocity of the gesture undercut by the immediate headrush that follows, forcing me back down.

“Are you ok?”

“I’m fine!” I snap. “I’m just not doing that, ok? There’s got to be some other way.”

“Well, I suppose you could register for a medical heat, but I’d really recommend against it, Indie. It’s incredibly painful, and—”

“What is that? A medical heat?”

“You’re locked in a room alone and forced to ride out your heat without the support of a pack.”

“Perfect. Sign me up.”

“Indie, a medical heat is a horrible experience, it’s—”

“I don’t care. That’s what I want.”

Ms. O’Brien’s brow furrows, her hazel eyes liquid with concern. I jut my chin out and glare at her. Her eyes flit to a clock and she stiffens.

“We can discuss this later, Indie. I have a class to get to now. I’m sorry that you’re going through this, I know it isn’t fair. Just know that you aren’t alone, ok? You’ll get to meet Dr. Gray, he’s fantastic, and he’ll be on your team to figure out what the best path forward is. We’ll figure this out together.”

I deflate. “I’m sorry. It just...” I trail off. I was going to say, *it just isn’t fair*. But, duh. I sink into the leather chair and say, “thanks,” instead.

Ms. O’Brien stands, gathering a few folders in her arms. “I hope you like Dr. Gray. Tomorrow you’ll start regular classes, but we’ll still meet here at the same time, ok?”

I nod, following her out into the hallway. It’s bustling with alphas and omegas, raucous and loud and overwhelming. Ms. O’Brien disappears, and I duck my head and go in the opposite direction, heading to the med hall, keeping my face buried in my map to avoid noticing people staring at me.

Dr. Gray is just as nice as Ms. O’Brien promised, even though he is an alpha. He smells of tanned leather, with salt-and-pepper sideburns and smile lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth. His assistant Alicia—a beta with a faint, boring scent of cut grass—takes my vitals and asks me the basic intake questions, and then Dr. Gray takes over from her and asks me even more questions about my diet and eating habits in a booming voice.

I haven’t been able to weigh myself all weekend, and I’m filled with relief when they read the number out—108.2. Below 110 again, thank God.

“Ok, Indie, why don’t you get dressed, and then we’ll meet in my office to chat?” Dr. Gray speaks brightly, like he isn’t about to admonish me for my weight and force me to eat, or get fed from a tube, or something horrifying.

I dress slowly, taking my sweet time. I realize as I'm dressing that I wish Leon were here—Dr. Gray is nice, but intimidating, and he doesn't smell the way Leon does. I don't know how to describe it, but it's like I know that Leon is on my side, just from his smell. Dr. Gray doesn't have that, no matter the promises Ms. O'Brien made on his behalf.

I follow the sound of voices when I emerge from the exam room. First Dr. Gray's booming voice, and then, like my prayers are answered, the lower baritone of Leon's in response.

If I could run without my heart seizing in my chest, I would. I round the door to the office and sag in relief—Dr. Gray sits behind a giant oak desk, Alicia perched nearby, and in one of the two chairs facing the desk, Leon.

They all turn to look at me when I enter, but Leon is all I see. His face lights up.

“Hi, little bird,” he smiles. “Wanted to make sure you were adjusting to the Complex and Ms. O'Brien said I could find you here. Hope that's ok? I can step out while you talk with Dr. Gray—”

“It's fine!” I say too quickly. “I mean, you can stay. It's ok with me, I mean,” I stutter, suddenly bashful. Cloves and cedar wash over me and I want to close my eyes and drown in it. But Dr. Gray and Alicia are watching, so I force myself forwards to sink into the chair next to him instead.

His left arm is next to me, and I watch it flick towards me before coming back to rest in his lap—like he wanted to hold

my hand before realizing he doesn't have one.

"How are you feeling, Indie?" Dr. Gray asks.

"Fine, I guess." I shrug. The entire right side of my body is pulsing, pulling me towards Leon. I struggle to pay attention to Dr. Gray's words.

"Well, let's jump right in then, hmm? I'm sure I don't need to tell you that you're in dangerous territory with your weight. From her notes, it looks like Dr. Mason has already read you the riot act several times over."

I flush, suddenly wishing Leon weren't here to witness this. Indie the Insufficient.

"I won't waste time spouting off about the dangers of your disorder, you already know them all. You'll start counseling tomorrow, and we'll be supervising your meals to make sure you get three squares. Weekly weigh-ins as well. Do you have any questions for me?"

"I don't need therapy," I start.

"Everybody gets counseling when they come to the Complex, Indie," Leon cuts in. "Pack-born and beta-born, alphas and omegas. It's not just about your ED. It's also about adjusting to a strange new place. I got it too, back in my day," he smiles. My shoulders drop. If everybody gets it, I do feel better, even if I know that's stupid. I nod.

"In regard to your heat, I wish I had better news," Dr. Gray goes on. "The physical was inconclusive, hopefully the bloodwork will give us something more definitive. You're

fully awakened, no doubts there, but it could be days or months until your heat. Your symptoms are too scattered to pinpoint anything more closely. Do you have any questions on that?”

“How do I get suppressors?”

Dr. Gray tents his fingers and looks over his big oak desk at me. Thankfully, his expression isn't pitying like Ms. O'Brien's—just thoughtful. “Why do you want to suppress your heat?” he asks.

I can hear my blood thrumming in my ears. Leon feels very warm next to me. Even a foot away, I can feel the heat emanating from his body. His eyes are heavy. “I just don't want it.”

Dr. Gray nods. “If you wanted to take suppressors, I would support you, but in your current state of health, I can't allow it. If you were to get your weight up to, say, 130 pounds, and all of your blood panels came back clean and within normal ranges, then we could discuss suppressors. Until then, I wouldn't take the chance with your health. And Indie; suppressors are a one-heat solution. Maybe two. You can't remain on them long-term without risking severe side effects.”

130. A ghastly number. Nothing I could even consider allowing myself to get near. I shudder at the thought of my body with all that fat. Flab in my arms and thighs and stomach and cellulite-ridden ass. I barely hear the rest of his sentence. All I can picture is people's disgust, their eyes on me and the

fabric of my clothing stretched taut over my disgusting, bulging form.

The injustice comes crashing home again—I can starve myself and buy time before the inevitable, or I can glut myself and risk going into heat before I’ve hit a weight where I’ll be allowed to eradicate it for real.

I’m quiet as Leon walks with me out of the med hall. I’m tired, my thoughts ping-ponging back and forth between my options. Cedar and cloves are swimming through my body, a sort of chemical calm spreading through me that wipes away the stress of the appointment.

“How was your weekend, little bird?” Leon asks once we’re outside.

“Um, awful?” I can’t help but smile though. I don’t know why—I have no reason to smile right now.

“Yeah, that was a bad question, huh?” Leon laughs.

“Is there anybody who gets told they’re an omega, learns what it is, and is like ‘oh boy yay!’” I joke.

“Actually, yes. Being an omega is a lucky, lucky thing.”

“How?”

“There’s a mixer on Wednesday this week. Will you come?”

The non-sequitur jars me. “Ms. O’Brien mentioned that,” I hedge.

Something dark flickers in Leon’s eyes, but he shakes it away and smiles again. “It’s a good chance to build

community. Not just meet packs, though it's good for that too. There are unmated omegas as well who will understand your situation, and mated packs, so you can see what all the hype is about."

"Are you mated?" I ask before thinking.

Leon shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, that was an inappropriate question."

"Not at all—please don't feel bad asking questions. Any and all of them, I'll do my best to answer."

"Will you be at the mixer?"

He breathes in sharply. "Probably not."

"I'll go if you go."

That makes him smile. "I'll see what I can do then. Usually an alpha attends those kinds of things with his pack."

"Will your pack not come?"

His smile disappears. "No."

His voice is terse, and I don't ask why they won't be there. We walk the rest of the way in silence.

When we get to my dorm, he stops outside rather than walking in with me. "I'm not actually supposed to go inside the omega dorm," he says when I look at him questioningly. "Friday was a special circumstance."

"Oh," I say, thinking back to his arms around me, his purr running through my body. Special circumstance indeed.

“Omegas can get protective around their nests,” he explains, “and alpha scent in a nesting space can set off spikes or territorial urges.”

“God, who would have thought that scent politics would be a thing.” I roll my eyes. “Honestly though, I can’t even smell myself. I don’t understand what all the fuss is.”

“You’ll learn how to scent yourself with time.”

“What do I even smell like?” I ask. “I can smell you so strongly, and the other omegas in the hallway, and all the alphas too, but I have no idea what I smell like.”

“You’re still pretty unpredictable right now honestly, fading in and out. Dr. Gray said you’re fully awakened, but I’d say barely. You smell like bergamot and black tea and springtime herbs. It’s a very unusual scent for an omega, more refreshing than sweet, and quite complex. It’s very nice.”

The way he says *very nice* makes me weak in the knees.

“You smell like cloves,” I murmur. “It’s also very nice.” I cringe as the words leave my mouth. It isn’t appropriate for me to comment on his scent. And he knows how he smells, he doesn’t need me to tell him. Still, he smiles at me like it’s novel information.

“Thank you, Indigo.”

Even weaker knees. I usually hate when people use my full name. I have no idea what my parents were thinking, naming me Indigo, but when Leon says it, I feel like it truly belongs to me, instead of just the idea of me they constructed when I was

a squalling infant. *High hopes dashed*, I think bitterly. Indie the Inadequate.

“I should probably get going now, I have a class waiting for me, but can I plan on seeing you for lunch tomorrow?” Leon asks. “We can eat in my office if you want to avoid the rush.”

“Is that... appropriate?” I ask. I’m thinking of the purring. About how much I want it, and how I know now that I really, *really* shouldn’t.

Leon looks at me, his expression troubled. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Does he not know? He has to—he’s a teacher for god’s sake. I guess we’re playing dumb on the purring front though. “Um, no reason,” I shrug. “I’ll be there.”

“Only if you’re comfortable, Indie.”

“No.” I shake my head automatically. “I mean, I’ll be there. I want to. I just...” I swallow. “I’ll see you then.”

I can tell he wants to ask what I was about to say, but he doesn’t. Instead, he nods, hesitating for a moment, rubbing around his stump with his right hand. My eyes flit towards it—he’s wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt that’s tucked in on itself to hide the scar from sight.

“Does it hurt?” I nod at it.

“Yes. It feels like it’s still there, and my fingers and palm are killing me. They call them phantom pains. They’re supposed to go away eventually.”

“Were you left-handed?” I ask, stupidly. I just don’t want him to leave.

“Thankfully no.” Leon smiles. “Right-handed. Just down a helping hand, you could say.”

The fact that he can joke about losing a limb is impressive. I grin.

“Bye, Indigo. Until tomorrow.”

“Bye, Leon. Or, er, Trainer Midas, I guess?”

He grimaces. “Please call me Leon.”

“Is that appropriate?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Just, er, you’re a teacher right?”

He facepalms with his good hand. “I’m so sorry, we should have made that clear up front. The Complex finishes mandatory education when you’re sixteen; everything is accelerated. From that point on it’s just an education center. Boot camp, more like, for the alphas. You have ‘classes’, but they’re all intended to teach you life skills and help you get a pack. Or learn how to navigate the world without one, if you so choose.” He dips his head towards me in acknowledgement. “So, yes, I’m a trainer, but I’m not, like, your teacher or anything.”

“And it’s ok for trainers to socialize with students?” I ask.

“I’m saying it is, and I have more dominance than anybody who might say otherwise, so yes, yes it is,” he smiles, then

turns and jogs away before I can reply.

Dominance. The word makes me shiver.

10

Magnetized

HOLLIS

“So as you can see, our population counts are at an all-time low, with one alpha per three thousand betas, and one omega per twelve alphas. Alpha birthrates among omegas are down nearly forty percent in the last decade, and omega births in beta populations are up by twelve percent, while being down by fourteen percent in the omega population. Overall, this is leading to a population decline so severe we can expect to go extinct within the next two to five hundred years.”

There’s a faint rumble in the room at Marcus Phoenix’s words. I don’t join in, because I know what’s coming next. He’s been bragging about it for the past two weeks.

“In order to avoid this fate, drastic measures must be taken. The Coalition has been vetting packs since its origin, serving as a directory and resource for omegas to stay safe while searching for packs to either bond with or take as heat-mates. We’ve done this for free, with nothing but our allocated funds,

but I believe it's time we begin asking for something in return for the service we provide.

“Our data on these pairings is clear as day: less than twenty percent result in a birth within the first two years. Our stats on the alpha and omega birthrates are obviously a decade or more behind, but even with trailing data it is clear that they are both proportionally higher in these pairings than in organic connections made outside our purview. And the ratio is only growing, a positive indicator for the value-add of our genetic research. I would also be remiss not to mention the increased occurrence of fated mate bonds from these pairings, with over a dozen having been logged in the last decade alone.

“If we want to save our species, the only path forward is clear: we must require that omegas wishing to utilize the Coalition's vetting process for finding a pack are not on birth control for their heats spent with the pack we pair them with.”

The uproar is instant, and that should hearten me, but I can see the faces around the table in the sterile conference room that are actually taking Marcus seriously. And they're the faces with power, that might actually be able to make this nightmare a reality.

“Absolutely not!” a voice cries.

“They'd turn away from us! We'd leave them at the mercy of the packs!”

“The amount of time we'd spend in damage control—”

“They're not slaves, what right do we have to—”

“ENOUGH!” Anthony Gold’s voice roars over the room, his dominance shattering the chaos and making the weaker alphas among us shrivel into their seats. It rips through my chest, and I have to use all my strength to stay upright through the teeth-clenching order.

Gold Pack is the seat of power for the alpha and omega populations right now—Steven Gold sits in the white house, Adam Gold is the head of the secret service, and Anthony runs the Coalition. Their omega, Marianne, is playing the part of the perfect First Lady, filling her time with charity work and press appearances and making it appear as though all five of her children were sired by Steven and Steven alone. I can’t remember ever seeing her at Coalition headquarters. Even if her time weren’t filled with political obligations, I doubt we’d see much of her.

Before the attack, Midas pack was poised to take them on in the next election. Or maybe the next—I try not to be too ambitious for my age, I swear. And not for the White House. Not yet. The Coalition. People were starting to worry about the power of both wings of government being held by the same pack. There’s no checks and balances, and it’s difficult for other voices to be heard in a community where dominance can decide an election as easily as votes can. Where not a single omega currently sits on the Board of Governors.

I would have changed that. My legislation has always emphasized equity for omega voices in our ranks. Of course, running for Head of the Coalition without an omega of my own was a gamble. I tried to push the pack to get out more in

hopes of finding a mate, but it just never seemed like the right time. We never had our shit together enough to be worthy of an omega's time, not with Risk's partying and Joshua's reclusiveness. Leon seemed just as happy picking betas up at the bars as courting omegas. It used to drive me insane.

"Marcus, explain your proposal," Anthony orders, and my stomach sinks. He's taking this seriously.

"It's simple. We're testing all of the omegas for genetic markers already, so we can propose best-fit packs. All that testing goes to waste if the omega is on birth control. We simply make it a requirement that to participate in our matching process, an omega must stop any and all birth control measures. We can test for it with the genetic testing."

"This is preposterous," Lucas Orion scoffs. "I understand the notion, but we can't legislate omegas' bodies. That would make us no better than those beta monsters we all laugh at. What if we incentivized childbirth instead? A lump sum reward for all births resulting from our pairings within the first year or two?"

I'm grateful that Lucas piped up, but his idea still puts a bad taste in my mouth. Risk is the product of an omega that didn't want to raise a child and took advantage of Coalition laws protecting her right not to. I don't think the world would be a better place with thousands of him running around, as much as I may love him.

Still, Lucas's proposal is more tolerable than Marcus's absolutism. Orion pack has always been an ally to us as well,

and Lucas is good at finding middle ground when things get heated.

Despite his words feeling far more sane, the room erupts in arguing again.

I have to struggle to keep myself from joining the chaos. Two months ago, I would have been the one standing in front of the group with my own proposals, which would have caused their own commotion. The Coalition is losing favor among our constituents. Feral alpha packs are on the rise, having gone without omegas for so long they're becoming militant in their desires to find one. We say we defend against them, but militarizing our omega Complexes is a far cry from seeking out and taking down the greatest threats.

Like the mob that took us down.

It's a sick kind of irony that the exact threat I warned against so fervently is what made my pack a subject of ridicule, unlikely to even be invited to the meetings where attacks against them might be coordinated.

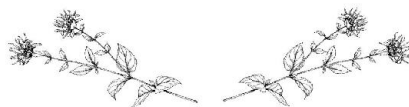
My attendance here today is like a pipedream after the last six weeks of desk duty only. And I still saw Anthony's eyes narrow when I entered the room and sat down—technically, Midas pack is still part of the Board of Governors. I have as much a right to be here as any of them, even if I have been formally demoted from my former position as Head of Tactical Operations.

Gold Pack was all too glad for the chance to boot me, once it became clear how starkly Midas Pack's agenda differed from

their own. Wilder and Phoenix Packs' have acted much the same, with John Wilder running the Complex and Marcus Phoenix acting as my 'supervisor' for my new analyst position. Now, Marcus waltzes by my desk each day, gloating as he dumps stacks of printed out spreadsheets on my desk for me to 'analyze' and write reports on. Biting my tongue, I drag my eyes across every damn row and write the reports he asks for. And each evening, when I deliver them to Anthony's office, I watch him scrape them off his desk and straight into the recycle bin, unread.

They're kind enough to include the mission reports from current tactical operations with the daily delivery to my desk, however—like Anthony wants me to see how poorly they're written. How the mission success rate has dropped. How badly my job is being fucked up, now that it's been wrested from my control. He's a very noble leader.

I swallow the bitterness, beginning to enjoy the chaos of the room as I realize absolutely nothing will get done in this meeting. Calls for a vote on the issue are drowned out by demands for omegas to participate in the drafting process. Nobody is listening to anybody. It's reassuring to know that my pack isn't the only thing falling apart right now.



Leon is waiting for me when I get home.

“How's Joshua?” I ask as I take off my coat and shoes.

“We need to talk.”

Something is wrong—his voice sounds different. He’s been the only pack member I haven’t needed to worry about since the attack. I know he disagrees with my choice to close the bond, but he hasn’t felt the depths of Joshua’s despair like I have. Risk is fragile right now—I know Leon could handle it, but Risk might fly off the rails more than he already has. And he’s been airborne since everything went down.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Come a little closer.”

Why does his voice sound almost hopeful?

I start to cross the kitchen to where he sits on a barstool at the island. It hits me when I’m only halfway across the room.

Instantly all the blood in my body rushes south, my mind fogging over in a purple haze as the scent of bergamot and black tea and sweet pea washes over me. I stagger forward to lean against the island. I fight the urge to mob Leon, to throw myself at him and rub my neck into the scent, collecting it all for myself.

“What have you done?” I choke out.

I didn’t think my mental state could get much worse than it has in the last six weeks, but immediately a cavernous hole opens in my chest, a gaping tear where the source of that scent should be.

“Her name is Indigo.” Leon’s voice sounds like a man who’s drunk on sunshine and sex and love. Has he slept with her

already? Without us? I fight the urge to dominate him, to make him cower and tell me everything.

“Where is she?” My voice is frantic.

“The Complex. She’s new, she just manifested.”

“A *child*?” I snarl.

“Shh!” Leon glances up the stairs, to where Joshua is. “No! She’s nineteen. She’s... sick, Hollis. Really sick.”

“Sick?” I echo, concern bubbling into nausea in my stomach. Jesus Christ, I need to calm down. My emotions slingshot around my chest, one extreme to the next.

“She’s anorexic. Totally emaciated. She starved off her own awakening for years. Her hormones are a wreck and she could go into heat any day now.”

Something twists my heart in an iron vice as reality sets in. She’s at the Complex. The Complex run by Wilder Pack, who hates us, and governed by the Coalition, where every ounce of prestige and respect Midas Pack once had has been stripped away. Including our placement on the vetted list for omega pairings.

“They’re going to pair her.” My voice is hollow.

Leon nods. “If it’s any consolation, she’s apparently dead set against having her heat at all, much less with a pack. Dahlia O’Brien told me she’s planning on doing a medical heat.”

It’s not any consolation. Not by a longshot. The thought of our omega alone in a locked room, desperate with need for us

and trapped far away? Unbearable. I feel something wet running down my hands and realize I've driven my nails through the skin of my palms, the crescent-shaped cuts trickling blood. I unfurl my fists slowly, grimacing as my nails come free.

“I need to see her.”

It's all I can think. I know I should have better words, a plan, some coherent vision, but all I can feel is the desperate need in my chest to have her near. To soak myself in that scent.

Leon shakes his head and fury grips me. My god, I'm like a fucking baby alpha right now, my emotions raging through me, barely held in check by my usually ironclad self-control.

“It's all a mess,” Leon rushes when he sees my anger. “She spiked on Friday, she was still up at Adams, and I had my combat class out on the field. They scented her at four hundred yards and took off, scared the living shit out of her. I barely got to her first, and her scent was just... unbelievable, Hollis.”

“You knew about her on *Friday* and waited until now to tell me?” I see red. Her scent is dripping off of him, mixing with his cloves and cedar, a freshness that is new, so new, and so sweet. It barely keeps me clinging to my sanity.

“I didn't know if there was any hope. I didn't... I didn't want to hurt Risk and Joshua. I didn't want them to scent her on me and get their hopes up only for it all to be ripped away if the Coalition makes other plans for her.”

“You kept this from me. All weekend.” My fury is cooling now, red-hot to ice-cold.

Leon gives me a strange look. “You weren’t even *here* Hollis. Did you go into the office?”

“I have a phone!”

“Is that how you’d like to find out about your fated mate? Really? By text?”

I fight the urge to leap the island and tackle him to the ground. I take a deep breath instead. Then another. It wouldn’t do for a Pack Alpha to lose control. “What are the plans?” I ask, a thin veneer of calm covering my rage.

“She’s in treatment for the anorexia,” Leon starts slowly, not trusting my sudden change of heart. “Supervised meals and therapy. Wilder isn’t keeping me away from her, though I think he can tell something is up. She’ll be eating lunch with me tomorrow.”

“I’m coming.”

“No.”

I’m over the island before he can react. I slam into him with a snarl. His body snaps backwards, crushed against the fridge. He doesn’t fight me, letting me pin him. I’m breathing hard from the exertion, and it only takes a moment for the hot coil of shame to snake its way up my spine. In nearly a decade of being a Pack Alpha, I have never, not a single time, grown physically violent with my pack. All it takes is one whiff of this omega, and what have I been reduced to? Still, I don’t

release him. Something carnal pulses in my chest, seized by sweet pea and black tea and spicy citrus.

“You don’t keep me from my omega,” I seethe. This close to him, I can smell where she brushed against him, the spots in his shirt that are stronger than the others. He hugged her. She gripped his arm at one point. I’m bloodying his shirt with my hands, the crescent-shaped cuts leaving smears of red on the white cotton. He just looks at me. After a second, I can’t meet his gaze. I let him go, stepping back to lean against the island. He relaxes, but doesn’t move. Her scent swirls between us, intoxicating.

“She’s fragile,” he murmurs softly. “Very fragile. You need to meet her, definitely, but not at a mealtime. It’s going to be fraught as it is without meeting another of her fated mates. I think she trusts me, but barely. And me being a trainer is confusing her even more—she’s used to beta schools; she doesn’t understand how things work for us. I can’t talk to her about the fated mates thing, not in her current state, though I think she can feel it.”

I glare at him. He has a point. I can’t meet his eye now, not after losing my temper.

I’m the oldest of Midas pack at twenty-eight. Leon and Joshua are twenty-four, and Risk is the baby at twenty-one. She is young, very young, and we would normally never consider her, but if she’s our fated mate...

Leon looks down. His right hand rubs circles around his left wrist, above the stump. He always keeps his sleeve tucked in, I

have no idea if he's been keeping up with the ointment and exercises the doctor gave him. Yet another area in which I have failed to be the alpha I should. He keeps rubbing anxiously.

“What aren't you telling me?” I ask. There's something—that rubbing has become his new tell.

Leon sighs. “On Friday.... God, Hollis, I fucked up so bad.”

Panic grips me. “How? What happened?”

“I had a flashback.”

“Fuck,” I whisper.

“It wasn't one of my worst, but she... she listened to her instincts, Hollis. She hugged me. Held me. Brought me back.”

My stomach twists with envy. I can't tell if it's for her or him. My Pack Alpha instincts want me to go to him, to comfort him like she did. That's *my* job. At the same time, I want to brutalize him, punish him for earning the physical affections of our omega before me. I eye the red smears on his shirt. Some fucking Pack Alpha I am. I shake the thought away. “What happened then?” I ask.

“She wanted to know what happened, and I couldn't pretend it was nothing, so I told her that I lost my hand recently. Nothing else. I tried to answer some of her other questions. She's so afraid. And she's so weak, Hollis, she can barely open doors. She's dizzy just from standing and walking.”

I wait. I can tell he has more, he's still choking his bad wrist.

“Something spooked her and she passed out,” he blurts. “I caught her and then she was in my arms just crying and.... I purred for her.”

I close my eyes, trying to breathe slowly and deeply instead of lurching forward and choking the life out of him.

“She was so scared Hollis, it just broke my heart, and she was still coming down from her spike, and she needed me, and I was there, and I figured she’s our mate anyway, she has to be, there’s got to be some way we can make it work, there just has to be. So, of course I gave her what she needed.”

“Are you fucking stupid?” I snap.

Leon ignores the insult like I didn’t even speak. “I told her not to tell anybody.”

“That’s even worse! She probably ran to Dahlia or Wilder the second you were gone!”

“No, she fell asleep. I put her to bed. And I went to her appointment with the doctor today and nobody stopped me. Her hormones are all over the place. She needs us.”

I clench my fists again and grimace as the cuts in my palms smart. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, then another. I try to clear my mind, but it’s almost impossible. I’m angry, and the smell of her still hangs between us, a gravitational force I can’t let myself fall under.

“What should we do?” Leon’s voice is plaintive. He needs me to be Pack Alpha right now. Even after what I just did, he looks to me.

Shame curls in my gut. I fell first in the attack. Everything has been in pieces since. And now this. An omega. A sick omega, a ticking time bomb until her heat.

“Don’t tell Joshua and Risk,” I start.

“Maybe if Joshua scented her...” Leon’s already been duped by her scent. By the hope—the idealism that seems to come with the sweet pea bergamot goodness of Indigo.

“No.” My voice is resolute. “If he scents her and we can’t have her, it’ll break him.”

“He’s already broken, Hollis.”

“No. That’s an order.”

Leon bristles, but doesn’t argue.

“I’ll poke around at the Coalition and see if I can’t get us back on the list,” I continue.

“We’re not getting on the list without the case closed.”

He’s right. We need Joshua back. And even then, if by some bizarre chance we’re found liable... I can’t think about that. The past six weeks without the pack bond have been torture enough. If we get charged, we’ll be forcefully unbonded. I might as well put Joshua and Risk out of their misery right now—neither would survive it. Even with the bond shuttered, we’re their only ties to reality, and those ties are tenuous at best.

“So, what, then? We go feral and kidnap her?” Leon’s voice is spiteful, and I can’t blame him. Everything we campaigned

against, with our blind faith in the Coalition. When did things go so horribly wrong? We used to believe in this government. Now it seems we'll fall victim to the systems we helped build. Or, at least, *I* helped build. I wipe the spiteful thought away.

This is different. She's our fated mate. We'd never take her unwillingly, never steal her, even if she chose another pack. The thought is like a lance to my heart. But if she wanted us, if we wanted her, if the Complex and Coalition tried to come between us, could we go rogue?

I put my head in my hands.

"Hollis."

I can't look at him. There's no right answer. I'm the fucking alpha, that's my *job*, and my brain feels like it's moving through a thick soup of her scent, totally useless.

"There's a mixer Wednesday night," Leon says softly. "Will you come meet her?"

It's wrong. Going to a mixer without Risk and Joshua? Every part of me screams no. Instead of listening to my instincts though, I nod. I can meet her first, get the lay of the land, figure out a strategy before taking it to the pack. Two days. It feels like a fucking eternity. "Fine. But seriously, Leon. Don't tell Risk or Joshua. Not until we know we can have her. That she wants us too. And you *tell me* before you do or say anything with her. I want a full report after lunch."

He recoils at the order. I can practically hear his response in my head. Or, what he would have said, in the before-times.

She's an omega, Hollis, not a mission. He's never been good at separating personal and political. He'll have to be now, if he wants a chance in hell with this girl.

Instead, he just slides out from between me and the fridge and heads upstairs without another word.

Inexorable

INDIGO

A knock on my door wakes me, and for a moment I'm disoriented, confused by my unfamiliar surroundings. When I look outside, I realize it's dark. I fell asleep after getting back from the med hall, too exhausted from the walking and anxiety and Leon.

"Hello?" a light feminine voice calls out.

"Hold on one sec," I rasp. I get to my feet slowly, the headrush refusing to clear even when I crouch. I've been such a wreck, I realize that all I've eaten since Saturday is a bag of fruit snacks and a cup of applesauce from the little bag of snacks Leon grabbed for me on Friday. And it's now Monday night. Victory lances through the dizziness.

When it becomes clear I won't be able to stand upright without passing out, I walk hunched over. I don't want to keep whoever it is waiting for my stupid brain to start working right. I open the door and stand back.

"Sorry, wicked headrush," I mumble.

“Oh. Um. Hi.”

I look up and see that it's a tiny omega with fiery red hair and plump, freckled cheeks. She smells of fresh cut apples and smiles awkwardly, revealing crooked teeth. She's holding a tray.

“Hi. Come in, I guess?” I straighten slowly, my vision going entirely grey static. I cling to the bed, hoping I look at least semi-normal.

“I'm Cecilia, and um, this is dinner. This was also outside your door. I don't know what it is.”

I squint to see what she's offering. A white envelope.

I take it and pull out the paper inside, struggling to focus on the black printed characters swimming across the white page. I think I must be hallucinating because it's filled with strange things. *Alpha/omega Nutrition*, *Pack Bonds and Behaviors*, and *Hormonal and Heat Studies* are mixed in with things like Calculus and Physics and English.

“What the fuck?” I whisper. “This is so bogus.”

“What do you have? Maybe we have a class together.”

I realize I've totally ignored the girl. She hovers next to the tray.

“Here,” I shove the paper towards her. “But it's a mistake. I'm graduated, I shouldn't be in any classes.”

“They probably want to help you meet people, a lot of graduates still take classes. Helps with college apps too, if you

go that route. Oh, we have nutrition and heat studies!” she chirps. “Thank god. Nutrition sucks, it’s all pack-princesses. You’re beta-born, right?”

I nod mutely. *Pack princesses?* My eyes are stuck on the tray she set down—it’s covered in plates with little lids on them. They can’t seriously expect me to eat all that.

“Oh, um, that’s both of our dinners. We’re going to eat together.”

I look at her again. She’s younger than me, I think. Unsure of herself.

“I don’t eat in front of people actually,” I say. I can smell something sweet coming from one of the covered bowls—fruit, definitely melon, maybe strawberries too? I could get used to this heightened sense of smell. I can’t wait for this girl—she said her name was Cecilia?—to leave so I can dig in. “Sorry they sent you, but you can just leave the food and go.”

She shuffles back and forth. She is tiny—barely scratching five feet tall. We probably weigh the same, but she’s got the curves she’s supposed to where I’m all bones. I can’t help but feel superior, and then immediately guilty and angry at myself for comparing.

“Um, I can’t go,” she hesitates. “I’m sorry, I know this sucks; I actually, um, was in your shoes once. I mean, I had an ED. Not anorexia, but um, yeah. I get it.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. I don’t know why. Like I’m the only one allowed to have an eating disorder? Like I’m

somehow special for being broken? I'm probably just hungry. I *want* to eat that food. After two full days of fasting, I deserve it. I just don't want *her* to watch me doing it. I shuffle back and forth, mirroring her discomfort. The headaches will probably get better if I eat. What I would give to not have the fog of war perpetually haunting the edges of my vision.

"This is kind of a tradition," she half-smiles, reading my silence as encouragement to go on. "When mine got really bad, they stopped making me eat in the cafeteria and sent another omega to eat with me instead. Her name was Cora. She was my best friend, actually. She had an ED too, way back, and she ate with me while I figured out how to not upchuck everything I put in my mouth. She uh, just bonded a few months ago. It's been kind of sucky without her."

So that's it. She thinks this is her legacy or something. That I'll become the next happy healed omega to indoctrinate another broken girl into the order. I bite back my bitterness. I can see the hope in her eyes now—I thought before that it was pity, but it isn't. She's lonely.

Her cheeks are rosy and round and she is cute as a button. She has to have other friends, friends of her own. Or some pack waiting in the wings for her first heat, if she hasn't had it yet.

Bulimia. Ugh. The thought of glutting myself only to then spew it all back up? Gross. I can't imagine her on her knees in a bathroom, sticking her fingers down her throat. God. I always felt superior to the girls who vomited instead of

starving. They didn't have the self-control to stop themselves. I did.

Looking at Cecilia now, I don't feel superior. I feel shitty.

I still haven't said anything, and she's really squirming now. "They didn't even give you much to eat. Just some fruit salad and half a sandwich. The rest is mine."

I look at the tray. Five covered plates and bowls. The room really isn't big enough for two people to eat comfortably.

"How do you feel about eating outside?" I ask.

"It's kind of chilly." It is unseasonably cold for May, and I know the evening air will have a bite to it, but the thought of listening to her chewing noises in this tiny, unfamiliar room makes my skin crawl.

I shrug.

"Do you have an extra coat or something?" she asks.

I nod at my closet. "Go wild."

When she's equipped she starts heading for the tables in the common space out front from the dorm, but I grab her elbow to stop her. She follows my gaze to the banks of windows from onlooking dorm rooms, then nods dutifully.

I take us around the side of the building instead, until we're hidden on a narrow strip of grass between the end of the dorm and the dark woods. Not a window in sight. A single orange lamp hangs off the building to illuminate the emergency exit.

“So, how are you liking things so far?” Cecilia asks as she splits the plates between us.

Half a sandwich and some fruit salad—melon and strawberries and blueberries. I angle myself away from her, so she’ll only see me chewing in profile.

“It’s weird. I still can’t believe it’s all real.”

“I know,” Cecilia gushes. “I was twelve when I came and I can barely remember my first months here.”

“How old are you now?”

“I turned sixteen last week!”

So, she is younger than me. I wonder how old she was when she fought her eating disorder. I wonder what made her sick. My stomach sours at the thought of her feeling less than—I’ve known her for five minutes, but already she’s bubbling over with eagerness to tell me about the Complex, bouncy and vivacious and fun. Maybe a bit much, but already I feel my edges softening. I see why the Complex chose to send her, ED or not.

“So, any alphas caught your eye yet?” she wiggles her brows at me. I have to laugh.

“No, I’m gonna do a medical heat. Not into the whole ‘alpha’ thing.”

“Oh, you’ll change your mind,” she waves her hand at me and takes a bite of sandwich. “Nobody does medical heats.”

“Why?”

“It’s like... childbirth on steroids. Just like... ugh,” she shudders. “Not worth it. Trust me.”

I don’t feel the need to argue with her. “The only alphas I know are teachers and the stampede that almost took me out on Friday, so not really anything to get excited about.”

“Ooh, you like an instructor? Cora ended up mating with the English teacher. Apparently there’s supposed to be a full-time replacement, but he’s gone AWOL, so we just have this stuffy sub instead.”

“Wait, your friend mated with her *teacher*? No wonder he got fired...”

Cecilia laughs. “He wasn’t fired, the pack just moved so Cora could go to university in California.”

My eyes practically bug out. “So, it’s... ok to date teachers?”

Cecilia shrugs. “I don’t think anybody goes around *trying* to date an instructor. And definitely not before graduating. It just depends on what the heat sheets say.”

“Heat sheets?”

“The Coalition does genetic testing on all alphas and omegas to suggest ideal pack pairings for omegas courting or on rotation. The heat sheets don’t lie. If one of those packs has a teacher in it, well, ya know, small world. Everybody comes through the Complex at some point or other.”

I chew for a moment, mulling that over. I try not to think about Leon. It doesn’t go well.

“Ooh, you do have a teacher crush, don’t you?” Cecilia teases. I’m glad my back is to the light so she can’t see me blush.

“No,” I say lamely. “Who’s Drake? Shawn Drake?”

“Oh, he’s just *dreamy*,” Cecilia sighs. Just mentioning his name is enough to launch her into an introduction of all the alphas I need to know around campus. Shawn Drake is at the top of the list of ‘incredibly desirable Pack-alphas-to-be’. Jared Anderson and Michael James are on the ‘avoid at all costs’ list, and then there’s a whole slew of omega names I don’t even attempt to follow.

Then she’s going off about good hang-out spots and where everybody goes to smoke or drink or hide from adult supervision for a little private time. I don’t know the campus well enough to really follow, so I stay quiet and eat, glad that her attention is so wrapped up in what she’s saying that she isn’t really watching me. When I hear the word ‘Adams’, I tune back in.

“Wait, wait, what was that?” I interrupt whatever she’s saying.

“Oh, I was just saying that the student store up there is way better, if you need snacks or school supplies or anything.”

“You can go up to Adams?” I ask, excitement beginning to glow in my stomach.

“Yeah, you just have to be careful. The best time to go is now, actually. The guard shifts always waste time talking

when they trade watches, so there's like a solid fifteen minutes you can go across the athletics field and climb the hill without being noticed. Otherwise you have to go the long way around in the woods."

I'm already standing, not thinking of anything but the possibility of seeing Rose and Cam.

"Um, Indie, what are you doing?" Cecilia asks.

"I have to go see my friends," I rush.

Cecilia bites her lip. Not even two minutes ago she was telling me how to get away with sneaking around, and now she looks torn. I'm willing to bet that for all her knowledge of the hide-outs and methods of sneaking alphas into the omega dorms, she's never once attempted to actually break a rule. She seems like a real straight shooter. Her internal battle is broadcast in technicolor.

"Um, can you eat the rest of your food, at least?" she finally says.

I've nearly finished the fruit salad, and I have half the sandwich left.

I sit abruptly and smush the sandwich into my face. She has a point—I won't get far if I pass out halfway there.

"So, have you snuck around with any alphas?" I ask to get her talking while I chew.

"What? Me? No!"

I bite back a laugh as she flushes bright red. “What, you don’t go tiptoeing into the alpha dorms at night for some cutie?”

“The alphas don’t have dorms like us,” she scoffs. “They have *barracks*.”

“Wait, what?” I’m scarfing down my berries, eager to get up to Adams.

“Yeah. They have to form pack bonds, and the easiest way to do that is to be around each other like... all the time.”

“That sounds wretched,” I say as I finish my fruit. I’m already standing, leaving Cecilia with her practically untouched food—she spent so much time talking she hardly ate at all. “And now I guess you get to eat indoors?” I say, feeling a little bad for ditching her. Not bad enough to stop though.

Cecilia gets to her feet gingerly. I feel alive, my blood buzzing with the calories I just ate. *This* is why starving is worth it. Because it makes eating feel so damn good.

“I guess,” she says, hurt all over her face.

“Look, we’ll eat again together, right? If you’re my eating disorder buddy or whatever?”

“Yeah,” she says, glum.

“Awesome. Then I’ll see you tomorrow morning. And I’ll show you pictures of Cam, and you’ll understand *why* I’m so eager to go see him.”

Her nose crunches up. “A *beta*?” she asks.

“Not just any beta. You’ll see. I don’t want to miss shift change. Bye!” I’m already walking away, leaving her in the little pool of orange light, tray of food at her feet.

Cam and Rose. A semblance of normalcy. Maybe Rose’s dad can make some calls and I can move back up to Adams. I’ve only missed two rehearsals—they probably haven’t found a replacement stage manager yet.

I’ve read the omega book, I’ve felt my hormones rage, I know nothing can be undone, but hope blooms in my heart anyway. All of this can be fixed. Somehow. Maybe.

The energy from my first meal in two days lasts until I’m about twenty feet up the hill to Adams. Leon ran up this hill like it was no big deal, but even walking slowly I’m gasping for breath. I have to stop several times, sitting and putting my head between my knees to hold the dizziness at bay.

Sometimes I forget how weak I am. It hits me abruptly how abnormal it is to not be able to even walk up a hill without needing to stop and rest. I’m getting so used to the cold feeling pressing in my head that I forget it isn’t supposed to happen every time I stand or exert myself. My thoughts race, my brain burning through the sugar I gave it.

My heart is pounding in my chest by the time I crest the hill, both from the exertion and the fear of getting caught. I’m sweating like a pig and shivering from the cold and clammy all over.

Hopefully Rose and Cam will be together, hanging in their dorm's common area. I don't know if I'll get caught by the dorm minder if I try to go in, but there's a big bay window out back, so I can scope it out before trying anything.

I stick to the shadows of the campus I know so well, an ache growing at the memories that live here. The spot where Rose planned a surprise birthday picnic for me when I turned fourteen. Our favorite lunch table in the springtime. The cherry blossom tree where we watched Cam kiss his girlfriend last year, my stomach dropping out as their lips brushed.

I shake off that memory—I don't want to think like that, not right now. I want to find out what's happening with the play, what people are saying about my absence. Are they saying anything at all? Or was I as much of a ghost as I felt like, some weird hanger-on lingering after graduating?

I'm so excited about getting to the dorm that I almost stumble over a couple, sitting on a bench in the shadows.

“Oh, sorry,” I say as I veer too close to the pair, wrapped in each other's arms, stealing some quiet time alone. The sounds of their kissing are wet and sloppy. They pull apart to see who the doofus is tripping over them, and the moonlight illuminates their faces.

Rose and Cam. Cam and Rose. Kissing. *Loudly.*

“Oh.”

“Indie?” Rose's voice is frantic. “What... where have you been?”

I realize I stopped breathing and force myself to inhale, trying to reconcile the horror in front of me with reality. That's when I scent them. Like Styrofoam packing peanuts and printer ink. Just like the hillside on Friday. The smell I was looking around for when my spike started. When the stampede began.

Revulsion washes through me.

Cam lurches away from Rose, but she feels no such urgency. She lets her hand linger on his leg, and my eyes fix on that.

Everything is a jumble—the hurt mixes with their nauseating scents. Everything I thought I wanted but didn't deserve snatched away, just before I have the chance to realize I don't want it. Not even a little bit.

I ache for the safety of Leon's arms. None of this would hurt as bad if I were bathing in the richness of cloves and cedar rather than the chemical odors that Cam and Rose emanate. I want Leon, I want his strength and protection and arms around me and solid, steady purring to give me something to match my heartbeat too. I'm hot all over.

"Sorry. This was a mistake," I mumble. *Leon was right.* I shouldn't have come.

I turn and rush away, ignoring their voices calling out behind me. How long have they been doing this? Rose knew about my feelings for Cam, has known for years. Was she sitting on her own crush that whole time? Was she *relieved* when I disappeared? Were they doing this before I left? Behind my back?

Tears cloud my vision and I stop paying attention to where I'm going. I think I might throw up. I don't know if they'll chase me. I don't know if I want them to.

I half tumble, half run down the hill, not realizing it's shallower because I'm at the far end, veering into the woods rather than the field. Every slap of my feet on the ground hurts.

I fall and stay down, chest heaving, sobs wracking my body. I try to get up and stagger forward, but the headrush hits almost instantly and I go down again, falling to my knees in the dirt. My heartbeat is erratic, too hard, threatening to burst from my chest.

“Excuse me? Miss?” a male voice calls out to me, a little raspy.

I try to get up again, stumbling forward a few steps before crashing back down. Something in my knee crunches, pain blooming. Humiliation courses through me as the man approaches.

He kneels down next to me and time freezes.

He is woodsmoke, a bonfire, thick and intoxicating. Laughter on a summer night. The freedom of dancing like nobody is watching. Like everybody is watching, and you just don't care.

The most gorgeous chocolate brown eyes I've ever seen, in a young face under a thick mop of chestnut-colored waves, held back by a black elastic band. A gold ring through his septum,

matching gold rings in each of his earlobes, a few on each side. He is a contrast of angles and softness, full lips and hollow cheeks, a sloping nose and deep-set brow.

“Are you—” his voice chokes off and I watch his eyes glaze over. The glow in my stomach is instant, all of my pain from a moment before sublimated into need, pulling me towards him.

“I—” my words are cut off by his lips crashing into mine.

I should be shocked. Logically I know that. But my body doesn't. He's warm and his arms come around me, pulling me to his body, hot and muscled and strong. He floods my senses, woodsmoke and power and lust. I'm holding him too, my arms around him, my fingers splayed and feeling the bones and muscles of his back.

I realize it's my first kiss, and maybe I should be alarmed by some stranger in the forest taking it from me, but I can't. I'm drunk on his scent, pulsing heat growing between my legs as he pulls me into him.

But then his hands begin roaming, up my waist, around to my non-existent breasts, and I freeze in his grip.

“Stop,” I murmur, trying to squirm away, but I can't. I'm too weak, and he's *so* strong. I'm such a fool, part of me doesn't want to stop, but this is wrong, I'm hyperventilating and I realize I'm still crying, even with his lips crushing against mine.

“Please,” I whimper, and he pulls back, letting me go. His eyes are wild with lust and pain and I feel the need to comfort

him. “I’m sorry,” I murmur, reaching for his face. “I didn’t mean—”

“HEY!” A voice pierces the darkness.

I look up and realize we’re in the woods. I don’t know how I got here, but then his lips are on mine again and I’m on my back in the dirt. My bad knee throbs, and I’m lost in the kiss for a moment, my hand snaking into his thick waves and pulling him closer before realizing I really, *really* shouldn’t be doing this. Fear starts to bloom in my chest. This man could do whatever he wants to me and I couldn’t stop him. I let go of his hair and try uselessly to shove him away.

The thunderous sound of feet approaching breaks his concentration for a moment. I squirm, but I’m not strong enough to slip out. I don’t really *want* to slip out. No, I do. Right? Everything is jumbled and his lips are hot and needy. Or is that me?

Then he’s gone, lifted from on top of me and tossed away like a ragdoll.

Leon towers above me, chest heaving. “Blue jay, are you—”

His words are cut off by the other man crashing into him, sending them both tumbling to the ground.

Then they’re fighting. I try to get up and scramble away, but my bad knee gives out immediately and I fall, pain igniting my entire leg.

I can only watch.

At first, it looks like Leon is going to easily overpower his opponent—he's bigger and stronger. But after a few breathless moments, the stranger is winning. They strike at each other with a sort of practiced familiarity, grunting and blocking and circling, always in motion.

Leon isn't used to fighting without his hand. He keeps trying to use it to hit or grab the man before realizing it's not there. And the man takes full advantage of this, pummeling Leon with lightning-fast blows. He's incredibly skilled, finding the tiniest windows to strike Leon where he can't defend.

Just when it seems like the fight is over and the stranger will have me at his mercy, Leon's voice booms out.

“Stand *down*.”

Dominance drips from the words and I shiver, cowering in the dirt. But my instinctual reaction has nothing on what happens to the man.

He falls like he's been shot. Then he makes the strangest keening sound I've ever heard, like a choked off howl of pain. Leon cringes as the stranger convulses on the ground, his back arching unnaturally like somebody just shocked him back to life. Once, twice he convulses, then he rolls onto his hands and knees, head ducked pitifully as he whines like an animal. He looks between Leon and me, seeing but not seeing, before staggering to his feet and tearing off into the forest.

Leon is breathing hard, but he jumps to his feet and comes over to me. I'm holding my knee, and he crouches, his big hands settling on the swelling.

“So,” he pants. “I see you’ve met Risk.”

12

Misbegotten

RISK

“*it, little alpha*”
S “*stand!*”

“*I said sit!*”

“*on your back, you pathetic degenerate*”

“*did I say you could move?*”

“*break your own finger.*”

“*do it, go on now. Do it.*”

Dirt in my mouth. Knees skinned. Tree. Good.

Thud. Forehead split. Orders still there. Won't come loose.

Thud. Searing pain. Blood in my eyes. Still there, can't do it all, can't do them both.

Too many contradictions.

Bergamot and black tea and need.

The feeling of being ok.

Brief, too brief.

I need her.

Stand DOWN.

I howl. Pitiful. Pathetic.

Blood in my eyes. I wipe it away. Too much.

Joshua. I need Joshua.

One more, good measure. *Thud*. Ow.

Run. Fast.

Leave them behind. Leave her behind. Leaving, always leaving.

Doesn't work, I know it doesn't work.

Panting, eyes stinging. Too much blood. *Dumbass*. Don't hit your head on things. Duh.

Car. No. Feet. I need earth.

Shoes off. Leave them.

Dirt between my toes. Grounding.

I come back slowly. Those orders weren't now. Not tonight. I don't have to listen.

Leon had to. He had to. I—

I sob as I realize. Fate.

She's ours. *Was* ours. I attacked her. I ruined it.

Ruined ruined ruined ruined.

I trip. Fall. Vomit, all over my hands. Bitter bile in my throat.

My omega, powerless beneath me. Afraid.

Wretch. Heave. Nothing.

Get up, step in vomit, dumbass, keep going.

Blood in eyes, wipe with hands, vomit in eyes, *ow*, stinging,
stupid fucking dumbass useless alpha.

“hurt yourself little alpha”

“be creative”

“that’s an order”

“do it.”

“down, boy”

“hit yourself”

“look at him. Pathetic.”

Pathetic. Me. Yes.

House. Joshua.

Dirt on stairs, ugh, Hollis will be angry.

Joshua’s door, closed, always closed.

I open it. *Slam*. Ugh. Sorry.

“Risk? Oh *Shit*. Sit down. Fuck. Let me get Hollis—”

“No!”

“Risk, you’re bleeding everywhere.”

“No Hollis. Please.”

Joshua, staggering, standing, so sad, so dark.

“Risk...”

“Please.”

“Fine.”

He’s gone. I can’t breathe. I gasp, fighting for air that isn’t there.

“Hey, hey, breathe, deep breaths, in, out.”

Joshua in front of me, supplies in hand. Then, frozen.

“What—” his voice chokes off and he’s looking around. Alarmed. Scenting. *Where is she?*

I wonder the same thing. *Where is she?* Is she ok? After what I did?

“Sorry,” I gasp, then whine again. I can’t help it, I don’t mean to. I hurt her. I need her.

His eyes are wide. Chest heaving. *Need.* Like mine. He’s alive. Joshua! Alive! I almost smile. Then the air is gone again and I’m drowning.

“Risk.” Joshua. Sane. Alive. “Come back. Deep breaths. Follow the hand.”

Hand. Moving. Up slowly, down slowly, up slowly, down slowly. Metronome.

I breathe. In and out. In and out.

I come back. My eyes focus. Joshua. Black curls. Red lips. Pale skin. Dark circles. *Beautiful.*

“Hey.” Joshua kneels in front of me. “You with me?”

I nod.

“What—what is that smell?”

“*Her.*”

Joshua sits back on his heels. “Who?”

“I don’t know,” I choke. “I—I hurt her. I’m sorry.”

Salty tears burn my cheeks.

“Hey, hey. Shh. Not now. Stay here, stay with me, please, Risk. Don’t go again.”

I shudder, but nod.

“Can I clean your face?”

I nod.

“What did you do?”

“Tree.”

“You hit your face against a tree?”

“Three times.”

“Why?”

“Trying to get the orders out.”

He sighs. “I thought we were past that.”

I shake my head. “Leon had to—had to do it. To get me off her.”

Joshua hesitates. “Leon is with her, then?”

I nod.

“So, she’s ok. She’ll be ok.”

I will myself to believe it. Her eyes, wide and fearful. *No*. Can’t think of that.

“I hate being so goddamn fucking fragile,” I murmur as Joshua brings the cotton ball soaked in stinging antiseptic to my forehead. The lovely burn.

“Right there with you,” Joshua smiles. “But at least we’re basket-cases together, huh?”

I can’t make myself smile. My grip on sanity is a little too shaky.

Joshua cleans in silence. Then he’s done, gauze taped on my forehead.

“Hey,” his hand on my cheek, brushing away the tears. He’s so warm. The rain to my smoke. Always putting me out.

“Taste her,” I whisper.

“Risk...”

I lean forward and do it for him, brush my lips against his. Through the antiseptic, the bile and dirt and blood and tears, the faint taste of bergamot, of sweet pea, of black tea on a rainy day.

Joshua sighs when I pull away.

“Right?” I rumble.

Joshua shakes his head. “We can’t. We’ll hurt her.”

“Already did.”

“No. She’s fine if Leon’s with her. Everything will be ok.”

“No. Not without her.”

He grimaces.

“Come on,” he says. Always gentle, always soft. “Out of those clothes. I’ll get you some new ones.”

I’m naked when he returns. He hands me a t-shirt and boxers. I pull them on.

His bed smells bad. But he won’t come to mine. And I won’t be without him. Not now.

“Come on,” I say. I fall into bed.

He stands above me, lingering.

Everything is always wrong. He can’t let himself feel good.

I don’t care. I need him.

“Come on,” I say, more insistently.

He sighs. He gets in.

I mold to him. We don’t sleep in the pack bed anymore. I can’t remember the last time I touched Leon or Hollis. I need them just as bad.

But only Joshua is here. Only Joshua gets it.

He understands my kind of broken. They like to pretend that they don’t.

Inchoate

INDIGO

“Risk,” I repeat dumbly. I only have flashes of him—
chestnut waves, burning brown eyes, a fire in them
that’s all-consuming. It would have eaten us both if Leon
hadn’t arrived. I would have let it.

“Can you walk?” Leon asks me.

I shake my head. I barely hear him. Everything is cedar and
cloves and woodsmoke and want.

My entire body is trembling. The dirt is cold, my clothes
ruined from brambles and tangling with Risk. My knee pulses
with pain—something is wrong, deep inside the joint, and my
stomach turns at the sensation.

The scent of smoke lingers, heavy in the air. Leon’s cloves
and cedar sets it off perfectly. They match. I thought no scent
could be better than Leon’s and then Risk came along, the
perfect complement.

I'm trying to force my brain to think in straight lines again. Everything is swimmy with the delicious scents. That's when I catch it for the first time—bergamot and black tea. Me. It's complicated and spicy sweet, melting with the woodsmoke and cloves, an earthy bouquet.

I'm suddenly aware of Leon's proximity, kneeling next to me, his hand resting on my swollen knee.

His eyes are so green, his short blonde hair all tousled from fighting Risk. His cheeks are flushed and his brow is furrowed with concern.

Without thinking, I reach out and put my hand on his cheek. He's so warm, he flinches when my icy fingers come in contact with his skin.

"Indie..." he breathes. "You're spiking."

I know what spiking is now. I do. Logically. It's my pheromones getting tricked into thinking it's heat time and getting my body all ready for sex, aka the warmth and wetness between my legs and the absolute flood of my scent I'm sure is battering Leon right about now.

But all I can think of is how beautiful he is. So strong, and capable, and calm. How he fought Risk to protect me.

Risk.

I look off in the trees he disappeared into. The ghost of his lips crushed against mine still lingers. I bring my fingers to my mouth, bruised from the force of him. Flashes of emotion collide against each other, each carrying words and thoughts

with them, but none able to claim my brain long enough to play out. Lust and worry, for Risk. Need, for Leon. Fear, for me. Shame, for the feeling in my belly and groin. Pain in my knee. Hurt, from Cam and Rose.

“Did he injure you?” Leon asks, grounding me again.

I shake my head. “No. I fell. He heard me in the woods and came over and I think I was already spiking. He didn’t mean to. He just...”

“I know,” Leon sighs.

We’re both silent. At first, I’m lost in the memory of Risk’s kiss, the pleasurable jolt that traveled down my body, ricocheting and returning to my brain as fear. Then I’m noticing Leon’s expression, troubled.

“The incident where I lost my hand...” he falters. “He was also hurt, in a different way.”

“How?” I can’t stop myself from asking. The spike begins to fade, pushed back by my curiosity.

“You know about compulsion dominance?” Leon asks.

“It’s how you stopped him.”

Leon nods. “He was dominated. A lot. It’s disrespectful to compel people outside of extenuating circumstances. You saw me dominate my combat class on Friday, but before that it had been years since I’d done it. During the... incident, though, some alphas began tormenting him. Compelling him with contradicting orders, telling him to hurt himself.”

Leon begins absently rubbing around his stump as he speaks. I realize the long-sleeved t-shirt he's wearing has come untucked, and for the first time I can see the scar from his amputation. It's still red and angry, not fully knitted together yet. It looks painful.

Incident. He's so careful with his words. They were attacked, they had to have been. But he won't say it, won't let slip the violence that must have led to the puckered red scar capping his left arm. Or his packmate's damaged psyche.

"Risk has always been a little unpredictable," Leon continues, "he didn't come from the best home life and manifested way too young, and what those alphas did just... broke something inside of him. He hasn't been the same since. Dominating him just now was the cruelest thing I could have done. I just couldn't... I had to."

I let out a long breath. "Thank you," I say. "I'm ok. Honestly. He did nothing wrong. If he did, it was my fault. I disobeyed you, I went up to Adams. I... saw my old friends." The wind goes out of me with the words. With the memory of Cam and Rose, tangled on the bench together.

Leon doesn't say anything.

"You were right," I whisper. "I shouldn't have gone."

"What did they smell like?" he asks knowingly.

"Styrofoam and printer ink. And they were kissing."

That makes him smile, just slightly. "Should they not have been?"

“I had a crush on him for years, and she knew all about it. I was gone for three days and they were all over each other. My two best friends.”

“Oh, little bird.”

“It’s stupid,” I mutter, “they smell bad anyway. I don’t even want him anymore, not now, but the fact that they did that...”

The shaking overcomes me. I’m not crying, but the aftermath of the shock and adrenaline and spike combine to wrack my body with shivers. I grimace as my bad knee knocks my good one, letting out a low hiss. I can’t stop it, no matter how hard I try.

Leon sighs, then lifts me, like I’m a feather, and suddenly he’s sitting on the ground and I’m cradled in his arms and he’s rocking slowly, shushing me as I shake.

Why does this always happen? Why does he always see me like this, when I’m falling to pieces?

“My god, you must think I’m a mess,” I laugh bitterly. What can I do but laugh? This beautiful man has witnessed me at such lows. He’s been through so much, lost his fucking hand, watched his packmate have a mental break, and here I am quivering over petty teenage heartbreak and missing a fucking play.

“Little bird,” Leon speaks softly, “You are not a mess. What you’re going through is impossible. You’re handling it like a champ. I feel privileged to witness it.”

I look up at him, and I can tell he's being earnest. My stomach flips. How stupid, to be bothered by the plastic smells of Cam and Rose when his heady scent is all around.

"Do I smell good to you?" I ask before I can stop myself.

He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

"Yes, you do," he says, his voice a little stiff.

"Risk smells like you. Not the same scent, but the same kind of... I don't know. Safety?" I blush, realizing how Risk's actions a few minutes ago are the antithesis of safety. "Wilder and Dr. Gray don't smell like that."

Leon swallows again. "What do they smell like?"

"Dr. Gray smells like leather, and Wilder smells like musty paper."

That makes Leon smile. "How about we get you back to the Complex and get that knee looked at?"

He helps me off his lap and I can't keep my eyes from flashing to his groin—he was careful when I was in his lap to not let my weight anywhere near his crotch, but as he moves to stand, I catch sight of the swell of him in his pants. He's hard—and very, very large. My eyes widen and I swallow thickly. *It's just the spike it's just the spike it's just the spike.*

He turns away from me for a moment, taking the opportunity not only to adjust himself, but also to re-tuck his sleeve over his stump. I do my best to school my features into something non-desperate.

“Can you walk?” he asks.

I shake my head. My knee is throbbing and hot and already my opposite hip is shrieking at me for how I’m standing to keep my weight off the injury.

Leon scoops me up without another word. I feel childish being carried again, but I can’t ignore the distinct, heavy wetness growing between my thighs as he lifts me. *It’s just the spike*, I repeat to myself in a silent prayer.

I hate myself for it. It’s like no matter what I do or say, any time I take a breath the pheromones wash over me, forcing my attention to Leon. To the things I could envision myself doing with him, if I let myself. If he wanted me. Indie the Imaginative.

I bury my face in his chest, embarrassed. I shouldn’t feel like this, no part of me really wants it, right? It’s all hormones, no matter how real it seems. I can’t trust this man, look at what his packmate did to me.

And look how much you liked it.

“How old is Risk?” I ask, trying to distract myself. “He seems so much younger than you.”

“He’s twenty-one. I’m twenty-four. So not too different. He came to the Complex when he was eleven. Normally, alphas don’t manifest—”

“Until fourteen or fifteen.” I cut him off. I remember it from the textbook.

He nods. “Risk manifested early. He was a handful as a kid, and too young to know what to do with his new alphas. He’s always been a little strange.”

His words could easily be construed as unkind, but Leon has a glint of pride in his eyes as he speaks that I don’t think he’s aware of. A protective instinct, almost.

“Who else is in your pack?” I ask carefully.

“Our pack leader is Hollis, and then our fourth and final is Joshua.”

“And how old are they?”

“Hollis is twenty-eight. Joshua is also twenty-four. You might meet Hollis on Wednesday. If you go to the mixer.”

I nod slowly. “I’d like that.”

I wonder if he smells as good as Leon and Risk.

“How did you know to come find me?” I ask, realizing suddenly how strange it is that he’s out here at this time of night.

“Ms. O’Brien went to check on you after dinner and you weren’t in your room. I was coming back to look for you, then I scented you and Risk.”

“Am I that strong?” I blush.

“Yes, little bird, you are,” he smiles.

My stomach twists. Is my scent not affecting him like it did Risk? Does he not feel what I do? I’m dying to press my palms

against his chest. To feel him purr, though I know he shouldn't. I shouldn't want him to. Right?

14

Mortal

LEON

She's trying to fucking kill me.
If my cock grew any harder it would fully bust through my fatigues.

She is rubbing her face directly over my scent glands, sending a tidal wave of citrus sweetness coursing through my veins.

I like to think I'm a well-controlled alpha. Instincts in check. A voice of reason in my pack.

But this featherweight princess in my arms is testing every limit I've ever placed on myself and then some.

I would break her. Crush her. No. I would hold her. Worship her. *Fuck, Leon.*

The rut is inside me. I can feel it. It's only egged on by the compulsion I had to put on Risk. We alphas don't talk about it, but there *is* a surge of pleasure when you dominate somebody. When you win.

To feel that against my own packmate? It's sick. Wrong. And fueling the beast inside me that wants to pick up where he left off. I speed up, trying to escape the thought.

In between flashes of beyond inappropriate fantasies about the girl in my arms, I'm cursing Hollis, because I have no idea where Risk is, or if he's even close to ok after what I did to him. The bond is a dead phone line in my body. He could be anywhere.

In the clearing, holding Indie, she was all I was thinking about. Just making sure she was ok. Making sure Risk hadn't further traumatized her. If she wasn't sure about the medical heat before, she has to be now.

But I can't think about it. I have to make sure she's ok. And then Risk. Is that the right order? She isn't ours, not technically, not yet. Maybe not ever. And he's my bonded packmate.

But the bond isn't there. Ever since the attack, when Hollis shuttered it. When he thought Joshua's black hole would somehow further damage Risk. Drain him of whatever life force he has.

If I'm being honest, he could use a little draining. He's like a spinning top, in perpetual motion, careening around, crashing into things or people and bouncing and not coming to rest until somebody drags him down. He's always been that way.

He's always needed us more, to anchor him. And when he needed us most, Hollis cut the one line that tied us to him. The language that only Risk seemed native in. The pack bond, the

second heart beating in my chest, a little pulse of the vital life force of every member of my pack. *Fuck.*

I steady my breathing, trying to pace quietly with Indie in my arms, ears searching the forest for the sound of him. Nothing. *Fuckfuckfuck.*

Indie is spiking again. She has no idea how powerful it is, and I'm worried about walking her through the middle of campus to get to the med hall like this. I need all my blood in my brain in order to think, but with her eyelashes fluttering against my neck, her arms clinging to me, I'm a goner. Every red blood cell has a one-way ticket straight to my dick.

I bite back a groan. I can't scare her. She's so delicate, so afraid of this aspect of who we are.

But she's also going to need to learn how to control this. How to recognize when she's doing it.

"Indie," I hesitate as we get closer to the tree line. "You're spiking again."

"Sorry," she murmurs. "I don't know how to stop."

I bite back another groan. How did we end up here? How is it that *I'm* the one who has to attempt to explain this?

She has to be slick and wet and needy and desperate for me right now, she's burning up in my arms and her black-tea scent is sharp with lust. What I *want* to do is lay her down and knot her and never let her go, not without my bite on her neck. What I *need* to do is explain to a self-conscious, anorexic, pubescent teenager how to *not* be horny. Despite the veritable

fountain of pheromones inches from her neck, tailor-made for her biology to turn her on. Yeah. This is great.

“It’s ok,” I falter. “Take some deep breaths. Focus on scents that uh, aren’t mine. Can you smell the forest? Can you pick up any other omegas?”

She sniffs gently, her little button nose rising into the night air. I fight the urge to fall to my knees. My cock is pulsing with heat, my knot halfway inflated just by the scent of her alone.

My god.

I keep scanning the grounds as we cross the distance to the med hall, looking out for alphas, school-affiliated or otherwise. I don’t think I’ll ever feel safe in plain sight with an omega again. Not after the attack.

Thankfully nobody apprehends us, even with Indie’s spike only barely tamed, trailing citrus spice behind us. I shoulder open doors and hurry inside.

Like a second blessing, Alicia is the nurse on night watch. I’m glad Indie will have a familiar face. And one without a nose capable of picking up my pathetically altered, horny scent.

“We have a knee injury,” I grunt as I barrel into the room, hoping to distract from the fact that I am not only carrying a young, spiking omega like a damsel in distress, but also that I have a raging, tent-like boner displayed for everybody and their uncle to see.

You couldn't have ziptied the thing down, Indie is just that enticing.

Alicia gestures us through, straight past the exam rooms to the hospital wing, and I set Indie on the first gurney inside the door. Third blessing of the night, Alicia doesn't stare at my massive hard-on, nor glare at me in any way indicating that she might have seen it. She also doesn't pause at the sight of Indie, covered in dirt, clothes torn and face flushed with the spike. Is it obvious to everybody else that her lips are swollen and just-kissed, or is that just me?

Alicia is straight to business, cutting away Indie's jeans to free her balloon-like knee.

Stepping back and looking at Indie's tiny frame in the big hospital bed, I have a weird moment of double vision.

I see Indie first—cheeks flushed, all angles, vibrant and alive, looking at me like I'm her compass.

Then I see Indie as the rest of the world sees her. Gaunt. Cheeks hollow, sallow skin, hair stringy and dull. A lost child, with a knee as big as a basketball and tattered, over-laundered clothes.

I blink a few times, trying to reconcile the two images, but the Indie that the rest of the world sees is gone when she turns her wide eyes to me again. I only see my Indie. My blue jay. And that's terrifying, because I know this girl could very easily die in the next few months if she doesn't get better, and all I see is the spark inside of her that somehow keeps her going, against all odds.

I have to help her get better.

“Well, this is just no good,” Alicia’s voice is soft and motherly, a nurturing presence in the sterile hospital ward of the school. “We need to take you into town to use the hospital MRI. It could just be an ACL tear, but I don’t like the look of it. Let me call up Dr. Gray to be sure, he’ll have to come sign off to take you off-campus at night.”

“Whoa whoa whoa, tonight?” I repeat. “Now?”

“Well, yes. The foot isn’t getting the circulation it needs—it could be for, well, other reasons,” Alicia averts her gaze from Indie, “but regardless, we need to make sure the swelling doesn’t prevent blood flow to her extremities. I’ll be right back, let me just call Dr. Gray.”

She bustles off, and Indie turns to me. “You’re coming with, right?”

My stomach sinks. My boner—which had just gone half-mast, due to a combination of extreme willpower and the bitter antiseptic smell of the ward tempering Indie’s scent—springs back into action.

“Of course, blue jay,” I answer without thinking.

Hollis will be pissed. He doesn’t care if she’s our fated fucking mate, the fact that I let Risk run off into the woods and did nothing to go after him, to make sure he was ok? Unforgivable.

I could turn it into a fight. If I wanted to.

I wouldn't have to run off after him if I had the bond, asshole.

I don't often fight with Hollis. We're fairly evenly matched. I was meant to be a pack alpha, once upon a time. Me, Joshua, and two others. Our families had it all planned, when we landed at the Complex. Plans change.

I'm usually grateful that we found Hollis, fine with my placement in our pack. But now?

My stump aches, and I rub it gingerly as Indie begins to shiver in the big bed.

I don't think before pulling my jacket off.

"Here," I hold it out to her. She accepts it without a word, and I don't miss the little sniff she takes of the black cotton before pulling it over her stack of shirts and jackets she's already wearing. Even with all the layers, it hangs on her like she's wearing a tent.

"Is Risk going to be ok?" she asks, like she's reading my mind.

I nod. "He'll be fine. He's a grown alpha, he can take care of himself." *Probably.*

"I'm worried for him," she sighs.

"Don't you worry about him even a little bit, little bird. You worry about you. About getting better."

I don't mean the words to carry the weight they do, but we both feel it as they settle in the air around us. The silence that

follows is heavy and still.

“I know I’m skinny enough,” Indie finally whispers.

I want to shush her, to tell her we don’t have to talk about it, but she’s already going on.

“I know I’ve made it. I don’t need to be skinnier. But the thought of gaining weight terrifies me. And I still feel stupidly happy when the number on the scale goes down, even though I know I shouldn’t. I know I’m sick, I really do, and I don’t want to die, but if getting better means gaining weight, I’m not sure I want that either. Especially not if it means having my heat.”

Fuck. I scramble. Was not expecting *that*. “You’re ok with feeling sick all the time?” I ask.

She fidgets with her hands, her long fingers flexing and coming to rest on the swollen mass of her knee. “Feeling sick is good for my ED brain. I know when I’m sick, when I feel crappy, that I won’t eat. And that’s good, even if I have to feel bad to get there. It’s wrong, I know.”

“Not wrong,” I say gently. “Not wrong at all. You’re doing your best.”

She laughs. “I don’t think so.”

“Indie,” I sigh. “You’re sitting here worrying about Risk, a total stranger who just, for lack of a better word, assaulted you.”

“But—“

“But nothing. I didn’t tell you about his history to excuse his actions, just to help you understand him. And it didn’t even cross your mind not to forgive him. Instantly, you had compassion for him in a way I have yet to see you demonstrate for yourself.”

She bites her lip and I fight the urge to reach out and brush it with my thumb, to make her stop hurting herself.

She doesn’t say anything for a while. I can practically see the gears turning in her head as she thinks about what I said. I feel shitty, like I scolded her, but now that the words are out I realize how true they are. They always talk about how self-conscious teenagers are, how hyper-judgmental, but they rarely talk about how simultaneously competent and able they are. It’s a dangerous combination. Potentially lethal. Irrational enough to hate her body, but capable enough to destroy it. What made her hate herself so much?

A few minutes later, Alicia comes back. She flutters about, cleaning Indie’s superficial scrapes and insisting on cleaning my lip, which I didn’t even realize was split.

Then Dr. Gray arrives. He doesn’t seem surprised to see me, and after examining Indie’s knee he agrees that the hospital is necessary.

The final miracle of the night is the spray bottle he pulls from a cabinet in the corner of the room—medical-grade de-scenter.

Half of me wants to punch him for snuffing out Indie’s perfume, the other half wants to hug him for saving me from

myself.

He explains to Indie how the spray works and she blushes ferociously, one final little puff of citrus-sweet black tea before she's dousing herself with the astringent nothingness of the de-scenter.

It's good though—we'll be leaving the Complex, and I want my wits about me. Even with Indie de-scented, even with another campus guard, with Dr. Gray and Alicia and the van driver, I don't feel safe outside the confines of the Complex boundaries. I wish I had a weapon on me, but I'm teacher Leon now, no longer tactical mission leader Leon like I was before.

"Now, I know we had a wheelchair around here somewhere." Alicia begins walking towards the back of the room, searching between the beds that line the walls.

"I'll just carry her," I grunt, shoulders hunched, eyes locked on Indie's knee.

Dr. Gray eyes her foot—it's turning a dusky grey color—before nodding his assent. Alicia hurries back and they exchange a grim look.

I sit Indie down next to me in the van and we settle in for the forty-five-minute drive into town. She doesn't complain about her pain, and within minutes, even as we're still on the bumpy gravel driveway back to Adams, she's dead asleep, head resting on my shoulder.

Her scent is muted now, and her little body shivers against me. I'm grateful for the clarity of mind I have, and the chemical arousal of earlier is replaced with a protective fondness. Dr. Gray's eyes are needle-like on me in the rearview mirror, but I wrap my arm around her anyway and pull her close. Maybe when she has more than 2% bodyfat he can choose this fight, but for now all I care about is my little blue jay getting warm and safe and ok again. If she ever was to begin with.

15

Mad

HOLLIS

I'm thinking it might be time to hire a personal chef—I really need to get out the door in the mornings, to put in my time at the Coalition and get Midas Pack back on the map. Trying to feed Joshua is turning into a second job, and it's not one I have time for.

If only he would get out of his fucking bed, we'd be able to talk about it. I used to grab a protein bar and apple before heading to work, but now here I am making oatmeal on the stovetop. Because I know that was his favorite. Before. Or, at least, the way he always made it.

I'm stirring the gloopy mess and wishing we had an omega around to tell me if I'm doing it right.

I've been thinking about Indie since scenting her on Leon yesterday. We're too out of it right now to consider bonding an omega, but it sounds like she isn't ready for a pack yet either. Not if she's sick. God knows we have enough to handle right now without adding another sick pack member.

I tamp down the pull in my chest that the memory of her scent draws up. Leon is strong enough to compartmentalize, but Risk and Joshua wouldn't be able to. I have to protect them. That's what love is. I'm making the right decision, I know it, even if it's hard.

I won't pretend I'm not nervous, meeting her in person tomorrow night and getting hit with the full force of her scent. My alpha instincts are strong, and I know the urge to care for her will be overwhelming. *A fated mate*. How ironic, to lead one of the packs lucky enough to experience such a thing, and have her appear in our lives now, of all times.

I'm just grateful she's in the capable hands of the Complex. It wouldn't be right, otherwise. But I know she'll be taken care of, and I can take care of my own pack until we're all ready to cross that bridge.

The sound of the front door opening jars me. This is weird, because Joshua is always in bed, Risk is usually passed out at this time after getting back from his third-shift patrol—or wherever he ends up after—and Leon is always gone before me for the early morning bootcamp he leads.

I figure maybe Risk decided to hit the strip club again—you would think finishing work at five in the morning that there would be nowhere in town to get a drink, but Risk always finds a way. Sure, his usual haunt is the seediest, most disgusting place imaginable, but Risk doesn't mind. Taste has never been his strong suit.

It's Leon who drags himself into the kitchen instead.

“Late night?” I ask.

My instinct is to disapprove; Risk is one thing—I’ve long ago given up on him—but Leon carries Midas Pack’s reputation on his shoulders. He can’t be out and about partying so soon after the attack. Then I think that maybe he was just distracting himself from being unable to be with Indie, and that’s slightly better, though still not great. It doesn’t even cross my mind to be offended he did it without me, even after we used to do all our partying together. It also doesn’t cross my mind to really *look* at him and see that he isn’t bedraggled, but scuffed and dirty and bruised. Not until he fixes his eyes on me and the full force of his exhaustion hits. I would have felt it, if the damn bond was open.

“Is Risk ok?” he asks.

“Why wouldn’t he be? Probably passed out upstairs after work. I thought you were him, coming back from the club.”

Leon stops in the middle of the kitchen. “You didn’t see him last night?”

“No. Leon, what’s going on?” I remove the oatmeal from the stove—I’m pretty sure I’ve ruined it anyway—and turn to face him fully. His lip is split. He reeks of Indie. His eyes meet mine for a brief moment, the weight of his exhaustion and resentment like an anvil in my chest. Then he’s gone, charging up the stairs.

I follow him, more confused than anything. He’s already slammed Risk’s door open by the time I make it to the landing, revealing his disaster of a room, empty. I scan the weapon wall

and allow myself a millisecond of relief that nothing is missing—the wall is exactly what it sounds like, stuffed floor to ceiling with his collection of instruments of death. The nesting room is also empty, the pack bed inside musty with disuse.

Leon knocks on Joshua's door last. No response, of course. He knocks again and I sigh and push past him, opening the door.

Leon practically topples over me into the room, and then we both stand there, dumbfounded.

Risk and Joshua are in Joshua's bed. This isn't too weird, in and of itself. But Risk is sporting a black eye so puffy it looks like a golf ball is sprouting from his face, with a giant gauze bandage covering his forehead. And he reeks of dirt, and blood, and vomit, and... *her*.

I turn to Leon. "What did you do?"

He ignores me, rushing to the bed. Risk is on the far side, so Leon has to climb over Joshua to get to him. He does it without thinking, lifting his massive frame on his good hand to get there and making the queen-sized bed look very small in the process. Then he's crouching, his hand on Risk's cheek, holding him still as he examines his eye.

"I'm so sorry," he murmurs, resting his forehead against Risk's shoulder. "I'm so, so sorry. I didn't know what else to do."

“It’s ok, I’m ok,” Risk whispers back to him, running his hands over Leon’s head, his back, the stained cotton of his shirt. I recognize smudges of dirt in the material, fanned in the exact shape his fingers make now. He did this to Leon. “Is she? Did I... is she ok?”

“Yeah, she’s fine, a little banged up. She sprained her knee, she’s got a wheelchair, but that’s it. She says she did it when she fell, before you found her. It wasn’t you. You didn’t hurt her.”

Indie’s *hurt*? A low growl bubbles in my chest. I swallow it down, mind racing as Leon and Risk waste time cuddling rather than telling me what’s going on.

Joshua is glaring at me balefully, his pale grey-blue eyes full of something foreign. *Energy*, I realize. Anger. Something that’s been missing since the attack. Did he meet her too? Have they *all* met her now, except for me?

“I have to apologize.” Risk’s voice is frantic, already climbing. I brace myself for it—he’s going to explode. He’ll blow up, something will get broken or somebody will get hurt, then he’ll end up crying like a toddler, feeling like shit, a child in an adult’s body.

His vices used to be enough to cool him down—he could drink or smoke or fuck himself into okayness. I know there are other ones as well, ones he’s less prone to telling us about—there was a reason I checked his weapons. We’ve seen the scars. We’ve watched him drag himself back home when he’s run until his legs gave out, feet bloody and blistered. Hell,

we've hauled him off poor beta assholes at bars who had no idea who they were tangling with.

But those are more shameful. He never wants us to see. Since the attack, it can't be avoided. None of the old tricks work. He's had a few meltdowns now, screaming, snotty, messy things. Befitting a toddler more than a grown man. I handled the first, when Leon was still in the hospital and Joshua was still catatonic. Pinned him to the bed with my body and waited him out while he thrashed beneath me. His degenerate friends brought him home after the next, streaked with vomit and smelling like metal and vinegar, blue in the face and rag-doll-like in my arms. Joshua's had the rest. The only thing that gets him out of bed, I think bitterly. Though maybe Risk is courteous enough to bring his meltdowns to him.

"Shh," Leon rests his head on Risk's shoulder, his hand on the back of his neck holding him close. "She'd like that. She wants to see you. She isn't mad."

"She should be," Risk's voice is thick with self-loathing, and I shift uncomfortably where I stand, Joshua's eyes never leaving mine. For once, I don't need the bond to know he's pissed.

Risk is gasping for breath, but Joshua next to him and Leon's arms around him seem to be keeping the worst at bay. Logically, I know that *my* arms would be best. Pack Alpha and all that. But how can I reward him for this? For falling apart and fucking things up? Again?

It's a cruel thought. But he's twenty-one now. He's not the eleven-year-old that needed me, *really* needed me. No matter how similar his anguished eyes might seem.

"Does somebody want to tell me what the hell is going on?" I raise my voice, my confusion giving way to anger.

Leon and Risk freeze before turning to face me, but it's Joshua who's the first to speak: "Risk met our omega."

Our omega.

"She isn't ours," I correct him.

"You knew. You knew and you didn't tell us," he accuses.

"I didn't want to get your hopes up."

"You didn't think that maybe our *fated fucking mate* would help give me some purpose?"

"I had hoped that your *bonded fucking pack* would have done that," I retort.

The instant the words leave my mouth, I know they're a mistake. Risk growls, a feral sound ripping from his chest that's more animal than man. Joshua's eyes flash with anger and Leon stiffens, his massive body suddenly a hulking threat.

But it's too late now.

Six weeks of rage are bubbling up inside me. Six weeks of my blood, sweat, and tears at the Coalition office, shuffling papers and groveling at bureaucrats' feet and calling in every favor I have. Striving to get back an ounce of the respect Midas Pack once commanded, while the rest of them go off

the rails. Leon, turning into a domestic fucking nobody, punching his timecard at the school when he used to be the best fucking mission leader the Coalition had ever seen. Risk wandering about the woods, drinking himself into oblivion and fucking his brain up with god knows what rather than facing his demons and fighting like he used to do in the field. And Joshua, lying here, useless, when he *knows* he holds the key to us actually being able to move forward. Like he's flipped the off switch on his brain, opting out of the burden of his intellect.

The absurdity of the situation strikes me then—my three packmates in bed together, two of them battered and bruised after apparently wrecking each other over an omega, and the other emaciated from weeks of bedridden, slovenly depression. Them vs. me.

“Not a bonded pack without a bond,” Risk sasses.

I grit my teeth. “It’s what’s best. For everybody.”

“Are you fucking stupid?” Risk asks.

“Risk,” Leon sighs.

“Me? Stupid? Says the elite soldier who is somehow suddenly content to blow his days treading circles in the woods and pickling his liver?” I growl. “I bust my ass for this pack, day in and day out, and not a single damn one of you can be bothered to get off your ass and help me, but the second an omega comes along with a semi-pleasing scent, you’re all about it? Like nothing happened, like our lives haven’t been shredded by an attack you all refuse to even *acknowledge*?”

“Easy for you to talk when you weren’t even *there*.” Joshua’s voice is deadly cold.

The room falls silent.

Something inside me breaks.

The shame I had squashed down so effectively comes surging back. The emptiness where all of them are so wounded fills with it, then overflows, and I’m suddenly drowning. I don’t know what to do, not when I’ve failed so colossally.

My mind latches on to the first emotion available. The one that comes so easily to an alpha under threat. Anger.

I roar. The sound is inhuman, making all three of them flinch. “Like *you*’ve been around? Any of you? How can I lead when you hide from me? From yourselves? When you refuse to speak about it? To work? We are *Midas* Pack for fuck’s sake! We are stronger than this!”

I’m practically screaming, but I can’t help it—I need them to know that I feel just as strongly as they do. They think because I was unconscious, I’m somehow exempt from the pain. But I’ve felt it every day since as I watch my pack fall to pieces, powerless to put them back together.

“Hollis,” Leon rumbles low in warning.

I feel drunk—the room is spinning, and if I look at any one thing for too long I risk falling towards it, my center of gravity demolished by my rage.

“I don’t want to hear shit from you,” I say, suddenly cold. “You think you’re some big man now because she trusts you,

right? Does bossing all those students around make you feel better, Leon?”

I feel like shit for saying it. I don't recognize these words coming out of my mouth—they're not the words of a pack leader. Hell, they're not the words of a decent man. And I used to think I was so much more.

Leon isn't even angry—his hand is on Risk's thigh, holding him back. His expression is worse than anger—he's just disappointed. “Do you feel better, Hollis?” he asks me quietly.

I choke on whatever I was going to say next. The haze clears, leaving my head pulsing in the quiet, stale air.

I take a deep breath.

I turn around and walk out.

Intrepid

INDIGO

Indie the Inferior: a one-act play.

A study in humiliation, contrasts, and sexuality.

A complete and utter disaster.

Day one of classes.

I think I might throw up.

There could be several reasons for this, but I suspect a fairly specific combination of sleep deprivation, pain, and the *incredibly* loud knocking on my door that has just roused me from the scant two hours of sleep I got after returning from the hospital.

“Hold on,” I groan.

“Indie, are you ok?” Cecilia practically shrieks from outside. God, if the hallway didn’t hate me before, they will now.

“I’m fine, gimme a sec,” I call back. I am fine, and also stranded.

Fun fact: anorexic arms are simply insufficient to carry anorexic body weight around on crutches. I learned this fact experientially last night—this morning—when I was finally discharged from the hospital, only to promptly fall on what would have been my face if Leon had not reacted quickly enough and caught me.

We were treated to another luxurious twenty-minute wait in the emergency ward as they scrounged together a wheelchair to loan me for the next two weeks until I'm cleared to walk again. I'm just glad it's not a tear that would have required surgery and a full eight-week recovery.

Unfortunately, my dorm room is not handicap accessible. The wheelchair fits in the door, but it can't go alongside the bed, so I have to find a way to get from bed to door without using my left leg at all.

This journey is not helped by the fledgling nest I have made for myself in the bed, creating an obstacle course of soft lumps.

“Indie?” Cecilia calls.

“Hold on,” I call back. “Logistics!”

Logistics indeed. I do an awkward dismount over the footboard, banging my good knee against the wood in the process and launching the career of a marvelously colored bruise. Small blessing: actually eating dinner last night seems to be fending off the headrush I've come to expect every time I go from horizontal to vertical. Funny how that works.

I hold onto the bed and lean over until I can lean against the door. Then I unlock it, using both my arms to haul it open before losing my balance, wheeling backwards and catching myself on the edge of the chair in a wild display of clumsiness. Another bruise for the collection.

“Oh shit,” Cecilia breathes when she sees me. She’s holding another tray of covered bowls. “Are you ok?”

“Apparently ok enough to not be allowed to sleep in, despite my *traumatic* night.”

Cecilia smiles, an adorable toothy grin that makes her look about three years younger. She kind of reminds me of Lise. It’s a sour thought. “People are saying you got attacked in the woods by a pack of feral alphas, and that Trainer Midas fought them off and saved you and then carried you back.”

“Oh my god.” I roll my eyes. “Not even close.” *Way too close.*

“You’re *different* today,” she cocks her head and looks at me.

“Am I?” I raise my brow. “Could it be the wheelchair? The veritable bouquet of bruises? The sleep deprivation?”

“What actually happened?”

“I fell,” I shrug. I don’t want to talk about Cam and Rose. “Dumbass move on my part. No more sneaking around for me.”

“Did you see your friends?”

I exhale slowly. “Yeah. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Cecilia eyes me for a moment. She bites her lip and cocks her head and finally nods, once, just a little, as though reassuring herself that she can respect my wishes.

“And I’m sorry I ran off,” I continue. “I’m still not used to the idea of being trapped here, and it wasn’t fair to you.”

I can smell the food; oatmeal, brown sugar, and more fruit. I want to eat it, even as the anxiety nausea grips and twists my stomach. This is the slippery slope I was afraid of. Eat one meal, and you start eating them all.

Cecilia waves off my apology, looking around the room as she sets the tray down on my desk. “That’s a nice nest,” she nods at the bed. The squeeze in my chest is like a messed-up kickflip—too many things at once. Pride, in the little nest I’ve managed to make out of the school-provided linens, and protectiveness, like I don’t want Cecilia looking at it, and then, strongest, shame. Because it’s just so *base* to create a *nest*. I read the textbooks, I know it’s normal, but I don’t have to *like* it.

She has no clue that the spare few items of clothing I’ve woven between the blankets and pillows are the ones I was wearing on Friday and last night. And Leon’s jacket. Everything that’s touched him, with the barest tendril of Risk still clinging to my dirt-stained clothes as well. I’ve been bemoaning the quickly dissipating scent while curling up in the nest, but now I’m hoping there isn’t enough for Cecilia to catch it.

“Help me pick out clothes for today?” I ask instead.
“Something that will help me fly under the radar?”

Cecilia gives me a look. “You were stampeded on Friday, hidden all weekend, and, according to most of the school, assaulted last night and carried back to campus like a damsel in distress. I don’t think ‘flying under the radar’ is going to be an option.”

My stomach drops. I hadn’t realized that everybody was paying that much attention to me. I’m no stranger to the limelight though—Rose loved attention, and I loved Rose, so I was used to it.

“Ok,” I hedge. “How about, ‘yes, I may be seven feet tall and wheelchair bound and the center of a large quantity of recent drama, but I’m totally normal I swear?’”

Cecilia laughs. “A tall order.”

“Literally.”

“Let’s see what we’re working with.”

“Not much,” I grimace, doing my best to maneuver the chair out of the way of the closet so she can look inside. The insides of my elbows are already painted black with bruises from where they bang on the arms of the wheelchair when I try to move.

“Wow, you weren’t joking.” Cecilia lets out a low breath when she takes in the contents of my closet. It is a fairly dismal offering. My old Adams uniforms are obviously out of the question, everything else is black or takes on black. Indie:

master of disguises. Indie the Invisible. More like Indie the Impoverished.

I never had enough money left for clothes after paying for my meals and books and theatre club dues each semester. My parents stopped sending money altogether when I was sixteen. I didn't bother asking why—I knew. Labor laws.

I should have known there was no hope of flying under the radar today. Not as the new girl on campus, not with the giant brace on my knee, not in a wheelchair pushed around by a fiery redhead who I suspect has no plans on leaving me unattended at any point.

Fifteen minutes and an awkward shuffle of an outfit change later, I have the tray of oatmeal on my lap and Cecilia is pushing me outside. For once, the Virginia weather is cooperating and giving us a sunny morning somewhat worthy of the label “May”. Cecilia somehow convinces me to eat in the giant quad at the center of the Complex, surrounded by students mingling before classes start for the day. We nab a picnic table that's designed for wheelchairs, missing a seat on one side so Cecilia can push me right up to it. It's nice—from far away you probably can't even tell that I'm in the chair.

I take the chance to truly take in my surroundings. Yesterday I was so intent on getting to Ms. O'Brien's office, I hardly looked around at all. Now I drink it all in. Groups of alphas stand around the quad. Anderson and James stand with a third alpha that looks similarly menacing. I don't even know what it is exactly about them that seems dangerous—they're dressed

like all the other alphas, maybe a little nicer. They just seem... poised to attack. All the time.

None of the other alpha groups look like that. A few omegas mingle as well—they are few and far between compared to the alphas. I notice older alphas and omegas, and maybe a few betas as well, standing at regular points around the commons. Supervising. That makes more sense to me—this casual, collegiate scene is one rut or spike away from disaster, if what happened to me on Friday is any indicator.

Some of the groups are obviously headed for packhood—omegas lean into alphas, kissing hello, brushing noses and hands, grazing hips and waists. Others are a little more distant, all smiles and scenting and demure nods and giggles. The earlier stages, I guess. After Shawn and Jake yesterday, I'm not surprised to see some of the alpha-only packs behaving just as affectionately with each other as those with an omega—lots of arms around waists, smirks and ass-pinching and some outright open-mouthed kissing, which makes me flush and look away.

It feels like *everybody* is more touchy-feely here. It goes against everything I'm used to up at Adams, where kids are self-conscious and rigid. Even the theatre kids need a few shots in them before they start truly groping each other. Their hand-holding and too-long hugs are always more performative than genuine. But these alphas and omegas are just... comfortable. It's an unspoken need that everybody shares, and everybody does their best to meet. Warmth curls in my belly, the memory of cloves and strong arms giving me goosebumps.

The only pack that *isn't* all over each other is Anderson's. They're aloof, not talking to each other, just standing on the grass. Michael and the third guy are on their phones, Jared is just looking around, slowly absorbing the groups around him. I watch his lip curl and follow his gaze to two alphas, leaning hip to hip against a decorative planter, one with his arm slung over the other's shoulder as they watch a video together. His eyes continue onwards, and then they fall on me. Ice water pours down my spine.

“Jared!” a voice calls from behind us. I twist to watch the blonde omega from my dorm strutting across the quad. She is all leather and denim and silk and designer labels and even in the grass, she manages to walk elegantly on her toes to keep her stilettos from sinking in the mud.

Jared doesn't call back, watching her approach, utterly impassive. When she gets to the group, Michael leans in for a brief half-hug. Their other packmate just watches. The blonde rubs herself against Michael's neck, making him shiver and step back, looking deferentially to Jared.

“Who is she?” I ask. “I met her over the weekend in my dorm. Real peach.”

“That's Kennedy Ryan—the pack princess I told you about last night? She was supposed to be mated last year but the pack renege. Got to know her and ran screaming for the hills.”

“Oh wow. Is that normal?”

“What? For a pack to renege?”

“Yeah.”

Kennedy is laughing at something Jared said—he’s smirking, but even that half-smile doesn’t reach his eyes. He has a cutting sort of beauty to him, all angles and sharpness.

“It happens more often for pack-born omegas than us. Their birth-packs try to make political alliances using their omegas as bargaining tokens, so it isn’t always love-matches. That’s what happened with Kennedy. She moved in with them ahead of her first heat and two weeks later they sent her back.”

“So she’s already had a heat?”

“Oh yeah. A few. She’s on rotation. Pissed about it too. Now she’s making her move for Anderson pack, as you can see, but they haven’t even bonded yet, so she’s going to have to wait a while.”

Jared isn’t even looking at Kennedy anymore. Bonding seems to be the last thing on his mind. Kennedy is trying to join him in his lazy survey of the commons, but her eyes keep flicking to his. Both of his packmates are watching her though. But they also look to him before and after every word they say. He’s clearly the Pack Alpha, and a forceful one if their submissive behavior is any indicator. It’s a strange portrait to take in.

I see Kennedy in a new light, knowing she’s already had a heat. She seems so confident and at ease, even after Jared’s seeming rejection. I try to imagine her naked, needy and enslaved by her hormones. I flush. I can’t do it.

“Indie! What the hell happened to you?”

Shawn comes jogging over, Jake and another alpha tight on his heels. Cecilia turns bright red next to me when she sees them, locking her eyes in her lap.

“Oh, nothing,” I wave. “Are you Brian?”

The third alpha of Shawn’s pack is cute, with his natural hair adding an extra few inches to his already admirable height. He has the same mischievous eyes as Shawn, twinkling like he’s in on some joke nobody else is.

“That’s me,” he smiles, holding his hand out. “I was in the back of the stampede on Friday, I like to think it was because I kept more of my senses, but honestly I think I’m just out of shape. Anyway, I wanted to get my apology in as well. But what did you do? This wasn’t us, right?” he gestures at the chair and I can’t help but smile.

“No, all me. That hill is not my friend. I just tripped and fell, nothing special. Have you guys met Cecilia?” Cecilia lets out a squeaked choking noise when I gesture to her.

“Hi,” she barks, keeping her eyes buried on her lap.

“Hi,” Shawn grins.

“You’re in pre-calc with me!” Jake grins. “I knew I recognized you. Sorry we’ve never said hi before.”

“It’s fine.” Cecilia couldn’t be any redder if she tried. “No big deal. Honestly.”

“Well, I was on my way over, want to walk together?” Jake points at a building behind him that I’m guessing is where math is.

“I uh, have to take Indie to her first class.”

“No sweat, I’ll save you a seat. You always sit in the front, right? Maybe your attention span will rub off on me and I can actually get an A on a test or something. Get these guys off my back.” He elbows Brian and Shawn good-naturedly.

“Please help him,” Brian deadpans. “I thought pre-calc was horrid enough one time around. Having to re-learn it to tutor his lazy ass is the worst.”

“Oh.”

“Cecilia is super smart,” I cut in, watching her cheeks turn redder than her hair. “She could definitely tutor you, Jake.”

Her eyes go wide, and if I weren’t in a wheelchair, I know she would have kicked me beneath the table.

I can’t help it though; watching Jake flirt with Cecilia is cute. The way Brian and Shawn look on is almost indulgent, but I don’t miss them evaluating Cecilia a little more closely as their packmate expresses interest. Cecilia doesn’t notice at all, her eyes still fixed firmly on her hands in front of her. Her apple orchard scent is sharp and pungent. She’s reacting to them, I realize. I’m unsure what to do; is this a spike, or is it normal? Shawn and Brian don’t seem concerned—I can smell them too. Brian mixes nicely with his pack—something sharp

and fragrant, maybe sandalwood. It offsets Shawn's sandy beach and Jake's clean air linen.

Jake jogs off, then Shawn and Brian wave their goodbyes and Cecilia and I are alone again. She sags, putting her head in her hands.

"Are you ok?" I ask. Jared and his pack are thankfully gone.

"I'm just... oh my god. Did you *smell* them?"

"I mean, yeah. It was... nice, I guess?"

"*Nice?*" Cecilia looks at me like I've sprouted a third leg. "You think that was *nice*? How are you not totally *slicked* right now?"

"Cecilia!" I laugh. "Were they really that special? They just kinda smelled tropical." I don't mention how compared to Leon, they're like cheap hand soap. Cecilia is clearly scenting something *very* different from me.

"Wow," she sighs. "You must have super-human self-control. Let's get you to class."

"Yeah, you have a very cute alpha waiting for you," I tease. She blushes so easily, I almost feel bad.

I don't even realize I've finished my oatmeal until I reach back in with my spoon and none is left. Somehow, in the midst of people-watching with Cecilia, it's just... gone.

Cecilia's eyes on me are heavy as she wheels me to class. "Are you seriously not bothered right now?" she asks.

"Why would I be?"

“My first day, I thought I was going to die. I wanted to roll over and show my belly to every alpha I walked by. I practically whined and bared my neck to the first one that spoke to me. My instincts were destroying me, like I was drowning in all the scents. And you’re just like... immune.”

I flash back to the way I nuzzled against Leon last night, unable to quell the roiling need in my low belly. The way his nearness made me perfume the air around us with my scent. I *definitely* can’t tell Cecilia that. The halls are filled with different scents, a jumbled perfume, but none of it even compares to him. It’s just... noisy in my nose.

“I guess these alphas just don’t affect me like that,” I shrug.

Cecilia looks at me dubiously as she pushes me into a linoleum tiled classroom. Before she has a chance to respond though, some sort of alarm sounds. Every alpha in the room bolts upright. My heart stops, fear seizing my chest. They aren’t looking at me though, not like Friday. Instead, they fly from the room, leaving their bags behind.

“What was that?” I say when only a handful of omegas are left.

“Mission time,” Cecilia explains. “Part of their training for Coalition service. They can come up at any time.”

“Coalition service?”

“All alphas do a year of active service with the Coalition, and then most usually stay in the reserves for life. If there’s ever a crisis, they’re on call to respond.”

“What kinds of crises?” I ask.

“Feral alpha attacks mostly. Sometimes smarter ones who try to start uprisings and enslave omegas or something crazy like that.”

“Wow,” I breathe. “They want to enslave us?”

“Not the good ones,” Cecilia grins. “Just the evil monsters. Which is why we have the Coalition.”

“You seem way too chill about this.”

“About what?”

“The evil monsters. Are we like... forever in danger because we smell good?”

Cecilia laughs. “No, not at all. Attacks are super uncommon. Hardly worth worrying about. And we’re especially safe at the Complex, with all the security.”

“But, after the Complex? People leave, right?”

“Yeah, but usually only in a pack. And thankfully, due to neat practice missions like these, those packs are chock-full of highly trained alphas, ready to protect and defend. Or something like that.”

Something in that doesn’t sit right with me. I don’t *want* a pack. And I don’t want to be in danger either. But I can see Cecilia getting antsy to get to class.

“Sorry you won’t get to sit with Jake,” I offer. “Though at least he’s fighting for the right side, hmm?”

“Oh, he’ll still be in class. He’s too junior for missions, he just got to the Complex a few months ago.”

That explains why he’s so skinny and gangly compared to Shawn and Brian, who look like full-grown adults.

“Well then shoo!” I wave her away. “You have flirting to do.”

“He wasn’t flirting with me!” Cecilia snaps. “And you shouldn’t have signed me up to tutor him. I’m on Indie duty until you’re out of that chair.”

I roll my eyes. “You are clueless. And officially dismissed from service. Go!”

“Fine, fine, but I’ll be back after to get you to your next class, ok?”

“You don’t have to do that,” I protest.

“It gives me somebody to walk with,” she shrugs, her voice suddenly quiet.

And just like that, I am Indie the Imposter once more. Did I ever look at Rose and Cam like Cecilia is looking at me now? With such unguarded hope?

“Yeah, ok,” I smile at her. “Thanks.”

17

Mossy

JOSHUA

Real clothes feel weird. Mine are kind of musty after sitting in my closet untouched for six weeks, but I pull them on anyway. Dark-wash jeans, black sweater, leather boots. The sweater used to be tight over my muscles. It hangs loose now.

I stare at myself in the mirror. A stranger stares back. He has fine features. Chapped lips that he can't stop chewing. Hollow cheeks and purple circles and a strange glint of hope in his pale blue eyes. His hair is wet and long and in need of a proper curl treatment.

Leon used to do that for me. Risk never had the patience and Hollis never had the time, but Leon would sit on a bench in the shower while I sat on the tiles at his feet. He'd run the mousse through my wet hair curl by curl, using his fingers to craft each one. I wonder if he can do that now, with only one hand. I strain, trying to remember his method, whether he used both hands or not. I can't.

I scent Risk before he opens the door—he doesn't believe in knocking. He's dressed for work, black sleeves and grey cargo pants and laced up boots. His hair is back in a ponytail and he's traded the gauze taped to his forehead for bandaids. They're nearly the same color as his skin. He's amber and rust. I am paper and pewter. His nose ring matches the chain on my neck. Our earrings match too. That's always been us.

He stands next to me and I smell the drugs. I don't know what he's taken, but his pupils are dime-sized and his pulse is sluggish when I take his wrist. He looks at us in the mirror and I can tell he's just as bewildered. Who are these men staring back?

Risk is concave. Like the bond has been pulled out of him and he's collapsing in on the space it once filled. Coldness seeps into me. I don't have enough to reach him. Not without the bond. I can only be so much.

We are in no shape to meet our omega.

I tug his ponytail loose and reshape it, brushing out the bumps with my fingers. When I'm done, I rest my forehead against his neck, hiding behind him. I don't want to look in the mirror anymore.

“While I pondered, weak and weary,” Risk mumbles. Poe. He feels my smile against his skin.

Hollis is downstairs, which surprises me. I figured he'd stay late at work to avoid driving with us. We haven't spoken since yesterday's fight. For the first time since we all got back from the hospital, he didn't bring me breakfast this morning. I

realize now how much our little ritual meant to me. How hard he tried to care for me, even when I refused to be cared for. I shove the thought away, too angry to give him any credit.

Leon brought me food instead this morning, telling me about the mixer. How Hollis and him were going to go, and Risk and I should too. How Hollis originally ordered him not to tell us. I knew he felt guilty, but I didn't have the energy to be mad. Or to comfort him in his guilt.

Hollis is angry when he sees me coming down the stairs. I don't need the bond to know why. My post-disaster debut.

So, an omega will get you out of bed, but not your pack? I can imagine his cutting tone. I wonder if I'd be brave enough to talk back. I want to conserve my energy for Indie.

He doesn't say anything. He's in work clothes, black suit and blue shirt and polished leather shoes. Hair gelled, face shaved, watch glinting, politician's face, *on*. I swallow my inadequacy. He is everything an alpha should be.

The SUV is silent the entire drive to the Complex. Risk and I sit in the back and I take his hand in mine to keep him from scratching the skin on his forearm off. His fingers beat a rhythm on the back of my hand instead. I don't know why I get finger taps and he gets friction burns. Why his energy is so sweet for me and destructive for himself.

When we park, Hollis's eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror and a strange flash of understanding passes between us. Even without the bond, even with the anger and hurt and

resentment thickening the air, we're thinking the same thing:
What if she doesn't like us?

We're the only two she hasn't met yet.

Risk has been beside himself all day. I only know this because of the delivery of knives he made to my room this morning when he got back from work. He didn't want to be tempted.

Part of me wanted to be alone, but I pulled him back into my bed anyway. He practiced his apology for the better part of the afternoon, when he thought I was sleeping.

Hollis's doubt disappears from his face quickly. He is a shallow pool, glinting in the sun. His doubts are well-camouflaged. Mine are all over my face, chewed lips and furrowed brow.

It almost makes me want to laugh. I don't think Midas Pack has ever needed to question our appeal before. We stopped going to mixers ages ago because we were tired of omegas throwing themselves at us, and the envy their advances inspired in other omega-less packs. There are so few omegas to vie for, it was better to opt out of the game altogether. It made it easier to gain allies in the Coalition—or at least, that's what Hollis said. Fat lot of good it's done us now.

“She's a little fragile,” Leon breaks the silence. “Don't overwhelm her. Proper hellos, not too many questions. She doesn't know we're her fated mates.”

“How could she not?” Risk asks.

“I was the first alpha she ever scented. She knows others don’t smell as good, but she never had a baseline, so she can’t tell the difference. It might be that meeting all of us together makes it obvious, but if not, don’t tell her. She’s still not bought in to the whole omega thing. It might push her away.”

“Is she mad at me?” Risk’s anxiety buzzes, his smokiness fogging the SUV’s cramped quarters.

“No,” Leon repeats for the millionth time. The man is a saint. How has he not fallen apart like us? He probably needs to.

“Come on.” Hollis moves to get out of the car, but Leon reaches out to stop him. He’s in the passenger seat, so it’s just his stump that rests on Hollis’s arm. Hollis looks down at it. He swallows.

“You might be... surprised, when you see her,” Leon says. “She’s really sick. I forget sometimes, when I’m around her for a while. I just see *her*.” His voice is almost wistful, and I fight the urge to touch him. I miss tracing the lines of his tattoos. I miss when he talked to me.

He’s weary now. He gives and gives and gives, to me and Risk and Hollis and now Indie too, and nobody gives to him. My fault. I take a deep breath and shut that train of thought down. Not now.

We walk into the Complex a united front. Midas Pack, back from the dead. A re-animated corpse, though nobody but us can tell.

The mixer is already in full swing, and the scent of omega hits me like a brick wall. I brace myself for the temptation, but it never comes. The room is swimming with scents, but none of them are hers.

I want to slink off to a corner to wait for her, but our arrival has caused a stir—it seems like every pair of eyes in the place is on us. Hollis and Leon are impervious to the pressure. Risk doesn't even notice it, he's so in his own world. I'm the only self-conscious one. I steel my gaze and stay behind Hollis and Leon. Let them lead. All I need to be is calm and quiet and nobody will have any idea what's going on in my head.

Leon spots Dahlia O'Brien and leads us over, ignoring the eyes. His movement breaks the seal and people begin talking again. They're still watching, though. "Did you hear what happened" and "such a shame" and "I would *never*".

The omega attention is mixed. Some scoff. Most eye us up and down, their instincts driving them to evaluate for themselves despite the gossip echoing around them. I forget how dominant we are, sometimes. Compared to Hollis and Leon, I live with my tail tucked. No omegas approach us. I don't know whether to be thankful or upset that we've fallen so far from grace.

Dahlia is holding one of her packmates' daughters on her hip, bouncing up and down and cooing at her.

"Leon! And the rest of Midas Pack too!" She looks from face to face, her earnest smile contagious. Her curls bounce along with the baby on her hip, who clings to a tiny plush cow

in a red hoodie. We were never close with Dahlia before the attack—she’s always been a teacher, and she’s soon to mate with Dawson Pack, all of them doctors or professors. Not much political advantage there, so Hollis was always apathetic but friendly. A commensurate politician.

Regret pangs in my stomach—we shouldn’t have stopped coming to these mixers. Shouldn’t have planned all our friendships around what could win us the greatest political victories. Sure, the omegas could be a lot, the alpha politics exhausting, but we missed out on so much more. I wonder if that’s part of the reason for the Coalition assigning Leon and I here after the attack. Were our deficiencies that obvious?

“Hey Dahlia.” Leon leans in and gives her a hug. “And who is this?” he asks, holding out a finger for the little girl to squeeze. She obliges, her chubby little hand unable to reach all the way around his single finger. My heart swells at the sight of it—I want that. I want Indie’s baby on my arm.

Jesus, calm down, Joshua, I command myself. You haven’t even met her yet.

“This is Lylah,” Dahlia coos. “And this is her first mixer! You looking for Indie?”

Leon nods.

“I think she’s been on the fence about coming. The wheelchair has her exhausted. Her first therapy session yesterday was rough as well. Poor thing’s been through a lot. Let me pop over to her room and see if your arrival can’t entice her.”

“Are you sure?” Leon falters, his forced bravado for the room wavering. “If she needs to rest...”

“Shh, I’ll go get your girl.”

She’s gone before Hollis can protest. *Our girl.*

We shuffle about once she’s gone. Hollis is too proud to apologize. I’m too angry to forgive. Leon is too tired to mediate. Risk is... well, Risk.

“Drinks?” he asks. He’s already moving towards the beverage table. I can only hope since the mixer is Complex-organized that there won’t be any alcohol. Not with whatever is already in his system.

Hollis follows him, leaving Leon and I to survey the room.

“Hello?” a little blonde omega approaches. “I uh, I’ve never seen you at one of these before. Which pack are you?” She’s speaking to me, ignoring Leon. Like she can’t tell we’re here together. I watch her for a moment, forgetting how to speak. She bats her lashes and leans forward to give me a view of her ample cleavage.

She smells like butter candy, rich and round.

“Midas Pack,” I answer. Her eyes flash to Leon with a shock of recognition.

“Oh!” she says. “I didn’t—your pack, Trainer Midas?”

Her eyes are on his stump. I watch his good hand clench into a fist.

“Yes,” he replies, his voice strained. “My pack. This is Joshua. And our leader Hollis and packmate Risk,” he gestures to them with his left arm as they return, handing us each a drink. He did that on purpose—her eyes follow his stump before landing on Hollis and Risk.

“Nice to meet you!” she chirps before fleeing.

“What was that?” Hollis asks.

“Cognitive dissonance,” Leon sighs.

The room is filled with packs vying for omega attention, ranging from a few lone alphas to clusters of seven or eight, bite-less and overeager. I wonder what those bonds are like. I imagine noisy. The space where mine should be aches.

I’m trying to pick out the packs I recognize when the door opens. Dahlia enters, pushing a wheelchair. There’s a girl in the chair, and she’s holding baby Lylah in her lap.

She’s terribly beautiful, and terrifyingly thin. Her cheeks are hollow, her brown hair dull and pulled back in a messy bun. I can’t even see the rest of her, she’s so buried in her baggy clothing and the baby on her lap. She looks around the room, and that’s when she spots us.

Time goes stop motion. Her expression morphs through every frame. Ease when her eyes fall on Leon. Shock, then excitement when she sees Risk. Eyes wide at Hollis. Up and down. Curiosity. Attraction. Then, me. Her eyes, locked on mine.

Hers are chocolatey brown, huge and honest. They see right through me, through every lie I've ever told, every construct of dignity I've meticulously built.

She smiles. A big, warm smile, with no reservation, like she wouldn't know how to hold back even if she wanted to. I realize I'm smiling back. It feels foreign on my face, and so, so good. The sunrise after the storm.

That's when her scent hits me. My knees buckle. Black tea and bergamot. My kiss with Risk, on steroids.

She's almost all the way to us, Dahlia navigating the chair through the scattered tables and packs. I fight my instinct to go to her. To reach out and touch.

"Hey little bird," Leon greets her. The nickname grips my heart and twists. His eyes flit to me. *May my heart always be open.* "Would you like to meet my pack?"

Dahlia collects Lylah from Indie's arms and then makes herself scarce, giving me one last knowing grin before flitting back to her pack.

To little birds who are the secret of living.

Indie just nods. I crave her voice, I'm dying to know what she sounds like.

"Well, you've met Risk," Leon nods at him.

"Hi I'm sorry I didn't mean to hurt you or disrespect you please forgive me I promise it will never happen again," Risk blows through the apology he's been practicing so hard, the words bleeding into each other in one elongated utterance.

Indie giggles, and the vice on my heart clamps a bit tighter.
Whatever they sing is better than to know.

She grins at Risk, “It’s nice to *actually* meet you, and there’s nothing to apologize for.” Her voice is soft and thready, deceptively deep but with a youthful lightness. The dissonance hits me. She has dark circles beneath her eyes. She’s gaunt, swimming in the already-small chair. But her earnest gaze and wide eyes and poisonously delicious scent...

“This is Hollis, our leader,” Leon gestures and Hollis steps forward. He awkwardly sticks his hand out. *And if men should not hear them, men are old.*

“Hello, Indigo,” he says, his voice overly formal. She reaches up to shake his hand and the contrast is laughable. Like Lylah and Leon’s finger, Hollis’s hand utterly dwarfs Indie’s. He shakes like she’s a porcelain doll, slow and easy.

“And this is Joshua,” Leon gestures for me to step forward and I do. “He’ll be your English teacher, actually, when he’s back from leave.”

“Next week,” I add without even thinking. “I’ll be back next week.”

“Oh!” Indie flushes. “That’s amazing! I can’t wait.”

I don’t look at Hollis, but I can feel his anger radiating behind me. He’s wanted me back at work for weeks now. And it took less than ten seconds with Indie for me to start making promises.

I'm not excited about being her teacher, having to stare at her across a power distance, however narrow it is within the Complex bounds. But I *am* excited for more time with her. I would do *anything* to get a mainline of her scent directly to my heart. Directly to...

The rut hits me before I know what's happening.

My libido has been dead for weeks. Even with Risk in bed next to me, whining and grinding against my hip, even with his hand down my pants, desperately coaxing me to life, even with the taste of her on his lips, nothing has been able to rescue me from the blue fog. Until now.

My scent, always the gentlest of the pack, becomes a solid thing in the air around us. I am a storm, a wall of grey crossing an empty horizon. I'm wet pavement and low angry clouds and the near-painful fresh of rain-cleansed air. I am *need*.

"Sorry, restroom," I mutter, bowing like a moron at Indie before dashing to the hallway. All of my blood has exited my brain, on a warpath straight to my dick. The eyes of my pack follow me. I don't need the bond to know. Irritation from Hollis, concern and maybe a little wry amusement from Leon. Risk on my heels.

The hallway is half-lit, lockers and linoleum. I know I went the wrong way for the bathroom, but I can't go back now. If I see her, if I scent her, I could do something disastrously stupid. I imagine the long, lithe curve of her back. Her hair, wrapped around my hand. Her lips, her full lips, pressing to mine.

I duck around a corner. I'm bleary with need, the urge to turn back and *take* her overwhelming. I hear footfalls.

I press myself against the wall. Hiding. I should know better. Risk rounds the corner a moment later, wild eyes finding my own. Then he's against me, hips against hips, heat against heat.

"No," I struggle, even as my hands grip his waist, pull him closer, harder. I remember being bigger than him, once upon a time. I'm still taller, but his muscular body dwarfs mine, pressing me into the lockers, owning me entirely.

This is *wrong*. I scream at myself to shove him away. I kiss him instead.

She's sick, I'm sick, *we're* sick. In a hallway where anybody could wander by. My hips thrust without my bidding.

His lips are hot on mine, his hands everywhere.

My knees give. I slide down the wall, landing hard, hunched over myself, my growing knot, the *shame*.

Risk crouches in front of me. His hands are undoing my button, my zipper, reaching inside. I bat him away. He ignores me. I cover my face with my arm, unable to watch. His fingers around the fleshy bulge, his hand stroking my shaft.

I don't even picture her. Just scent, black tea and wood smoke and pounding, throbbing rain. My mind is blackness.

His mouth closes around me and I stuff my moan down. He strokes and sucks and swallows the evidence, his fingers never

releasing their noose-like grip on my knot, the punishing, desperately-pleasing pressure.

He tucks me away and yanks my calves to straighten my legs and straddles my lap. I can feel his erection press against my stomach and I feel shame, somehow more shame, for failing him yet again.

“Welcome back,” he murmurs in my ear. I shudder, still hiding my face, unable to look at him. Tears prick my eyes, a roaring hole inside me where the bond should be.

Risk used to sing to me in the bond when we fucked, when we made love, when we spent hours just exploring the nooks and crannies and corners of each other’s bodies. A battering ram of affection, adoration, a syrupy drug I became addicted to. Risk’s world has more colors than mine. No words can do it justice, no roaming of callused hands over velvet skin. Bond-magic.

Inside me is charcoal. Crumbling grey-black dusty barren wasteland.

The rut has softened to only razor-edged. This, I can control. My hormones want one thing, my brain chemistry another. My heart hides, afraid to enter the fray.

Risk removes my arm from my face. His lips press soft kisses to my brow, my nose, my cheeks, my jaw. He licks the tears I didn’t realize had fallen. “Miss you,” he mumbles, resting his head in the crook of my shoulder.

We are as close as we can get, without a bond. It isn't close enough.

"She's something, isn't she?" I breathe.

"Enough to restart your heart." The words only have an edge of hurt in them. I wrap my arms around him, pulling him closer.

"You kept it beating," I mutter. I long for the comfort of my bed, to see her again, to braid Risk's hair, to trace Leon's tattoos, to memorize her face, to curl in Hollis's arms, to hold her in mine. The wanting is painful and too loud. I'm re-animated, electric after months offline. Numbness was easier.

Risk pulls me to my feet. I look longingly at the emergency exit. Simpler, to go. To hide.

He weaves his fingers through mine and pulls me back to the mixer.

Leon and Hollis are sitting at a table with Indie now. Leon has his good hand on the table next to her, and as Hollis speaks it keeps twitching, like he's reaching for her and then thinking better of it.

Indie is intent on what Hollis is saying, but when Risk and I come back in the room she catches our scent and looks around again. The moment her eyes lock on mine, my knees go weak. Again. Is it going to be like this every time? I've scented many omegas in my day, but never one that made me react like this. I swallow the razor-edged rut back. I am stronger than my instincts.

“Hi,” I say abashedly as we take seats at the small table. For the first time, I breathe us all in together.

The sweetness and freshness and spice and smoke compound, overpowering the room. I vaguely sense other packs picking us up, shuddering at the strength. It’s obvious, so obvious. Indie catches it too.

“Whoa,” she whispers. “Do other packs smell so good when they’re all together?”

It’s such an innocent question; she truly has no idea.

“Not quite,” Hollis answers.

“It’s pretty special, huh?” Risk smiles mischievously. Hollis shoots him a glare, but that only makes Risk smile wider.

“Yeah,” Indie’s little nose sniffs the air again and I bite back a moan. She’s going to spike if she keeps going like this.

Leon reads my mind, leans over and whispers in her ear. Indie flushes red and a little burst of sweet orange fills the air. “Sorry,” she squeaks.

“You smell amazing,” I say without thinking. It would be an absurd thing to say to most omegas, but I’m eager to wipe the shame from her face. “Events like this are so overwhelming, right? It’s hard when you feel like you’re competing for air.”

Indie nods, her eyes locking on mine again. Vertigo.

“We were just asking Indie about her classes,” Hollis explains gently. “Apparently your substitute sucks.”

“Oh?” I ask. “How so?”

“He was teaching us Yeats today and just... he doesn’t get it,” Indie sighs, shaking her head with disappointment.

“Do you like poetry?” Hope blooms in my chest. My poetry nerdery has always been lonely. Leon and Hollis both read for pleasure, but Hollis reads stuffy non-fiction and Leon is a sci-fi fantasy nerd. Risk knows poetry, but only as a bridge to me.

Indie nods. I swell.

“Who are your favorite poets?” I ask.

“Rilke, Plath, and Wendy Cope,” she lists off without needing to think.

“Wendy Cope is a modern genius. I love Rilke too, though I think it really depends on the translation. Are you a Cummings fan?”

Leon bites back a smile. He knew I wouldn’t miss his little nickname for her. He and I share some very fond memories around Cummings.

Indie shrugs. “I haven’t read any of his stuff, though my—“ her voice breaks off and grief shadows her features. Instantly my stomach sinks. What did I say?

“Are you ok?” Leon asks, his hand jerking over hers, eager for the opportunity to touch her.

“Oh, yeah,” she recovers, shaking the sadness off. “My friend—printer ink,” she half-smiles at Leon, like it’s some kind of inside joke, “he liked Cummings.”

“Do we need to beat somebody up?” Risk asks. “I’m sensing *yes*.”

Indie laughs. She shakes her head no.

The electric overwhelm is fading. I drink in her almond-eyes and delicate ears and nails trimmed short and slightly knobby knuckles and the way Leon’s hand stays over hers and she pretends not to notice but most definitely does.

Then the doors to the event hall slam open and Headmaster Wilder marches through them, leading two suit-clad alphas I vaguely recognize from the Coalition offices.

“Joshua Midas!” he booms across the hall. Silence descends. You could hear a pin drop. “So good to see you again. Glad you’re, er, *up and about*. Since you’re feeling up to socializing, why don’t you come have a chat with us in the office? We have some questions for you.”

Hollis stands just as Wilder arrives at our table. Hollis dwarfs him. Wilder does a double take. I would laugh if I weren’t rooted to my chair.

“Is this necessary?” Hollis growls. “Joshua is going into the Coalition offices on Friday to give his statement.”

I never said that, but it’s a fair assumption for him to make after I promised Indie I’d be in class next week.

“You can understand our hesitation to believe that,” one of the suits says, his voice dripping false kindness. “We’d much rather chat tonight.”

“Unfortunately, we’re in the middle of a conversation.” Hollis smiles, allowing an edge of dominance in his voice.

The second suit steps close to Hollis. Every eye in the room follows. He whispers in Hollis’s ear, but he’s looking at me, sinister. “You have a choice, easy or hard.” He lifts his suit and I see the cuffs hanging from his belt.

The way he says *hard* implies cuffs won’t be the only hard thing about it. Hollis growls.

Without the dialogue audible, the attention of the room turns back to the mixer, conversations picking up where they left off, though people still watch the conflict out of the corner of their eye. Indie’s fear sharpens her scent. Without thinking, I reach across the table and rest my hand over hers and Leon’s.

“Hey,” I murmur. “I’m gonna go with them. I’ll see you in class next week, ok? Don’t worry about me, everything’s fine.”

I don’t know why I feel the need to comfort her—she just met me, her fear is probably about the aggressive alphas, not on my behalf. But after I say the words, I sense her relief. She nods.

“You’ll be there?” her eyes are wide. “Promise?”

I swallow the sudden thickness in my throat. The thought of disappointing her is chilling. Just like that, bed isn’t an option.

“Promise,” I vow. “I’ll bring some Cummings. We can reclaim him from bad memories, ok?” I give her a wan smile.

Then I turn to the suits, smoothing my shirt and nodding once, firmly. “Gents?”

“I’ll be joining you,” Hollis says. Not a question. For an instant I want him to stay, to comfort Indie, to leave me as he’s left me every day for the past six weeks, but his tone bears no questioning. I nod, and off we go, marching past the crowded tables and wide-eyed packs. I fight down my fear.

For Indie, for the first time in a long time, I believe I can be strong.

Intransigent

INDIGO

*“**W**hy do you think people would dismiss you?”*

I shrug. “I’m just an angsty teenager. Nothing I do really matters. Not yet.”

“Why do you think that?”

I shrug again. “Nothing’s real here. It’s just school. Relationships don’t last, grades mean nothing, our opinions can’t change anything and nothing we do will be remembered in five years’ time.”

“That’s a very nihilistic view of the world.”

I shrug yet again.

“It must be disconcerting to come to the Complex and see people forming permanent pack bonds when you think relationships don’t last.”

“Yeah,” I laugh. “I think it’s kind of stupid. I’m not going to bond. I’ll just do medical heats.”

“Why?”

*“Anything I say to answer that will just be teenage
dramatics.”*

“Lay it on me anyway.”

*I eye the therapist, silver-haired and eagle-eyed. Something
thickens in my throat. “Because the only person I trust is
myself, and sometimes I don’t even trust her.”*

The therapy appointment from yesterday flashes through my mind as I watch Hollis and Joshua walk away. The hour was filled with nosy questions about my eating habits and body image and feelings about the Complex, but that one exchange had me prickling, feeling restless and angry and small. I feel the same way now, as Leon and Risk and I watch the doors close behind their packmates. Except, this is real. This matters.

I miss them, and I barely know them. I don’t even know if they like me. The way Hollis looked at me was an evaluation. The way Joshua stormed out right after meeting me, like I had angered him. But then the way he just comforted me...

The intensity of my emotions has me jittery and anxious. When all of Midas Pack was here, I felt calmer, somehow. Like I was in the eye of a hurricane, able to look at the chaos around me from within an oasis of perfect stillness.

I stopped looking over my shoulder around the room. All the pungent alpha scents faded away. I felt warm all over, and I was able to scent myself again. Mixed with all of them, it was exhilarating. It just made *sense*. If Leon hadn’t warned me, I

definitely would have spiked, riding the high. In the middle of the crowded hall, I have no idea how that would have gone.

But now without them all here, the doubts creep back. Leon's steady presence next to me keeps me tethered, but just barely.

This ease isn't natural, right? I shouldn't feel so comfortable. Risk practically jumped me last time I saw him and now I'm wishing he were touching me too. That's not *normal*, but the tightness in my core is begging for it, itching to be closer to him. To both of them. *It's just omega instincts*, I think to myself. My inner voice is weak. Like even I don't believe myself.

I scan the room and find Ms. O'Brien standing with her pack—she brought baby Lylah to get me from my room, but I haven't met the rest of them. Another little girl hides behind the skirt of what must be the pack beta. Three alphas stand with them, one with his arm around the beta, another absently tracing his fingers over the back of Ms. O'Brien's hand.

Just like Leon is doing with me, his hand still resting on top of mine. Is this allowed? He doesn't seem concerned when people's eyes skate over us.

“Are people staring at me or you guys?” I ask.

Risk smiles. “Me, obviously. They've never seen anybody so stunningly good looking.”

Leon rolls his eyes. “Probably both,” he says. “We haven't been out in public since the incident, and you're new and

exciting.”

“Thrilling,” I deadpan.

“Every hero needs a sidekick,” Risk winks at me. “You’d look hot in tights.”

“Have any I can borrow?” I shoot back.

“Fishnets.”

“You two are going to give me grey hairs, aren’t you?” Leon sighs.

“Are you the problem child?” I ask Risk.

He nods. “You?”

“A consistent source of consternation.”

Risk laughs, a bell-like sound that fills me with warm fuzzies. He turns to Leon smugly. “Wish you had thought of that?”

Leon pinches his brow. “Don’t you have a patrol to get to? Before you turn her to the dark side completely?”

Risk grabs Leon’s wrist, looks at his watch, exclaims noiselessly, and in the same breath is on his feet. He kneels in front of my chair, takes my hand, and kisses my knuckles delicately. My skin tingles where his lips touch. “Thank you for not hating me. Come over and hang out some time?”

Leon stiffens. I turn to him and his expression is a perfectly schooled mask of pleantry.

“Um, am I allowed to?” I ask. “Like, leave here?”

“I’ll bust you out if not,” Risk shrugs, not even pausing to think. “Rules schmules.”

“No,” Leon snaps without pausing to think, then turns to me. “Right now, probably not, blue jay. You should get a little healthier first.”

My smile fades and Risk glares at Leon. “She’s fine,” he says sharply.

“No,” Leon says again. It’s a practiced no, and Risk doesn’t pay it much mind.

“Ok, whatever,” he relents. “Get better so we can hang out, ok?” He leans up and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek before he’s jogging across the hall and out the doors.

I bring my hand up to my cheek, hot where Risk’s lips touched. Again.

“Sorry about him.” Leon is quick to apologize on his packmate’s behalf. It’s a practiced apology.

“Does he know how to walk?” I ask, waving it off. “I don’t think I’ve seen him walk. Ever.”

“Risk doesn’t do anything half-speed,” Leon smiles. “But what do you think of Hollis and Joshua?”

“I don’t think they like me very much,” I sigh.

Leon throws his head back and laughs. His true laugh is so different from the tight chuckles I’ve seen from him so far, my heart skips a beat. He is beautiful with his eyes closed and his neck exposed, hand on his stomach as he lets the laugh roll

through him. I see an edge of black ink peeking out the collar of his white thermal shirt and look away, embarrassed.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“Oh, little bird, you couldn’t be further from the truth. They both liked you *very* much.”

“Really? But Joshua stormed out, and Hollis...”

I replay my conversation with Hollis in my mind. He’s a giant, almost as big as Leon, but unlike Leon’s military-esque appearance, he looks like he just walked out of an Armani catalogue. His words were measured and academic. The way he asked a question made it seem like there was always a ‘right’ answer. He asked a lot of questions. I don’t know if I gave any right answers.

“Hollis was hoping you would like him too. Don’t tell him I told you that,” Leon smiles. “He can get a little uptight when he’s nervous.”

“Nervous?” I guffaw. Perfect Hollis, *nervous*?

“Yes,” Leon chuckles. “And Joshua just needed a moment to clear his head. That wasn’t about you at all.”

“Is he going to be ok?” I ask. “It looked like he was in trouble.”

“He’ll be fine. He just hasn’t given his statement since the incident, and the Coalition has been getting a little antsy.”

“It wasn’t just an incident, was it?” I push my luck.

Leon’s lips tighten into a flat line. He shakes his head.

“Will you tell me about it, someday?” I ask.

“It’s not a happy story, blue jay.”

“That’s ok. Most stories aren’t.”

I wait for him to dismiss me. To put me in a box, the simplified life of a teenager. Not real. Incapable of understanding.

But he doesn’t. He nods solemnly instead. “I’ll tell you when you’re healthy enough to come over, ok?”

“When will that be?”

Leon sighs. “I don’t want you to think that I don’t want you to come over. I do.”

“Even if I were healthy, is it allowed? You never said.”

“It’s murky waters. For an unbonded omega to fraternize with us, we’d need to be on the Coalition’s list of approved packs for bonding. Which we currently aren’t.”

“Whoa whoa whoa whoa, what? Bonding? I thought Risk meant—” I break off, my cheeks flushing. I yank my hand out from under Leon’s and bury it in my lap.

“What? No! No, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean, we wouldn’t, I mean, we would never,” Leon is spluttering, and if I weren’t so panicked I would find it funny. He stops himself, takes a deep breath, and then speaks with a gravelly voice, “I was just trying to explain the rules. And unfortunately, since you’re an unbonded ward of the Complex and we are an unbonded pack employed by the Coalition, we have to play by the rules. And

all the rules for people like us center around the possibility of bonding. To prevent us from taking advantage of you. We would never... Look, we don't have to talk about this if you're uncomfortable. I'm sure Risk's invitation was to play videogames or show you his knife collection or something."

"And what would you want to do if I came over?" I don't know why I ask. My heart beats a tattoo of anxiety in my chest.

"I was building a treehouse in our woods, before the incident. You could come help. I could use an extra set of hands."

He holds his stump up good-naturedly and I have to smile. The awkwardness is gone.

"A treehouse?" I ask. "Why?"

He shrugs. "I always wanted one as a kid. My birthpack lived out in the country, so I grew up with flatlands for miles, no trees in sight. We live in the forest now, and I think I realized there was nothing stopping me from living out my childhood dream. So, why not?"

That makes me smile. A treehouse. Big powerful Leon. Building a treehouse not for any sort of child but the one within him. It's a wistful thought. I wonder if he was scrawny, once upon a time. It's hard to imagine him as anything other than the mountain of muscle he is now.

"So... what do I have to do to come over?" I ask, hoping I don't sound over-eager.

“I’ll look into the Complex rules,” Leon offers. “But be ready for bad news. You might need to have a heat contract signed already.”

My stomach sinks. My heat. In the thrill of meeting all of Midas Pack, I forgot. The knife hanging over my head by a thread, and I forgot. Like they were shielding me from the risk of it falling. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I force a smile. At least it simplifies getting to spend time with them. “That’s fine then, I’m doing a medical heat,” I say.

Leon’s expression darkens.

“Oh, c’mon, don’t be like that. Why is that everybody’s first reaction?”

“Because you don’t know what you’re saying, little bird.” Leon’s voice is soft. “A medical heat is an awful, awful thing. Finding a pack is better.”

The way he says it though, it doesn’t sound like he means it.

He wheels me back to my dorm in silence. My head is a jumble of questions. I want to know where Midas Pack lives, what it’s like living with Risk and Hollis and Joshua. I want to know where Leon grew up, about his parents, the other adults in his pack, what it was like to be raised in a home like that. I want to know about the bond, how it feels, what’s shared and what’s kept hidden. I want to know if his packmates are aware of the quiet moments we’ve shared.

“Penny for your thoughts?” he asks as we make our way across campus to my dorm.

“I just have so many questions. Every time one gets answered I come up with ten more.”

“Is Ms. O’Brien helping?”

I nod. “I just have too many.” *And most of them are about you*, I don’t say.

“Well, how about we eat lunch together tomorrow and I can answer some more?”

My stomach twists with nerves.

Before I came to the Complex, my restricting was simple. If I was around people, I ate. If I wasn’t, I didn’t. It was easy enough to keep to one shared meal a day.

Assigning me buddies for every meal has shot my strategy straight to hell. I’ve eaten three meals a day, three days in a row. Without access to a scale, and with the wheelchair preventing my typical daily self-flagellation, I can pretend the weight gain isn’t happening, even as I’m energized and the head rushes disappear. At some point, it’s all going to come crashing down. But that doesn’t have to be tomorrow. Not when I can eat with Leon.

I don’t realize I’m nodding until he says, “Great!”

He waves at the guard as we enter the dorm.

“You get the ‘sick omega’ exception again on coming inside?” I tease, trying not to think about the lunch.

“You seem to be a permanent exception, little bird.”

“Sorry.”

“I did not say that in a bad way. You have been.... A breath of fresh air, let’s say.”

“I don’t feel very fresh,” I sigh. “Would it be weird to ask you to wheel me to the bathroom so I can brush my teeth and wash my face? I can’t really—” I make a face. “I can’t really push myself.”

I roll up a sleeve and show him the bruises patterning the inside of my elbow. I don’t know why I do it. His hand locks around my wrist and holds my arm in place so he can inspect them. He lets out a low whistle. His fingers close completely around my wrist. His hand is so warm.

“You really don’t do anything halfway, do you?” he asks. I can only shrug.

He wheels me into my room and the first thing he notices is the nest. I consider turning the chair and wheeling myself out of the room. Maybe off the nearest cliff.

He smiles, his eyes catching on his jacket from Monday night.

“I’ve been keeping it out to give back to you,” I offer lamely. It’s woven in with blankets and my dirty jeans. The lie is blatant.

“Keep it. That’s a fine little nest.”

Unlike my defensive urge when Cecilia complimented the nest, Leon’s words set a fire in my low belly. A bubbling sensation rises in my chest and I realize; it must be my purr. I

clamp down, refusing to allow the sound out. It feels like breathing through frothed milk.

“Those are my things,” I point out my toiletries for him to grab, desperate to change the subject. He obliges. I can’t believe I forgot about the nest when he came in.

He waits while I clean up. I’m exhausted, but my body is humming with him just outside the door. I call out when I’m finished and he enters and stands behind me, looking at our reflection.

“What do you see when you look in the mirror?” he asks. It’s an innocent enough question, but he notices my breath catch. “I’m sorry,” he falters. “I shouldn’t have asked that.”

But I’m looking with new eyes now. I wonder what *he* sees.

He towers over me, a blonde god and a wilted waif. I know he’s nearly six years older than me, but in the harsh lighting of the bathroom, I look older than him, aged beyond my years. My skin is sallow and my features pinched. I have sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. Sitting in front of Leon, for maybe the first time ever, I wish that I weighed more. That I glowed, at least enough to be worthy of a place next to him. It’s a disconcerting feeling, so starkly in opposition to how I usually feel.

“I look like shit, don’t I?” I smile, but it’s flimsy.

“I don’t think I’m supposed to agree with that,” he hesitates.

“It’s ok,” I chuckle. “I’m not saying I’m fat.”

“Did you really ever look in the mirror and think you were fat?”

“I was.”

He shakes his head slowly. He opens his mouth as if to say something, then thinks better of it. I watch him chew on the inside of his cheek, brow furrowed. Then, he blurts: “I don’t know if it’s bad to tell you I think you’re beautiful.”

The air is sucked from the room. We lock eyes in the mirror. It’s a quiet moment. It feels like it matters.

I look away first.

He wheels me back without saying anything more. He notices me squint when we enter my room and flicks the light off. The moon is almost full, visible in the sliver of sky between the tops of the trees and the frame of the window. He maneuvers me to the foot of the bed by its light, and then looks at me questioningly, silently asking if I need help. I nod.

He cradles me gently and lifts in what is quickly becoming a routine gesture. I bury my face in his neck. I know now that this is where his scent glands are. That by doing this, I’m assaulting him with my black tea and bergamot. But all I can think about is what he’s doing to me—cloves, like spiced cider, melting me like warm butter. *He thinks you’re beautiful.*

He sets me in my nest, but I don’t let go of his neck. I know I should, I know, *I know*. I just *need* him. A little longer.

“Indie,” he rasps.

I let my hands trail from behind his head to rest on his cheeks. I hold his face over mine, knowing he has to be bent and uncomfortable. Not caring.

I will him to know what I'm asking for. I can't do it myself, I just can't.

His expression is pained, his green eyes burning. He leans forward and for a moment I think he'll close the space between us. His hand cradles my face. His thumb brushes my lips, parted, waiting for him. A feather's touch. He presses his forehead to mine. Our breaths mix. My body turns to jelly.

"Leon," I breathe. I feel pathetic, my need for him overriding every instinct of self-preservation I thought I had bolstered in anticipation of my hormones betraying me.

His hand comes to rest over mine, still cupping his cheek. He pulls away. The air is cold without his breath to warm it.

"Rest up, Indie. I'll see you tomorrow, ok?"

"Tomorrow?" I repeat, struck dumb. All I can think about is him, his lips, his body, big and solid against mine. Safe.

"For lunch. I'll be waiting, so don't stand me up, ok?"

I nod, watching him turn and go.

How am I supposed to face him after this?

Indie the Imbecile.

Malevolent

HOLLIS

Wilder is so goddamn pleased with himself I want to punch his lights out. He's practically skipping as he walks us across the Complex to the administrative wing.

His office has been turned into a mini-interrogation room. I grit my teeth when I see who awaits us inside: Marcus. Marcus Phoenix. Lucas Orion is next to him, grimacing apologetically. His presence should soften the blow, but it doesn't.

Because Anthony isn't here. Maybe it's good that Joshua won't be facing the head of the Coalition when he's still so fragile, but Anthony's absence means something else too: they really don't believe us. They don't take this seriously at all. Logically I already knew that, but it stings anyway. We have a very deep hole to claw ourselves out of.

What happened should have had the entire alpha community on red alert, preparing for war. But it's been six weeks and it's soon to be some dusty file in a forgotten storage room. Until the next omega lost.

My palms burn as my fingernails dig into the scabs I made on Monday. When I first learned of Indigo.

I frown at the thought of her, trying to wipe it from my brain even as her scent still swims around us. So sweet. She's so frail, I want to run back and guard her so she can eat, and rest, and heal. It isn't right, just leaving her, even in Leon and Risk's hands. But I can't fend off the enemy if the enemy is her.

I shake the thought loose. This is exactly why I was hesitant, why I didn't want Joshua and Risk to know about her. She's a distraction. Joshua *needs* me. She is cared for, no matter what my instincts might tell me.

"Joshua, why don't you take a seat?" Marcus doesn't stand to greet us. Disrespectful asshole.

I pull out Joshua's chair for him and then cut Wilder off as he tries to round the desk to sit across from us. I take the chair he was headed for and yank it around so I can sit next to Joshua.

"Excuse me—" Wilder protests.

"Can somebody explain why the headmaster needs to be here? I don't remember him being involved in tactical operations." I look directly at Lucas as I speak, ignoring Wilder completely.

"That's true. You can go, John." Lucas dismisses him.

I make a mental note to ensure Orion Pack is on our list to send Christmas cards to.

“But—this is my office,” Wilder sputters, but Lucas has already turned to Joshua.

“How are you doing?” he asks.

“Fine, thank you.” Joshua’s voice is stilted and formal.

“Enough sweet talk.” Marcus is all business. Bastard.
“John?”

Wilder is still standing there, mouth open like he’s trying to catch flies. He turns and leaves, the wooden door slamming behind him.

Marcus wastes no time. “Joshua Midas, you are hereby held in contempt of the Coalition’s Office of Internal Affairs for refusal to acknowledge official summons. The fine will be levied on your salary for your tenure at the Complex. You are officially relieved from duty when your assignment is complete. Do you understand?”

“That’s a poor decision,” I cut in before Joshua can answer. “You’ve never had a tactical operations coordinator as good as Joshua, and you’re about to cut him loose, for what? Being attacked?”

“I know you may be bitter about your own demotion, Hollis, but the Coalition doesn’t employ alphas who can’t be trusted to show up, much less carry out what needs to be done in the field.”

I see red.

“Enough.” Lucas’s voice bristles with dominance, shutting Marcus up momentarily. “At the end of Joshua’s Complex

assignment, we can re-visit his eligibility for re-hire. Without psychiatric clearance he won't be re-entering field duty, no matter what. Same as the rest of you."

I grind my teeth.

I haven't even gone in for the assessment yet. I can't risk failing. My future in the Coalition would be doomed before it began. And all of us know better than to try and send Risk in there right now. Joshua has been bed-bound, and Leon says he has no interest in working for a government that turned its back on us so easily, so there's no point in bothering with the assessment. I can't blame him, but now that Indie has entered the picture, he won't be able to avoid it. Not if he wants a chance with her.

"Fine," I grit out.

"Ok Joshua," Lucas gives a tight smile. "Why don't you just start at the beginning."

A vein pulses in Joshua's forehead. I fight the urge to reach out and touch him. He takes a deep breath.

"We were at the Rochester Center at 0600, as assigned. I went with my Pack to manage radar threats on location. It was a routine transfer of a pre-heat omega, so we were armed and performing the expected field threat assessments. Margaret—" Joshua clears his throat.

I look down at his hands and notice they're shaking. He clenches them in his lap. Watching his shoulders hunch fills

me with a red-hued rage. Fuck this. We've all told them exactly what happened, there's no need for this.

I bite back the anger fueled comment I want to make and reach out instead, putting my hand on Joshua's thigh, stopping his nervous bouncing. He takes a deep breath.

"Margaret Knight was sitting in the backseat, between Risk and Leon," Joshua continues. "She was de-scented but clearly only hours away from her heat, and she was deeply uncomfortable. We were doing our best to move quickly while retaining all security measures. Knight Pack was waiting at their home in the city."

"And you don't think that any of your pack mates were rutting?" Marcus asks.

"What? Of course not. We've done pre-heat transfers dozens of times, why would this be any different?"

"Well, you tell me."

Joshua glares at Marcus.

"Go on," Lucas prompts.

Joshua takes another deep breath. "We were about forty miles south of Rochester when we detected a large heat signature in the forest. It wasn't a group of hikers or a picnic or anything. As is policy, we evaluated alternate routes, but the turn-off was four miles past the unknown signature. We evaluated turning back, but the tail caught up to us. They must have been lingering three or four miles behind to stay out of

radar range, and didn't close in until the forest unit was in position."

"And you can understand why we're dubious when you speak of supposedly feral alphas like this?" Marcus cuts in. "A tail? A forest unit? This doesn't align with our current understanding of these feral alpha packs you Midas boys seem so leery of."

I choke a snarl back. *Boys*. Like we're children.

"Can I finish?" Joshua snaps.

"Watch yourself, Midas. There is further yet to fall."

I know I have to be bruising Joshua with how hard I'm gripping his thigh, but I can't stop. It's the only thing stopping me from launching myself over the desk at Marcus.

"When we stopped, Leon and Risk exited the vehicle and assumed defensive positions. I radioed in the unknown threat. We didn't realize at the time that they had scrambled the area. That's when..."

Joshua fades out, something flickering in his eyes.

I can smell the paper of the old books on Wilder's shelves. The fluorescent lights flicker slightly, always bright, with moments of increased intensity. Lucas needs a shave. I wonder how many pens in the wire basket on Wilder's desk are dead.

Joshua's veins are blue under his alabaster skin. A muscle in his jaw tenses. His lashes fold between his lids as he screws his eyes shut. His hand comes to rest over my own on his leg. I

feel the trembling in his fingertips, the sweat in the creases of his palms.

I open the bond.

I should have been with him the whole time. Should have felt his pain, shared it.

Just like last time, the energy required to keep Leon and Risk out while allowing Joshua in is herculean. I am silly putty stretched too thin. I am not enough to fill the emptiness inside of him.

Joshua inhales sharply as our minds bleed into each other.

But something is different this time. He isn't the black hole he was before, sucking what little I had to give until I felt myself going numb.

He is a vortex, burning with so many thoughts that for a moment I forget my own. Indie and Risk and his bed and the rut and Leon and me and the bond and the attack, all smashed together, tumbling over each other in a tangled mess.

Marcus clears his throat, and Joshua's mind screeches to a halt, stuck on something he was trying to forget. Trying to lose in the jumble. I feel it all with him.

Terror. Confusion. Dread. The memories are splintered glass, slivers of color and the red-hot pain, feeling us fall, one by one.

Joshua speaks, his voice locked into an even, dead timbre. "That's when they emerged from the tree line. I would estimate at least fifty, potentially more. I radioed in the red

alert immediately, which, as we now know, was scrambled. We watched from the road as they approached. At this point, Hollis exited the vehicle and ordered me to lock down. I protested, not wanting to leave my packmates outside, but he ordered, so I complied. We wouldn't have been able to escape anyway—they had barricaded the road ahead of us.

“I tried to comfort Margaret as we watched the feral alphas approach. They were running. None of them had guns. They had... knives.”

He closes his eyes, and my heart aches as I feel the echoes of panic through the bond. There's nothing I can send back to comfort him. He watched it all. I didn't.

“After Hollis's second order to stand down, he cleared Leon and Risk to begin shooting. They did, and took down at least a dozen before they reached us.”

“A dozen whose bodies were never located,” Marcus adds.

Joshua just goes on, deaf now, lost in the memory. “When they did arrive, everything happened very quickly. Hollis fought several of them at once, until one hit him from behind and knocked him to the ground. He was bleeding from his head and I thought that he... I thought that he had been killed. I pulled my gun. Margaret pulled my knife from the holster on my thigh. I ordered her to give it back, but she begged me to let her keep it. I agreed.

“We watched as they overwhelmed Leon. They weren't... they weren't out of control. They were very precise. They—” he chokes off.

“They cut off his hand?” Marcus prompts.

Joshua’s eyes flash. “No. First they ripped off his fingernails. Then they cut off his fingers, one by one, knuckle by knuckle. They laughed while they did it. They made him watch. They woke him when he passed out from the pain. *Then* they cut off his hand.”

His voice is resolute. Inside his mind, mallets ring on metal. He tastes blood, the loamy grind of dirt in his ears, Leon’s anguished screams. Joshua is walking on broken glass, steps even, unfeeling to the pain. This is too far, too much, and I spread myself like a kite, trying to catch him as he threatens to disperse in the wind like a dandelion gone to seed. I have to keep him whole. His hand over mine has turned to ice, a flat, dead thing gripping me no longer. I flip my hand underneath and thread my fingers through his. He doesn’t notice.

“And you were, what, just watching this happen?” Marcus asks.

“I had orders,” Joshua breathes. “I couldn’t... there were too many.”

“And after that?” Marcus pushes. He’s heard this before, clearly. Lucas looks green around the gills. His eyes are pure regret. The time for apologies is long gone.

“They broke Risk.” Joshua’s voice is flat again, controlled. His mind is not.

“And what do you mean by ‘broke’?” Marcus asks.

Joshua's memory makes me cringe. Risk on the ground. Risk, trying to obey. Trying so *hard*.

"Four alphas compelled him. At the same time. They made him do horrible things. They gave conflicting orders. Told him to hurt himself."

"We understand the stab wound in his thigh was self-inflicted? As well as the broken fingers?"

Joshua nods. "They ordered him to cut off his own hand as well, but he withstood that one. At great personal cost."

"What do you mean by that?" Marcus fishes.

"I don't know, how about Hollis tells you to cut off your hand and we see what it takes for you to resist?"

Marcus bristles. "That would be illegal." He doesn't like Joshua pointing out that I have more dominance.

"Correct. May I go on?" Joshua asks. The anger helps him hide from the despair.

Marcus nods, irritation flashing in his eyes.

"At that point, a group of them approached the vehicle and ripped the doors off the back."

"You're saying that alphas ripped through military-grade reinforced steel with their bare hands?" Marcus challenges.

"You saw the forensics on the SUV, you know I'm not lying."

Marcus waves his hand in dismissal. "Go on."

This is the part that Joshua hasn't been able to say out loud before. To any of us. *This* is what Marcus has been waiting for. I squeeze Joshua's hand.

"Joshua? Any day now."

"Enough," Lucas snaps at Marcus.

"Thank you," Joshua whispers, not opening his eyes. "They, um... They tried to drag us from the vehicle. Margaret... Margaret asked me to shoot her. She said it would be—it would be better. Than what they would do. I refused. I thought help would come in time. I just needed to delay. I didn't know things had been scrambled. I didn't know nobody knew."

His breathing is ragged, his eyes flitting around behind half-closed lids. He's nauseous, the bond is roiling with his shame and self-loathing. I take as much of it as I can. I wish I could take it all.

"They dragged us from the vehicle. They came from the back, she was between us, I didn't want to risk hitting her, so I didn't attempt a shot until she was pulled free. By then it was too late.

"They smashed the radio. They forced me to my knees. They had already ripped her shirt. They were rutting. The ones who... who hurt my packmates, they weren't. They were in control. But the ones who had Margaret and me. They... got her onto the ground. I tried to fight, but they held me down. They made me watch. Said they'd cut off my eyelids if I didn't keep them open.

“She fought them. As much as she could. But when it was clear there was no hope, she...”

His eyes open, utterly empty. He isn't here with us, not anymore. He's watching. My stomach flips as I relive the sensation of it with him. This was the memory that made me close the bond. Beyond even Leon's and Risk's agony, beyond the decimation of our pack. The one that I knew we couldn't take, not when it played on loop in Joshua's head, over and over again in the aftermath.

I can tell Marcus is itching to prompt Joshua on. He's leaning across the table, knuckles white on the mahogany. But he waits, feeling Lucas's coiled rage next to him.

“She stabbed herself,” Joshua finally says.

The words are underwhelming compared to the torment flaring in the bond.

“How did she manage that?” Marcus asks. Lucas glares at him, but Marcus is intent. Disgust is soured milk in my mouth.

“They let go of her arm to rip her pants off. She had the knife hidden in her sleeve. They ripped her shirt down the middle, so the sleeve was still on. As soon as her arm was free, she... did it.”

“And are you sure that she succeeded in ending her own life?”

“Enough,” Lucas's voice flares with anger. “He's said enough.”

“Without a body recovered, we have no way of knowing. Knight pack deserves to know.”

“She was dead,” Joshua chokes. “They joked... they joked about having her anyway.”

The room falls silent.

Joshua’s hand is deadly still in my own. It would be better if he were squeezing the life out of me. But he’s just empty.

“Are we done here?” I ask. I’m surprised by how calm I sound.

“What happened after that?” Marcus asks.

“They knocked me out. When I woke, they were gone.”

“So, you expect us to believe that *over fifty* feral alphas attacked you? All for a single omega?”

“Believe what you want. Can I go?” Joshua’s voice is tight.

“Not quite—” Marcus looks poised to attack again, but Lucas cuts him off.

“Yes, you may go. We’ll reach out if there are any other questions. And Joshua?”

Joshua doesn’t move. He’s holding on by a thread.

“I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine—” Lucas shakes his head. “I’m just sorry.”

Joshua’s nod is barely perceptible. He stands abruptly. I’m quick behind him.

“Send me a copy of the file when it’s closed,” I say to Marcus. The order has more dominance in it than would ever be considered polite, but I think of it as a kindness, considering what I really want to do to him right now. I give Lucas a curt nod. The door slams behind us.

Wilder is gone. I almost wish he wasn’t. My fists are craving the crunch of cartilage on bone.

Leon is leaning against the car when we make it out to the parking lot.

He smells strongly of Indigo, so strongly that Joshua staggers when he gets in range. Leon rushes forward and catches him before he goes to his knees. Joshua gasps, a sob ripping from his chest. It’s too much—I let the bond slip away. I can’t be eaten by his grief, not like this. He shudders with the loss.

It hurts me too. I sink to my knees next to them on the hard asphalt. I’m about to shush Joshua, to help him calm, but Leon speaks first: “Let it all out, it’s ok. Just go ahead and cry.”

It’s the exact opposite of what I would have said.

Joshua gives in, sagging fully into Leon’s arms, the sobs so powerful that they’re silent, just wracking his body. He looks like he’s seizing. There are no tears, no words. I fight my inner urge to cringe away from a show of such vulnerability. Leon is made for it.

He rocks slowly, a consistent rhythm to counter Joshua’s jerky movements. His eyes are open and locked on mine. I

can't read them. I just watch, my hand resting on Joshua's shivering back. I can feel the knobs of his spine through his thin sweater.

This is the difference between Leon and I. I wanted Joshua under control. Leon wanted him better.

I bow my head in shame, rubbing my hand in soft circles on Joshua's back. Some fucking Pack Alpha I am. Leon can see it in my eyes. I can't meet his gaze.

He just keeps rocking. I take deep breaths, matching his rhythm, giving Joshua something to cling to. I don't know how long we stay there. It feels like forever. My knees ache. Joshua's body relaxes, and when the fit seems to have passed, he pulls away from Leon.

"Is Indie ok?" he rasps.

Leon's shoulders shake. "Are *you* ok?"

Joshua waves his hand, dismissing the question. "It's over now."

"That bad, huh?"

"Marcus held it," I grit out.

Leon's brow furrows.

"And I'm super fired," Joshua jokes lamely. "My stint as an English teacher will be my swan song."

"That's up for debate," I counter.

Joshua shakes his head. "I don't want to go back to missions."

“Agreed,” Leon nods firmly.

I press my lips into a thin line, but don't argue. It isn't the time or place, and there are other paths to where we want to go than field work. I can still matter, even if my pack decides not to.

“No more missions,” I acquiesce. “Now, do you want to go home?”

“Can we sleep in the pack bed?” Joshua asks.

“Of course,” Leon answers before I can. I feel a brief flash of irritation. I would have said the same thing anyway. I wish Risk would be home to sleep with us. He's always been good at breaking down the reservations that Leon and I have. Leon is better at putting his aside when he knows he's needed.

Which just leaves me. The one meant to hold everything together, useless when it all falls apart anyway.

20

Incarnate

INDIGO

“**W**hat is this?” I ask as Cecilia places the breakfast tray on my lap to wheel me out of the dorm. A piece of paper is folded beneath a covered plate that smells strongly of blueberry pancakes.

“What? Oh, the paper? Probably your pack sheet.”

“Pack sheet?” I unfold it and find a bulleted list of names: Orion, Anderson, Black, Phoenix, Mason, Eros.

Cecilia waves her hand dismissively. “The list of packs that you’re genetically predisposed for successful heats with. Your testing must have come back.”

“*Successful heats?*” I echo. The note of horror in my voice is not lost on Cecilia.

“It’s no big deal. All unmated alphas and omegas get them. One of the perks of the Coalition.”

“Perks?”

“It makes finding a pack a whole lot easier. Whether you’re looking for a bond, or just on rotation. Apparently the genetic markers predict social compatibility too.”

“I’m doing a medical heat.”

We arrive at the same table in the quad as yesterday. The early summer weather is doing its best to batter the cooler spring away with watery Virginia sun peeking through the clouds. When Cecilia sits, her face is pinched. We had this fight yesterday too.

“You know what, Indie?” she asks. “Why don’t you ask Ms. O’Brien to show you a video of a medical heat today, hmm? We watch them in class. See for yourself.”

The blueberry pancakes smell much less appealing as Cecilia uncovers them.

I wouldn’t say I’ve come to terms with what’s going to happen to my body soon, but I’ve been doing my best to have at least a grudging acceptance for its inevitability. The thought of actually *seeing* it? I can’t tell if that would be better or worse than going in blind.

“What packs did you get?” Cecilia interrupts my thoughts. I hold the list out to her, then watch her eyes go wide.

“What? Are they really bad or something?”

“No, they’re... powerful. Orion Pack has two alphas on the Board of Governors. Phoenix Pack pretty much runs Internal Affairs now. The Blacks are mob bosses. This is an all-star line-up, Indie—you must have great genes.”

“Is that a *good* thing?” I ask.

“Most omegas here would kill for a sheet like this. Honestly, I wouldn’t mention it if I were you. Kennedy might murder you and wear your skin as a suit or something.”

I half-smile, distracted looking at the list again. Mob bosses? The Board of Governors? I don’t even know what that is. “They sound old.” I say.

Cecilia shrugs. “Cora’s pack has a thirty-year-old in it. She bonded when she was eighteen.”

“How can you be so casual about that?” I ask. “It’s *creepy*.”

“How? Once you have a heat, you’re on an even playing field.”

“No, you’re not! You could be at completely different life phases!”

Cecilia laughs. “Indie, a pack bond isn’t like a marriage between two betas. It goes way deeper than that. Pack comes first. Always. Nobody wants it any other way.”

My stomach sinks. I planned on being pack-less. Going to college like a normal person, someday. A degree. A job. Suppress my heats once I’m healthy enough, or take a day or two off every few months to handle them. No need for some pack to steal my future with the exact kind of commitment Cecilia is talking about. How else could I survive the death of Indie the Imposter from Adams, and the birth of... whatever it is I am now? Indie the Idiot?

Now I think of myself away at college while Midas Pack is still here. I'm homesick for a treehouse I've never even seen. How can I ache for a *smell*? The memory of Leon's lips hovering over mine last night is sharp.

"So... what am I supposed to do with this list?" I ask, taking the piece of paper back from Cecilia. *Midas isn't on it*, I can't say. Why do I even care?

"The packs have been given your name too. Usually you set up meet-and-greets at the mixers, one pack at a time. I don't know if you'll do anything different since you're, well, rushed."

"I don't want to be courted."

Cecilia shrugs. "There's no commitment. You won't be forced to do anything you don't want to." Her tone makes it perfectly clear what she thinks I *should* do after one of these meet-and-greets.

"Cecilia," I change the topic, "do you have an easy way to get some de-scenter?" I ask.

"You don't have to sabotage them, Indie," her voice is exasperated. "They're just dates."

"Not for that," I shake my head. "I um, I need it for something else."

She looks at me flatly. "What?" she asks.

"Lunch."

Cecilia's eyebrows shoot up. "With who?"

“Um. A teacher.”

“You’re eating with Trainer Midas.”

I nod. I fight to keep my scent down. It feels like trying to write with a wet noodle.

I couldn’t fall asleep for hours last night, trying to find words for the taste of the air he breathed. The stubble on his cheeks, rough on my palms. The tortured look in his eyes.

I must have looked so pathetic, practically begging him to kiss me. Never have I stooped so low before. And, I resolved last night, I will *never* stoop so low again.

Hence, de-scenter.

I haven’t touched my pancakes. They’re cold now, the syrup and butter congealed. My stomach flips at the thought of eating. I want to see Leon. I can’t imagine facing him.

Leon listens to me. He takes me seriously, and teases me, and thinks I’m beautiful. I feel safe with him. He makes me want to be better. And also naked. And I can’t live with the dissonance of that. Because naked and exposed is not safe, no matter what lies my hormones might tell me.

Cecilia is watching me, scenting my turmoil. Irritation flashes. Is this how things are always going to be? Every emotion I feel, broadcast for everybody?

I like Midas Pack. But I can’t *like* them. It’s just too dangerous. I’ll opt for medical heats, start de-scenting myself around them, and maybe, just maybe, I can have some friends.

The thought of it makes me ache. I miss friends. I miss Rose and Cam. So much has happened in the past week, I can't seem to wrap my brain around it. I can't ruin the tenuous friendship I've made with Leon and his pack.

"Me and an alpha in an enclosed space?" I say, trying to keep my voice light. "Seems like best practices."

"I'll see what I can do." Cecilia doesn't look pleased about it. I don't know why—there's no shame in using de-scenter, from what I can tell. They use it to clean the Complex hallways, on all the linens, in the bathrooms, it's just best practices. I'm being good. I'm doing the right thing.



"You don't have to register yet Indie, you can wait a little longer. The default is a medical heat, no need to actively opt in." Ms. O'Brien faces off with me across her desk.

"I don't want to get another one of these." I hold out the pack sheet to her. Her eyes widen as she reads it, just like Cecilia's.

"Wow," she breathes.

"Yeah. I'm not interested."

"I understand. This list is... very political." Her voice carries an edge to it that I haven't heard before. "But... are you sure? About the medical heat?"

I nod. "Never been so sure in my life."

“Indie... what about Midas Pack? Leon and his packmates seem very fond of you.”

My cheeks flush and I look away. “No. They’re just friends. I don’t want that.”

Ms. O’Brien shifts in her seat uncomfortably. “There’s nothing wrong if you did want that, you know that, right?”

“They’re not on the list, so.” I shrug. “And this way I can hang out with them without the Complex having a cow.”

“Indie... I don’t feel right signing you up yet. You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

“Cecilia said you have a video of a medical heat. Show me. Then I’ll know, and you can sign me up.”

Ms. O’Brien purses her lips. “I wish Cecilia hadn’t mentioned it.”

“Why not? Everybody sees it, right?”

“You’ve known you’re an omega for less than a week, Indie. Most omegas don’t see heat videos until they’ve gotten nearly a year of classes. And counseling.”

“Well, I don’t really have the luxury of time, do I?” I counter.

She sighs. “No, I suppose you don’t. Though I wish you did. How about a deal?”

I’m not really in any position to bargain. I have no idea how I would sign myself up for a medical heat if Ms. O’Brien refused. “What?” I ask.

“I’ll show you the medical heat if I can also show you the regular heat. With a pack. And if you watch both, and still want a medical heat, I’ll put you on the list. Sound fair?”

I feel my scent rise with embarrassment. “You want me to watch porn.”

“It’s educational material. And you’re the one who asked.”

“For the *medical* heat.”

“Both are explicit. Do you accept or not?”

“Fine,” I relent.

“Ok. Let me set them up. I’ll leave so you can watch alone. It can be a little hard on your hormones.”

She fiddles with her laptop, clicking and typing and clicking some more and then turning the screen to face me. The video is paused, showing an empty room. A massive bed occupies the center, with a huge pile of blankets on top.

“They’ll play one after the other, you don’t need to do anything. And Indie?”

I turn to Ms. O’Brien. Her eyes are full of concern. I remember how happy she looked last night, with her alphas and beta and the little girls. A family.

“What?” I ask.

“What you’re about to see? It’s not who you are. It’s a part of you, yes, but you are still you. You’re still Indie. Smart as a whip, complicated and funny and sarcastic. Don’t let this define you or what you think you’re capable of, ok?”

My shoulders sag. Ms. O'Brien leaves, closing the door to her office softly behind her.

I turn back to the screen, suddenly nervous. I wanted to get this over with, to prove Cecilia wrong, but the static image on the screen seems somehow foreboding.

I hit play.

At first, nothing happens. Then the blanket pile moves, and I realize that there's somebody underneath. A nest, not a pile.

"*Alpha?*" the sound is grainy, the word barely audible. A tiny face pops out from the blankets, all flushed cheeks and big eyes. An omega. She's pretty.

A rumbling sound comes from offscreen, and then three massive alphas enter the room. They stride quickly, confidently, approaching the bed in perfect synchronization. One of them sweeps blankets aside, the other scoops the omega into his arms, crooning for her. The sound quality turns even more staticky, but then I realize that what I thought was white noise is actually purring.

Memories of Leon's rumbly purr hit me, and I feel a distinct rush of wetness between my legs, making me clench my thighs with embarrassment.

The other two alphas make quick work of the blankets, not shoving the nest aside but instead reshaping it so they all fit. One of them sits up against the headboard and the alpha holding the omega sets her down so she's leaning with her back against his front. He takes over the purring, pulling her

into him. He begins touching her, and my cheeks flush as I watch his hands roam. Over her chest, cupping her chin, venturing between her legs. She eagerly helps him pull her shirt off.

“*Good girl,*” he grumbles. She’s panting now, spreading her legs to give him better access. She starts whining as his motions quicken, and before the other two alphas have even stripped their clothes off, she’s bucking in his lap, crying out.

I hit the mute button, unable to listen to her pleasure-filled cries. I feel like I’m violating their privacy.

On the now-silent screen, one of the other alphas crawls over to the omega, panting and slumped back against her other alpha. He’s naked, and I instinctively avert my gaze, mortified. It doesn’t seem right. After a moment, I can’t help it though, and I turn back to watch. My eyes dart where their hips meet.

He’s buried himself between her legs, grinding his hips up and into her. Her mouth opens in a silent ‘O’ of ecstasy, and I know she’s making all kinds of noises that I don’t want to hear.

He kisses her. The other alpha is still fondling her, grinding his own hips into her butt, though he’s still fully clothed.

The third alpha crawls in then, leaning forward and kissing the alpha who’s sitting against the headboard.

I can smell myself now, my spicy citrusy tea sharp and definitive and needy. The alpha resting against the headboard

reaches out and grasps the third alpha's... thing, stroking it slowly.

And this time, I see it. At the base, growing with every stroke. His knot. I swallow once, twice, again, unable to clear my throat.

I press my thighs together. I'm wet. Soaking wet. Like, *need a change of panties* wet. And maybe my pants too.

On screen, the first alpha speeds up until with one heavy, final thrust, he stops, the bulk of his body covering hers. He doesn't pull out, and I realize he's locked with her. *Knotted*. She's panting and smiling, a hazy look in her eyes like she's not fully there.

A mindless sex-crazed doll. I was being cruel and mocking when I said it, but I was right. It's exactly what she looks like.

The alpha on top of her lifts her body and turns so his face is visible for the camera, and the expression he's wearing makes my vision start to tunnel. He *loves* her. If the resolution were clear enough, I know with complete certainty that I would see silvery bite marks on all of their necks. This pack is bonded, heart and soul, body and mind.

Captions begin to scroll across the bottom of the screen—a laughable, health-class appropriate spiel to a terrifyingly intimate scene. “Knotting can last anywhere from ten minutes to an hour. During this time, massive amounts of oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin are released in both the alpha and omega. It is very important to **never** force an alpha and omega apart when knotted, or serious internal damage may occur.”

The video cuts then, showing the same group in a different configuration. I wonder if the action onscreen is toned down at all for the classroom—in this new position, she's on her knees with a different alpha behind her, using her hand on another.

I watch mutely, a throbbing feeling growing at the back of my neck. It briefly crosses my mind to touch myself, to attempt to alleviate the sharp ache between my legs, but something tells me it would do no good. What I'm craving isn't my own hand. I feel squelchy with wetness. I cringe as the word comes to me. *Slick*.

I fight the urge to slam the laptop shut. The video cuts more frequently, showing all the different ways they handle her. At one point they're all sprawled out, one of them holding a juice box to her lips while another wipes between her legs with a damp rag. She looks hazy, half-conscious, all smiles and bliss. The alphas are glowing as well, smiling warmly and touching each other almost as often as they touch her. If this weren't being recorded to be shared with thousands of students, I wonder if they'd be giving each other more than passionate kisses and occasional strokes.

The video ends with a final caption over an image of all of the alphas and their omega curled blissfully together in the nest, sweaty and thoroughly sexed out. They're all touching her somehow, one on either side, one between her legs with his head pillowed on her stomach while she absently cards through his hair.

For a moment, I imagine Joshua like that, looking up at me. Shame chases the image away as quickly as it came.

The caption rolls slowly and then freezes: “An omega’s heat can last anywhere from one to three days. During that time, it is important to spend as much time as possible knotted, while still leaving adequate time for food, water, and rest. At the end of a heat, it is normal to need a day or so to recover, during which time it is important for an omega to remain as close as possible to her alphas in order to avoid a serotonin dip.”

I’m breathing hard when the caption disappears. My pants are ruined. Humiliation roils in me as my scent battles Ms. O’Brien’s for domination of her office.

A new image flashes onscreen.

This one is a different room. Rather than the dim darkness of the first, it’s all sterile and white. A neatly made, extra-wide hospital bed fills the frame. A surgical tray on wheels is next to it, like the occupant of the bed is about to be operated on.

I squint to see what’s on the tray, then recoil—sex toys. All of them with big, fake knots at the base.

An omega enters the frame. She’s pacing back and forth, clearly anxious.

The first caption flashes, and a sense of foreboding fills me. “Warning: some viewers may find the following video disturbing. Viewer discretion is advised.”

The omega stops and hunches over. She looks like a pregnant woman feeling her first contraction.

I reach out and turn the sound back on with a shaking hand. Immediately her whimpers are audible, high-pitched sounds much like Risk made when Leon dominated him. I flip the volume back off, unable to handle the pitiful whines.

She crawls to the bed, pulling herself up and yanking the blankets back, burying herself underneath. She curls into a tiny ball, holding her midsection tightly. I'm beginning to understand the feeling she's having. Emptiness. The need to feel *full*. To feel connected. The edge of what I've felt with Leon or Risk when I spike. To be touching them. But she has nobody to touch.

Her hand shoots out, reaching blindly towards the surgical tray. She grabs the first toy she lands on, pulling it under the blankets. She shifts, adjusting herself, and a moment later it becomes clear that she's riding it. She's hunched, the movements subtle, and they don't last long. She slumps forward.

A caption rolls across the bottom of the screen: "It is normal for omegas to call for help during heats spent alone. Unfortunately, they are unable to consent while in heat. This is why heat suites are equipped with timed locks, and only a medical override with three betas present can open the door ahead of the completion of the heat."

My throat is made of sandpaper as I watch her drag herself from the bed and pound on the door, over and over again, slumping into it as she wears herself out. I turn the sound back on and immediately regret it. She's wailing, her voice full of

despair. I mute it again, but not before the words are branded in my brain: “*alpha, alpha, please, alpha...*”

The video cuts and for a second I think she’s gone, then I realize she’s under the bed. Another caption rolls as her shivering form cowers against the metal frame: “Nesting instincts often turn overpowering in unattended heats, and omegas will hide wherever they can. Serotonin dips are inevitable, and thus all heat suites are cleared of any sharp objects or potential weapons.” Her eyes turn to the camera, pitifully sad, still glazed with a disturbing lack of awareness.

Sharp objects or potential weapons. Would she... hurt herself? Would I? My stomach is full of gravel.

The video cuts again, showing her in the bed once more. She reaches out blindly again towards the tray, but only manages to push it away from the bed. As her hand fumbles, searching for it, she tips, lurching for a frozen moment before falling out of the bed altogether. She lands hard. I wait for her to get up, to get the toy she needs from the tray, to get back in bed, but she doesn’t. She just curls into a ball on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest, shivering.

I can’t do it.

I slam the laptop shut, closing my eyes and willing the image of her out of my mind.

She was so afraid. So alone. Naked, and scared, her eyes similarly hazy to the omega in the first video, but with none of the satiety or pleasure. She was all yearning, absence, and need.

I wipe at my cheeks and realize I'm crying. *It's just the hormones*, I think. Just the fucking hormones. The goddamn motherfucking soul-sucking life-owning hormones.

I dig the heels of my hands into my eye sockets. I wonder; who was on the other side of that door? Who had to listen to her cries? Who sat there and did nothing to help her?

She called for 'alpha'. Not a name. Would I do the same? Or would I call for Leon? Would I humiliate myself and call for Hollis, and Risk, and Joshua?

They don't want me.

Leon wouldn't kiss me last night. Hollis is too perfect, and Joshua is too sad, and Risk... the memory of his lips on mine sends another burst of spicy citrus into the air. What if I hadn't stopped him? If I had let my hands roam over his skin, feeling his muscles, finding the waistband of his pants and venturing underneath...

A knock on the door startles me.

Am I supposed to go to class? After watching that? My head hurts. I want to go somewhere dark and warm and small.

"Indie?" It's Cecilia's voice.

My bottom half is drenched and my cheeks are stained with tears and my scent is a miasma around me, poisonous and cruel.

"Give me a sec," I choke out.

“You watched the videos.” Her voice is muffled through the door. It isn’t a question. I wonder if she can scent me through the wood. “I brought the de-scenter. Do you need a change of clothes?”

“Yeah.”

“Slide your key under the door and I’ll go to your room.”

I maneuver the chair to the door and do as she asks, sliding my plastic dorm key underneath. I listen to the bustle of students outside. I take deep breaths. By the time she knocks again, I think I’m halfway back to sane.

“Here,” she holds out the clothes and de-scenter when I open the door. She turns her back to let me change. I mop up the wheelchair seat with my pants, feeling for all the world like I peed myself. Honestly, it might be preferable. Less humiliating.

When things are as clean and dry as they’re going to get, I turn the de-scenter on myself and start spraying. It is astringent and sharp and doesn’t even come close to cutting through my spiking scent. At a certain point I’m damp all over and give up.

“Still sure about the medical heat?” Cecilia asks knowingly.

I don’t answer.

Meritless

HOLLIS

“Interesting round of heat sheets this morning, hmm?”

Marcus Phoenix leans against my desk in the crowded bullpen that makes up the Internal Affairs office of the Coalition, his grass-like tobacco scent muddled in the damp air.

I had a corner suite, when I ran Tactical Operations. Now I'm stuck between a young alpha with post-nasal drip and a leaky radiator.

“Oh, sorry, you're not going out in the pack sheets now, are you?” Marcus simpers. “Well, maybe you can give me the inside loop anyway; you were getting cozy with the Wolfe girl last night, right? Indigo?”

I'm out of my seat and chest to chest with him before the snarl has a chance to rip its way free of my throat. He just smirks. I have six inches and thirty pounds on him, but in here, he's untouchable.

“She’s a little bony for our taste,” he goes on. “But we’ll find a way to make it work. Give her a pillow to kneel on. Think she can take a knot in her state? Or, you know, five.”

The wet sound of blood gushing in my ears competes with the growl roiling in my chest. “She’d never touch you,” I spit.

“Well, we know she won’t be touching you, hmm?”

Post-nasal drip has very smartly made himself scarce.

Marcus slides a stack of folders on my desk. “My proposal on banning birth control is going to a vote. I was going to tell you last night but, well, things got a little tense, didn’t they? Write up an issue memo and have it to me by end of day. I look forward to seeing your impartial explanation of both sides.”

He slips out from between me and the desk, practically skipping away.

The radiator starts rattling, matching the choked down growl in my chest.

I wheel back to kick it, but almost crash into post-nasal drip instead.

“Oh!” he says. He has a half-full cup of coffee in his hand, the other half now spilled down his front. I look around and catch the other grunts in the bullpen staring. Eyes dart away. *Way to go, Hollis.* I smooth the rage from my face, trying to put on some semblance of my practiced smile.

“Sorry.” I bow my head. I should really learn his name at some point. “Let me get you a new one.”

“That’s fine,” he rushes to stop me. Probably doesn’t want the hazard of me with hot liquid in throwing range. We both sit.

Indie. Under Marcus Phoenix. *A little bony*. I pull out my phone to call Dr. Gray and check on her condition, then think better of it. Clearly our interest in her has already been noted, and I don’t like that. Not if it will be used against us. I pull up Leon’s number, knowing he’s having lunch with her, but stop myself again. He’s already pissed at me. After the fight on Tuesday and then Joshua last night, I know he has some choice words saved up for when we’re next alone.

We woke this morning in the pack bed with Joshua between us. We were both awake, but neither of us spoke. Joshua was snoring, a soft murmuring sound that only happens when he feels safe. I always thought it was restful. It reminds me of when I first met him, just a boy, barely fifteen. So afraid, so in need of somebody—anybody—to protect him.

How could I lay there next to them, depriving them of the bond? What comfort am I really? All I protect them from now is me.

I got up first.

With Joshua finally out of his room, I changed his sheets and started a load of laundry. His hamper was almost entirely pants and underwear, and when I went in search of his shirts, I found them all piled up in the corner of Risk’s bed. A bottle of Vicodin and a little baggie of yellow pills were stashed

underneath, along with a pair of my underwear and one of Leon's favorite pairs of sweats. A nest.

I cringe to think of Indie and Risk comparing notes on how best to self-destruct.

Indie. God. Leon reeked of her last night, and she's still in the creases of my skin.

Can I really subject her to this? Fated mates or not, is it what's best for *her*? She's so young.

There's an aimless pull in me, a desire to go to her, and I don't trust it. What would I do? What do we have to offer her? Midas Pack is a disaster. I can't condemn her to that. This physical *craving* for her is punishment for the fact that I have nothing to give her in return.

Everything keeps going wrong. I could blame it on the attack, but that would be a lie.

Indie. I could blame Tuesday's fight on her, but what would have happened if she hadn't come along? Joshua sure as hell wouldn't have gotten out of bed. Leon wouldn't be smiling. Risk... I shake my head. I don't know what to make of him, I never have. What was he going to do with those Vicodin? What are the yellow pills?

He's been on third shift since returning to work. I never even considered that missing nights with us might affect him. He was always the one who wanted to sleep in the pack bed. I always thought it was because he's a horny bastard. Come to

find out, he's gone and nested with our scents. A goddamn alpha, making a nest.

I sit at my desk and pinch my brow and ignore the garbled half-coughs from post-nasal drip and the rattling radiator. I ignore the folders from Marcus and try to think. There has to be a solution here. An answer.

There's case studies demonstrating correlation between positive mental health outcomes and increased genetic marker matches in mated packs. Fated mates are the highest that the genetic markers can get. Could we fix Indie and her illness? Could she fix us?

That's a lot to put on a nineteen-year-old. My fingers curl with the need to hold her. I bite the instinct back.

Indie. She'll be a ward until she's signed a heat-contract or mated. Which means she has no choice but to choose from her pack sheet. We have to get on that goddamn sheet.

I head for Aaron's desk. Aaron is the guru of pack clearances.

"Hey Hollis! How are you doing? Saw you at the mixer last night, good to see the whole pack out and about again."

"Sorry I didn't say hello." I put on my best politician's smile. "You and the boys courting any lucky lady in particular?"

Aaron smiles back, immediately disarmed. "Paperwork went in this morning for her first heat. But enough about us, you looked like you were getting cozy with that omega in the wheelchair. Is she new? I don't remember seeing her before."

“She’s actually what I’m here to talk to you about.” I lean over his desk, like I’m bringing him into my confidence. “She’s sick.” I keep my voice low. “Real sick. Manifested late and her hormones aren’t playing nice.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Aaron says.

This is the moment of truth. I can’t tell him we’re fated mates—the only thing it can do is hurt us. So, I settle for something in between. “We’ve gotten close with her since she landed at the Complex. You saw—she’s comfortable with us. Her heat is coming soon, Aaron, real soon, and we’d like to be there for her.”

Aaron’s face tenses. I almost wish he wouldn’t speak—that hesitation is enough.

“You know I wish I could, Hollis, but rules are rules. If I started giving exceptions now, I’d never hear the end of it. How many clearances left until you’re eligible?” He begins tapping away at his keyboard, then pauses to read the screen. “Ok, this isn’t too bad. Just the psychiatric clearances across the board for you, and it looks like the final mission report—well, it’s classified, so that might take a minute, though it did just get put in this morning for processing, so at least the ball is rolling there. Get those appointments in and I’m sure you guys can be on next month’s sheet, maybe the month after.”

I should have known better than to try. “We might not have a month,” I say.

“Can she not take a short course of suppressors?”

“Thanks for the info, Aaron.” I smile at him tightly. “I wish you the best with your omega.”

I turn on my heel and walk back to my desk. Post-nasal drip coughs. The radiator rattles.

There are no answers. Indie will be alone in a heat suite and Leon will hate me and Risk will self-destruct and Joshua will slowly fade to nothingness.

I can't stop her hormones. I can't force Risk and Joshua to be sane enough for their assessments. That's my fault too—because of my position on the board, we're subjected to more stringent psychiatric evaluation than just the usual pack clearance. Usually, it would just be ensuring we're not narcissists or sociopaths, but because of me and my ambition, we also have to prove that we're of sound mind and judgment. A higher bar for higher aspirations. My fault.

I can't make them want what I want. I can't fix them. They probably want me to open the bond. And stick them with this feeling in my stomach? I don't have words for it, all I know is I want it gone.

My brain is hot. I open Marcus's folder and the sick feeling is compounded by tasteless disbelief that his proposal has somehow made it to a vote.

The Pack registry has been a boon for omega safety since its inception. He's framing this as a choice, but it's no choice at all. Bodily autonomy or the wild west of forming pack bonds outside the Coalition's vetted list. Omegas, at the mercy of alpha packs that have forsaken the Coalition and the

protections we offer. Handing the most vulnerable among us, the ones we've vowed to protect, to the very enemies we promised to protect them from. The very purpose for the existence of the Coalition to begin with.

Everything I've stood against my entire career, and he's having me write the justification for it. A test. Another test. How much bullshit can Hollis put up with before he explodes? Just like the rest of his pack. How long until we can get him to throw in the towel, just like them?

I used to think I could do it forever. Now I'm not so sure. There are some shortcomings I can't make up for on my pack's behalf, no matter how much overtime I put in.

I spend the afternoon trying not to think about the words I'm typing. I do my best to brainstorm ideas for Indie and her heat. For how to motivate Joshua to put himself through another traumatic interview. How to make Risk seem even semi-sane. How to soothe the rage in Leon's eyes without opening the bond. I can't open the bond. I can't be the Pack Alpha they need, not now. They might not understand it, but I know it's best. I can't subject them to this. I burn away at myself as the hours pass. Post-nasal drip breathes wetly. The radiator leaks and rattles.

At one point—with another intrusive thought of Indie alone in a heat suite crossing my mind unbidden—I stand, cross to the dripping radiator, and deliver a swift kick to its coiled metal side. There's a metallic *thunk*, then silence.

Post-nasal drip stares at me in horror.

“Fixed it,” I grunt. And I did—the radiator isn’t rattling any more. The steady drip of water into the pool underneath has also ceased. Likely due to the size fourteen dent in the side, but that’s beside the point.

The silence is arguably just as bad as the constant rattle.

I need a fucking drink.

Imprudent

INDIGO

I spend class clenching my legs and quietly spraying more de-scenter and wishing I could go back to my room and bury myself in my nest and never emerge. Not to face Leon, or Cecilia, or my heat. No more therapy or weigh-ins or tutoring with Ms. O'Brien. Just darkness, and quiet, and solitude.

It's a giant lie. I know that the second Leon opens his office door when I arrive for lunch.

"Hey, little bird," he smiles. "How are you doing?"

"Embarrassed," I say, my stomach doing a complicated flip at the sight of him. "Would you mind?" I thrust out the bottle of de-scenter. "Clearly I am young and impressionable and not to be trusted without pharmaceutical aid."

His smile falters. "You want me to..."

Warm cloves are already swimming in my head. His eyes are piercing, matching the evergreen scent of Hollis that I can faintly detect on him. Joshua's rain-sweet freshness too.

I nod tightly, trying to hold my breath. “I’m sorry about last night. That was... a lot.”

“Oh.”

What does ‘*Oh*’ mean?

I give the bottle a little shake. “Please?” I ask. “I just... I don’t want to not trust myself around you.”

He takes the bottle. He sprays his neck, his wrists, and with practiced motions manages to spray the tops of his thighs—where I know his *other* scent glands are located—without making it look weird or sexual.

“Better?” he asks. I take a little sniff and then nod curtly. He isn’t completely gone—I don’t know if it’s possible to truly wash a scent away—but it’s close enough.

“I see you already dosed yourself.” His voice is wry.

“This bottle is my new best friend.” I take it back and let him roll me into the office. It isn’t much to look at—white walls, linoleum floor, general issue furniture, a few stacks of folders. The only thing that marks the space as definitively his is a single framed photo, next to our lunch tray on his desk. I reach for it without thinking.

It’s Midas Pack. They’re all smiles, on a sun-soaked beach. Risk is perched on Hollis’s back, like he leapt up right before the camera snapped. Joshua is between Hollis and Leon, his arms over their shoulders, though it seems like Risk’s jump onto Hollis unbalanced them all. They’re laughing, mid-moment, a perfect snapshot of joy.

My stomach pangs. Whatever happened six weeks ago, it stole this from them.

“That was in Mexico.” Leon’s voice is wistful. “Right after our first mission with Hollis as Head of Tactical Operations.”

“You all look so happy,” I whisper.

“We were.”

The Leon in the photo is younger. Alive. Golden skin and golden hair and perfectly built planes of muscle. His left hand, hanging at his side. Whole. Carefree.

I look at the Leon in front of me. There are lines in his face now. More from frowning than smiling. His remaining hand cups his stump, massaging circles around his wrist. Black ink peeks from beneath his collar. He is Atlas, bowed under the world’s weight.

“What are you thinking?” he asks.

I chew on my lip. Leon hasn’t answered most of my questions about his past. Now I know. *He was happy.*

My voice is quiet when I speak. “I never got jealous of my friends when I was stuck at Adams every break and they’d go on vacation. They’d post all these glamorous photos looking like they were having the time of their lives and then get back and complain endlessly about bug bites or being forced to share a room or not having wi-fi on the plane. It didn’t make sense to me. Like their trips were one giant photoshoot. Why would I want to go through all that hassle when I was

pretending every day already? I didn't realize—you're not posing."

Leon looks at the photo for a lingering moment, his eyes traveling slowly over each glowing face. "No, we weren't," he finally says.

He drags the tray between us and starts divvying up the plates. "I need to start eating with you more," he changes the topic. "The school did my lunch up extra special, to match my company." He has a massive sub sandwich, a bowl of soup, a side salad, and an apple. I have a small bowl of soup, a bag of oyster crackers, and a clementine. I wrinkle my nose when I see it. It reminds me of Cam.

"Don't like oranges?" Leon asks. "Funny, since you smell like them."

"I do not smell like *oranges*," I retort.

"No, you don't, you smell much better," Leon acquiesces. "Oranges would be a gross oversimplification. Though, I have to say, all de-scented like this you are very," he sniffs sharply. "*orange-y*."

I roll my eyes. "Maybe I need to bathe in this stuff to truly get it all gone, huh?"

"You don't need to erase your scent, little bird."

No, just yours, I don't say. I narrow my eyes instead, taking a sip of soup to give me a moment to come up with a response to that. I watch as Leon struggles to get his sandwich in his

hand without spilling any of its contents. He doesn't use his stump at all, even as a support.

"I'm officially signing up for the medical heat tomorrow," I declare. "After that, do you think I can hang out with you and Risk without the Complex getting all pissy?" I don't let myself think of the tiny, glassy-eyed omega hunched under the bed. I think about the treehouse. About Joshua's black curls. Risk's gold nose ring. Anything else.

Leon stares at me, his sandwich halfway to his mouth. He sets it down. I feel bad—picking it up was difficult. Now he'll have to do it again. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

"My options aren't very appealing." I thrust the pack sheet out so he can read it. He takes it from me and I watch his eyes scan down the names. I was expecting a reaction like Cecilia's or Ms. O'Brien's, a slight widening of his eyes, a groan, a little frustration.

Instead, Leon flies to his feet, a snarl ripping from his chest.

I flinch, cowering back into my seat. Sometimes I forget how large Leon is. The way he cradles me in his arms, his throaty murmur, the soft brush of his thumb over my lips... all of it is gone as fury swells his frame. Corded muscles stand out on his neck as he looms over me, his face contorted with rage.

For a moment it looks like he might punch something—a vein pulses at his temple, his jaw clenched and strained as his single remaining fist balls up in preparation. But then he notices me. He deflates.

“Oh Indie,” he huffs. “I’m so sorry.” He slumps into his seat, dropping the crumpled Pack sheet on the desk.

“Cecilia and Ms. O’Brien were surprised but... what was that?”

The muscle starts flexing in his jaw again. He stares pointedly out the window, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “They’ve made a joke of it. They’ve politicized it. They’ve—” he searches for words and can’t find them. He bows his head, his hand running through his hair, gripping it like he might pull it out by the root. “I’m so sorry,” he finally murmurs. “This is our fault.”

“Your fault?” I crinkle my nose. “How?”

He sits back and takes a deep breath, his hand instinctively circling his bad wrist. I notice he never actually touches the stump itself.

“Hollis has dedicated his career to omega agency. Our kind’s history is... complicated. On one side, you have packs, bad packs, evil packs, wanting to treat omegas as property rather than human beings. On the other, you have those who wish so badly to protect omegas that they try to legislate away their agency, entrusting it to the Coalition instead. Neither extreme is right. Hollis is the middle ground. Which means there are people on both sides trying to knock him—*us*—down. Both inside the Coalition and out. God. None of this would have happened if I wasn’t the one to retrieve you on Friday.”

“If you hadn’t *saved* me, I’d be stomped into little omega pieces,” I counter.

“I know,” he sighs. “I know. I’m sorry, Indie.”

“And what does you rescuing me have anything to do with my pack sheet?” I ask.

Leon chews on the inside of his cheek. “Your doctor’s appointment Monday. The hospital, Monday night. The mixer yesterday. There are eyes everywhere, little bird. People haven’t missed that we’re... friends.”

Friends.

“I didn’t know that’s what Hollis does,” I say, changing the topic, my cheeks hot. I see Hollis’s questions last night in a new light. He wasn’t evaluating my answers; he was appreciating them. He worked to make them possible.

I don’t know if I’m grateful. I never asked to be a burden, to need protection. I wish I didn’t. The rules and restrictions of this place chafe every day, but I shudder to think of a world without them.

Leon irons the pack sheet out on the desk with his good hand, anger flashing in his eyes as he reads over the names again.

“It’s fine, Leon.” Saying his name feels strangely intimate. A little too familiar. I rush on, “I’m doing a medical heat anyway. So none of these matter.”

“Indie.” His voice is pained. “I hate to say it, but it would be better to entertain some of these options than to do a medical heat. Orion—” his voice breaks off, like he can’t physically

force the words out. “Orion pack is very nice. Lucas Orion is a friend of ours. They would treat you very respectfully.”

I’m already shaking my head. “No. I’m doing a medical heat.”

Leon lets out a low groan. “I swear you’re trying to kill me, blue jay.”

“What’s the issue?” I ask stubbornly. “I’ll do a medical heat, the Complex and Coalition will let us be friends, it’s win-win as far as *you’re* concerned.”

Leon’s eyes lock on mine. Shame washes through me.

He cares. More than a teacher. More than a friend. He *cares*. Something swirls deep in my belly. Right in the spot that lit to an inferno when I watched the videos this morning.

I can’t face that. I can’t be his friend, not if he sees me like that omega in that first video. I just don’t *get* how the two can co-exist. The respect and the lust. The control and the weakness. The friendship and the sex.

I should be glad Midas isn’t on that pack sheet.

But I’m not. Because this isn’t what I want friendship to be. De-scenter and a constant heaviness in the air. Half in the moment, half stuck in my mind imagining the things my body wants to do with them. How could they ever be my friend if they knew what I imagined? How could I ever feel whole if they reduced me to something so... primitive?

I’m torturing myself, trying to straddle this line. If I were smart, I’d give up on Midas altogether. I’ve known them for

what, not even a week? I can go it alone. Get my bearings and figure out what the hell I'm supposed to do with my life now that this is my reality. I'd be free from the wet, squirmy feelings that claw at my insides every time they're near.

But I won't.

I would rather die than spend a heat with any pack that isn't Midas. I would rather die than have Midas Pack see me in my heat. Exposed. Disgusting.

"Leon..." my voice is weak. I want to take back what I said. I don't know how. Not without admitting every overwhelming, confusing thing he makes me feel. The few sips of soup I've managed turn to acid in my stomach. "I just... want to be able to spend time with who *I* choose. Not the Coalition."

I'm flirting with disaster and we both know it.

"We could be arrested if we take advantage of you, Indie," Leon reads my mind.

"So maybe don't take advantage of me?" I snap, unable to help myself. My insides have turned to liquid lava, rolling down my skeleton and melting me from within.

"I'm just saying. We would never touch you without your explicit, documented consent."

"The Coalition wouldn't let you, right?" I scoff, unable to look at him. "So it's a moot point. If you or I or anybody else wanted anything different. Which I don't. And you don't. So we're fine."

"Right."

I said it first. So why does it feel like a rejection?

He doesn't try to pick up his sandwich in the awkward silence that ensues. He just stares at me.

"I'm being serious, Leon," I soften. "About the medical heat. I saw the videos this morning. The ones they show classes. I don't know which is worse, being that vulnerable with a group of alphas, *any* alphas, or being alone. I prefer alone though. I've done everything else hard in my life alone, and I've made it this far. I can do this too. Now, can we eat?"

He stares at the photo on his desk. He reaches out with his left arm, like he might try to pick it up. He grimaces, bringing the stump close to his body and circling it with his right hand. Finally, he looks at me again. "Sure, little bird," he says gently. "Let's eat."

And just like that, calm, serene Leon is back.

He tells me a little more about the Coalition, the history of how it came about to protect omegas. I can tell he doesn't want to discuss feral alphas. Doesn't want to scare me any more than he already has. Ha.

I listen, but only with my ears. My body is watching his, like it always is, feeling the tightness in him, his scent beginning to leech from his de-scented skin. His voice is kind, but he is hurting.

I long to reach out and touch him. I ache, wishing that I wasn't another person to pretend for. I want the real him. The

one that rasped over me in bed last night. That builds a treehouse. That smiles on sunny beaches.

A stomachache comes on halfway through eating. The pain is familiar, sharp and high in my abdomen. I almost feel nostalgic for it. The launch point of my eating disorder, come back to haunt me. This is what I deserve.

I eat every bite of food, even though it's ash in my mouth and acid in my stomach. I do it to please Leon, because there's nothing else I can offer.

I don't tell him that when he wheels me to the bathroom on the way back to class, I vomit up everything I managed to eat anyway. I have a sick sense of satisfaction that maybe, just maybe, I can starve off my heat a little longer.

Maudlin

LEON

I go straight to Joshua's room when I get home. Leaving him alone this morning after last night's interrogation was wrong, and even though I kept texting and texting Risk, I got no answer. He usually goes to Joshua's bed when he stumbles back after a bender, but my stomach swam with worry anyway. I never thought I'd rely on a bender.

If I hadn't promised Indie I'd have lunch with her, I probably would have called in. My pack needs me. All of them. Indie-inclusive.

And, of course, Hollis, nowhere to be found. Running from Joshua's sleepy smells and smashed-flat curls this morning. He couldn't take it, being next to us.

I shouldn't feel superior. I remember that pressure, when I was meant to be Pack Alpha. To be stronger, to always have an answer. I was eager to hand it to Hollis, when he entered our lives. He always knew what to do. When all I could give

Joshua was myself, Hollis gave him a future. Both of us. And now it's gone. Hollis is gone. My throat aches.

There has never been a point in my life when I wasn't destined to be in a pack with Joshua. Yet still, alone in bed this morning after Hollis's flight, I was anxious. He was too. Indie's lingering scent danced with our sharpness as we fought our instincts. To get up and run or roll over and pull each other close, I couldn't tell.

It took me until I was in the car driving to the Complex to realize: I should have held him. I should have been able to tell. He was dying for it, every inch of him needing, and I got up and left. If I had had the bond, I would have known. If I wasn't fucking blind, I would have known. I should have known.

I take the stairs three at a time and open his door. Bed made, sheets clean, hamper empty. Joshua gone.

I go to Risk's room next. The smell hits me before I even open the door. Bourbon and body odor.

A tornado has struck, and it takes me a moment to pick out their bodies in the wreckage. Risk's knives are nowhere to be found, the bed dragged away from the wall, dresser knocked over, floor hidden under the debris from... whatever happened. Clothing and bottles and leather straps and fidget toys and scraps of paper are scattered everywhere.

They're curled together, Risk using Joshua as a pillow. They reek of whiskey. Risk is still in his work clothes from last night, boots and all. He has a chemical smell cutting his woodsmoke and liquor. Noxious fumes. I kneel and press a

finger to Joshua's throat. His pale skin is nearly translucent, paper thin. His pulse is fine. He's fine. My breath leaves me in a whoosh.

Risk snores. He's fine too. A bender, not a suicide pact. Isn't this what I hoped for?

I fall back on my ass, sitting next to them.

Drunk. Joshua's drunk. It was a comfort to me, after the attack, that he never turned to the bottle. He didn't need help to find his numb.

I watch the shallow rise and fall of his chest for a moment, letting my heart rate slow.

I should clean up. I should pick up the clothes and right the bed and dresser and begin to make order of the chaos. Risk never will. It's what packs are for.

I begin the process of taking his boots off. My fingers are shaking, compounding the difficulty of the one-handed task.

There's an empty dime bag in his right boot, white residue inside.

I stuff it in my pocket. I peel his socks free. I pick up his body—a much more difficult task than Indie's frail bird bones, nearly two hundred pounds of dead-weight muscle—and place him on his bed. I almost drop him at one point, but he doesn't wake. Joshua is easier. He's lost weight these past months, and he was always the thinnest of us to begin with. His breath on my neck is cool—even in the bourbon haze, he is the sweet blunt breeze before a summer storm.

I should get in. I should take my shirt and pants off and crawl into bed and press the length of my body to his and give him everything that I failed to this morning. It isn't hard. All I have to do is lie there.

I turn around and walk out. Down the stairs, out the door, around the giant house and into the woods. I think I'm wandering aimlessly, until I realize I'm going to the treehouse.

I hadn't thought about it even once since the attack, not until Indie asked. My mind instantly filled with images of us out here. Reading, picnics, napping... other things.

I walk faster, wishing I could outpace the thoughts.

It's just too goddamn much right now.

Joshua and Risk and Hollis, fucking Hollis.

Indie.

The memory of her beneath me takes my breath away. Fragile and hot with need, delicate fingers holding me there, silently begging for me to kiss her—I speed up again. It's no use. The mental image shifts. Her angry face today, trying to hide her fear.

I see her in a heat suite. Alone. Crying for me, just like she did in her darkened room. But I'm not there. In this nightmare, Marcus Phoenix is. He appears out of the darkness, kneeling between her legs and peeling her clothes off.

I roar, drowning out the mental picture. I'm running now, my breath steaming in the cool night air. I'm gasping when I finally arrive at the giant oak. The ladder hangs down from the

wooden platform above, waiting for me, and that's when I realize.

I can't climb it.

The rope and plank contraption sways slightly in the breeze. Like it's mocking me. I hold my left arm up, eyes fixed on the space that used to be my hand. Every time I look at it, something feels distinctly *wrong*. Like if I had only turned quicker, the hand would still be there.

I'm so fucking tired.

Of Risk's harsh chemical smell, a pharmaceutical aid instead of what should be us. Of checking the hump of Joshua's bedridden body for signs of life in his musty, dead-aired room. Of Hollis, fucking Hollis, righteous and terrified and holding us all hostage while he hides.

Of fearing for Indie.

My god. I've known her a week, and already she lives inside me, a second heartbeat prone to palpitations, always on the verge of giving out. I think of the vertebra in her neck, each sticking out like the keys of a piano, waiting to be played. I think of the tiny mole on her cheek, how I always want to brush it with my thumb.

I could blame Hollis for the names on that pack sheet. There's no way in hell it's the sheet that genetic testing turned up. It's a one-two punch, aimed straight at Midas Pack.

But it's not all Hollis, no matter the enemies he might have made in his time at the Coalition.

Eros Pack. *My* intended pack. With Joshua beside me, and two others whose memory makes my lip curl. I know why they're on there among those other big-name packs: me.

Carrying her across campus. Twice. Sitting in the med hall, the waiting room at the hospital, beside her at the mixer last night, watching her every flicker and breath. Obvious—and why shouldn't I be? When did something as simple as fated mates become so damn complicated?

She's going to do a medical heat.

I punch my fist in the dirt and grimace at the pain. It isn't enough.

I launch myself to my feet and smash my fist into the trunk of the tree. It isn't satisfying, not like if I could use both hands, find a rhythm for my rage. A lopsided, irregular beat. Just like Indie.

I'm gasping when I stop. My hand is nearly numb for a moment before the pain has a chance to catch. It comes in electric lances, zapping all the way up my arm. The knuckle on my middle finger split. The little fissure oozes blood. White bone is visible.

I try to flex my fingers, but they don't respond to my brain's command. I stare at my one remaining hand, willing it to obey. I can't do stupid shit like this anymore, not with only one hand left. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Panic is a snake coiling around my throat.

What use would I be with *no* fucking hands? How would I hold Joshua? Play video games with Risk, or braid his hair when he spends his nights draped over the toilet? How would Hollis ever trust me again, if he had to start taking care of me too? How could Indie ever love me?

Risk could lose himself in hitting this tree. He'd keep on going till he's bloody and bruised and smiling, the intensity of his emotions reminding him he's alive. Joshua wouldn't make it this far out of the house. He'd be in bed, asleep. Hollis would be at the office, shuffling papers and talking to mid-level bureaucrats and pretending it's enough.

And I'm here. In the woods. Alone. Unable to climb a fucking ladder. Heartsick for a nineteen-year-old anorexic omega I met a week ago who seems hell-bent on tearing me to pieces.

I want her. Like Risk wants his vices and Hollis wants his power and Joshua wants his numbness, I want my Indie.

I groan and flop back to the ground. The dirt is frigid against my back, and I hiss as it gets in the cut on my hand, burning as it burrows into the raw flesh. Just what I need. Sepsis.

I look at the sky and choose stars at random to focus on, watching them glitter. There isn't much of a breeze, but what wind there is blows the boughs of the trees overhead, dappling the little pinpoint lights. Is this what Indie saw, when Risk pinned her down on Monday night? Was the dirt this cold beneath her bony frame, lacking any fat or muscle to protect her? The thought makes me nauseous.

And still, she wants him. Wants me. It's clear as day, if she would just fucking *say* it.

Like it would do any good.

Fuck. I keep going in circles, worrying about one member of my pack after another, powerless to do a goddamn thing to help any of them. I can't fix Indie. I can't make her eat or agree to court other packs that aren't her fated mates. I don't *want* to.

I can't breathe life into Joshua. I can't give Risk all he needs. And I can't make Hollis turn his back on his life's dreams.

He's always wanted the Coalition. For noble reasons, sure, but he isn't immune to the draw of power. I've always supported his causes. In theory, I still do.

But Hollis will be no leader at all for our world if he can't lead by example: pack comes first.

And I'm too fucking weak to fix ours.

I can't make myself stronger. I can't find any more to give. *I can't, I can't, I can't.* I can't put on a show of it anymore. I've duped them all for weeks, and now it's time to pay the piper.

I've given patience, soothing words and cradled arms and sage advice. Endless hours spent listening, researching anorexia and PTSD and depression and the veritable alphabet of acronyms that is Risk. I've neglected my own physical therapy, my stump pulsing with phantom pain and muscle contractures, the flashbacks coming in waves and getting shoved down as I turn to other's problems instead of my own.

I don't know what to do.

The ladder makes a creaking sound as a particularly strong gust of wind blows. I shiver.

It wasn't the attack that made us like this. Sure, it went ahead and dropped a nuke on our lives, but we weren't all sunshine and roses before then, as much as I might like to pretend.

I had started building this treehouse alone. A gift for myself.

When Risk found out, he was like a kid at Christmas. He was all over it. He liked to climb the tree instead of the ladder to get up to the platform. One day he jumped from the platform, nearly thirty feet in the air, just to see if he could, and sprained his ankle. The next day he somehow made it up again while I was up there trying to draw plans for the actual structure. He whipped out a joint, joking that the doctor prescribed it for his pain. *Why* not, I figured. This was for my inner child right? I was expected to be a Pack Alpha back at the Complex, I rarely got to cut loose with the other alphas like Joshua and Risk did. I smoked with him, and Hollis yelled at us both when we returned. Risk got his usual apathetic cuffing, but Hollis called me irresponsible, said I should have known better. Like I was Risk's father instead of his packmate.

I went up once to find Joshua lying in the sun, writing in a journal. When he saw me pop up through the hole in the floor, he slammed the book shut, scurrying to the ladder and apologizing for 'intruding'. I told him he didn't need to go. I wanted some peace and quiet too. I could feel his shame in the bond, but I didn't ask him about it. I didn't wonder why my

own packmate was so afraid to be caught by me. I didn't stop him, or reassure him, or ask him to stay. Careless.

Hollis has never been out here. Never asked about it, never paid attention. He thought building it was silly, and I brushed him off, happy to have something of my own for once. To not need to be Mission Leader Leon. To just be Leon. Leon who was a boy once. Who liked climbing and building things and getting high with his friends and reading in quiet, companionable silence. All things I could share with my pack, if we weren't so lost in ourselves.

I've been a fraud ever since the attack, a broken man masquerading as whole, with everyone abiding by my lies because they needed what I could offer more than they needed my dignity. I'm by far the most physically disfigured of us after the ambush, but if you asked anybody they'd probably say I was the least affected.

It's bullshit. All of it. The Coalition, the Complex, Hollis's ego, my own hang-ups and baggage and insecurities.

I consider trying to climb the ladder. Just to say I can. A fool's errand. I don't have a left hand.

I laugh.

I am an amputee. I don't have a left hand. I am disabled.

Everybody's been too afraid to say it. Myself included. But I'm fucking disabled.

Nothing and no one will ever give me back what I've lost.

Except.

I turn around and walk back to the house. In the door, up the stairs, down the long hallway to the master suite. Hollis's room. I knock.

“Come in.” His voice is strangely buoyant.

The master suite is an ostentatious thing, with a big canopy bed and a marble fireplace and a crystal chandelier. Hollis is perfectly at home with his pressed suits and gold jewelry and groomed beard and gelled hair.

Tonight is no exception. He sits in front of the hearth, a small fire lit within, a crystal tumbler in his hand, a bottle of Macallan 30 on the table in front of him. Even his spirals have style. He's still in his suit from work, his tie pulled loose around his throat, his cuffs unbuttoned.

“Leon!” He grins at me, expression bleary. “Come, have a drink.”

By the sound of his voice, he's had several.

The plush carpet mutes my footfalls across the expansive space. I've always hated the tufted couch in front of the fireplace. It's cream-colored, beautiful and elegant and uncomfortable, intended for eyes and not asses.

Hollis doesn't look at me as I hover next to it, not wanting to sit. His olive skin glows in the amber light of the fire. His eyes are glassy, his expression frozen in ambivalent pleasantries. Like he has no other default to turn to, no backstage behavior, not even in the privacy of his own room.

“You and Risk and Joshua match tonight,” I nod at the bottle.

“Do we?” his eyebrows arch in passive curiosity. He takes a sip.

He didn’t check on Joshua when he got home. After everything that happened last night, he didn’t even bother to check.

I take a deep breath. I can feel the heat from the flames. My skin is already hot.

Hollis sets his glass down and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, tenting his fingers and hiding his face. He’s expecting anger. He knows he deserves it. He knows he can’t fend off the inevitable.

I could yell. Lord knows I’ve practiced the speech I would give him a million times, righteous indignation dripping from every word.

I sink to my knees before him instead.

“Hollis,” I murmur.

He looks at me, surprised by my nearness. The softness of my voice.

I clear my throat. His brown eyes are like Indie’s—gorgeous and complicated. So terribly sad.

“I love you.”

The breath he lets out is ragged. He is thin, his evergreen scent more like a car ornament than the forest I’ve called home

for so long.

“I need you to love me too.”

His Adam’s apple bobs.

“Can we really not do this without the bond?” he asks.

I use his knee to leverage myself to my feet. I take his hand and pull him to his. He pads behind me to Risk’s room.

I open the door and show him what’s inside.

Risk and Joshua have curled into each other on the bed where I placed them, forehead to forehead, legs all tangled. They remind me of the lovers at Pompeii, encased in ash. Doomed. I shake off the thought. Not anymore.

Hollis inhales sharply when he sees the wreckage. I follow his eyes over it, tracing the chaotic whirls of clothing strewn about, trying to find some sort of pattern. There is none. He can barely look at Risk and Joshua.

“I was trying to do the right thing,” he whispers. “I didn’t want anybody to get hurt. To stay hurt.”

Joshua stirs. His pale blue eyes blink open. They fix immediately on Hollis. None of us speak. For a long moment, I watch Hollis and Joshua face off. Unlike Risk, Joshua is incapable of asking for what he needs. I’ve always tried to intuit. Failed a million times, but still, I tried. Hollis won’t. The chasm between them is wide.

Joshua shakes Risk’s shoulder gently. He rouses all at once, amber eyes electric the moment that consciousness strikes.

He sees Hollis. He smiles. “Hi.”

Hollis ducks his head, nearly flinching. I know what he saw right there—Risk’s smile is exactly the same as it was a decade ago, when he was the youngest alpha the Complex had ever seen. Brash and illiterate and energetic and devout. So much has changed. So little has changed.

I still have Hollis’s hand in mine. I give it a squeeze. “It’s going to be ok.”

He nods. The bond opens.

24

Multitudinous

RISK

My brain works differently from the others.
Maybe the childhood shit, or the ADHD, or the drugs, or whatever. I don't know. But.

When we got the pack bond, my brain got a translator.

Three of them.

Three people who got me.

Six weeks. Deaf, blind, dead.

Before, I didn't need meth or burning myself with cigarettes to feel ok. To feel at all.

Joshua's kiss. Leon's arms around me. Hollis next to me in bed. All of us, together. On missions. With betas. At the Coalition. Together. Better than heroin.

Without the bond, even when we're together, we're not. The bond is our Rosetta Stone. Without it, Hollis doesn't speak my language.

He thought we weren't ready for it. Didn't he want to understand?

No matter.

It's white-hot in my chest. The air zings as we fill each other with ourselves.

It's breathing after being in a vacuum. The air sears my lungs, burns all the way down and boils on the way back up.

Joshua gasps next to me.

Leon stumbles near. His hand on my thigh grips hard, hard enough to leave bruises. More than he's already given me. I'm grateful for every last one. His knuckles are bloody.

I laugh.

I *feel* them. Crushing sorrow. Defeat. Yearning. Exhaustion. Wave after wave after wave of shame.

It's like seeing in color after nothing but black and white.

Hollis thought there was such a thing as bad colors.

I zero in on him. Not with my eyes. His pinpoint of light inside me. Dim. A guttering flame. He's overwhelmed. He feels weak, too small to hold it all. Incapable.

I open my eyes. He's on his knees in the doorway. Overcome.

It seems suddenly very important that he sees me.

I crawl out of bed, Leon's hand forced free as I turn away.

I crawl over Joshua, accidentally kneeling him in the balls.

I'm on the ground, my arms around Hollis.

He's unresponsive.

I rub on his neck. His usual pine freshness is burned and ashen. I feel for a moment like I've burned him. But no. Alpha. Pack Alpha. He needs to know.

I nuzzle him again. He doesn't get it—he's always been dull. Always wanted words more than feelings, despite having more feelings than all of us combined.

I pound my fist on his chest, once, twice, three times.

"Here," I whisper. "Right here. Now."

He breathes in sharply. I put my arms around him again, inhaling deeply.

He still doesn't get it.

I grip his face in my hands. "Alpha," I grunt. "Hey." Words are no good. Never enough.

Pressure rises in my chest. It's hard—we're all so loud, overwhelming after six weeks of silence. We don't mean to, but we're all shouting into the bond. The connection is fraying. Too much noise.

"Hey!" I say, louder. Am I the only one? Too much chaos. Everybody sending, nobody receiving.

I wish she were here.

I draw her scent in my mind. It's hard. I'm on a soft moss-covered rock. A forest. The trees around me, cedar and pine. It's about to rain. The clouds are dark and low. Petrichor. A

fire, woodsmoke floating to the heavens. A tea kettle, whistling. Birds, chirping. Curls of steam, black tea, cloves, bergamot. Safety. Peace.

It isn't her, it isn't us, not quite, but it's enough. To stop the noise, just for a moment.

"Indie," Leon rasps. "Indigo."

Joshua echoes him. "Indie." Magic. Wonder.

Hollis's hands rise. They settle on my shoulders. He can't look at me. Fine. Whatever. I hug him. It's enough. He doesn't believe it, not yet. My teeth on his neck are a question, not an answer.

I feel for Joshua and Leon. I don't ask. I feel. I wait. They're numb—better than Hollis, but not much. Joshua gets it first.

He's behind me, arms around me, head on my shoulder. Cool glass skin turned warm.

I know what Leon is doing behind us.

He needs to see it first. To know it's happening. To believe.

I grunt. Enough knowing.

I feel his smile.

Then he's with us. Finally.

We all breathe as one. A messy pile of Midas.

But it's not complete.

She's not here. Tiny flecks of her in the air, but not *her*.

My malcontent is in the bond. We all feel it.

“I’m sorry,” Hollis whispers.

Shame. Shameshameshameshame. He’s full of it. He feels so small.

I think of him. I show him. Larger than life. Capable, coherent, eloquent Hollis. Tall and brave. Earnest and hardworking. Always up up up. So afraid to fall. A shortcoming of pride. An earnest picture. I won’t lie to him. He needs to know.

Gratitude. The truth. Always better than a lie. Always better than silence. He knows now. His teeth on my neck, cutting relief. I moan. I bask.

We’re rock bottom. But we’re looking up. All of us. Together. I paint the picture in my mind. The bottom of a ravine. A sliver of sunlight shining through. Us. In pelts. Like cavemen.

An echo of laughter through the bond.

An amiable silence.

A leg cramp.

More laughter. More silence. Then. Joshua. “Never again, ok? Never. Not even a moment.”

“Never,” Hollis agrees, penitent.

“Never,” Leon echoes, reverent.

I show a picture. All of us. Indie too. Flushed and vibrant and aching, incomplete without us. Incomplete without her.

Plans come later. But we all know—we're close. But not complete.

25

Indefensible

INDIGO

“Which is why it is so important to get the full B-complex represented in your diet, at least a week or two ahead of—Indigo, are you listening?”

Ms. Kayle, the nutrition professor—yes, that really is her name—is glaring at me.

“Sorry.” My cheeks heat as the attention of the class turns to me. I would have thought that the nutrition class would be comprised entirely of omegas, considering it seems most domestic duties would fall to the often-singular female member of a pack, but it’s a pretty even split between alphas and omegas, all of whom are now staring at me.

“Just because you don’t eat doesn’t mean your pack won’t.” Kennedy smirks from the side of the room. My jaw drops—it’s just so stunningly cliché.

Kennedy’s friends titter, and Ms. Kayle drones on, seemingly oblivious to the 80’s high-school flick playing out before her.

Outside of Cecilia and the soon-to-be-minted Drake Pack, I know almost nobody my age at the Complex. I feel like that's a problem, but if girls like Kennedy are the only options, I don't particularly feel like I'm missing out.

"She's just jealous that you actually had a pack to talk to on Wednesday night," Cecilia whispers to me. "She was high and dry, all by herself."

I rack my mind, trying to recall if I saw her at the mixer at all. "It was just Leon's pack," I whisper back. Midas Pack, who I was daydreaming about when Ms. Kayle embarrassed me in front of everybody.

"Just Leon." Cecilia makes air quotes around the words. I watch her phone light up and bite back a smirk.

"Like that's 'just Jake'?" I quip. The contact on her screen is three duck emojis.

"Uh, no, actually." She flushes her signature red and flips the phone over so I can't read the text. Before I have a chance to pry, the bell rings.

"No actually what?" I push as she slings my threadbare backpack over the handle of the wheelchair. Before she can answer me, however—or *avoid* answering me if her expression is any indicator—Leon enters.

"Oh!" Cecilia squeaks, nearly rolling me into his shins. "Hi, Trainer Midas."

"Hello, Cecilia," he greets her, but his eyes are on me. He wears his usual well-constructed mask, but his scent gives him

away. It's somehow *stronger* today, even more intense and overpowering than I usually find it. I squirm in my seat. "I'll escort Indigo to her doctor's appointment. If that's alright, Indigo?"

"Sure," I stammer, turning to Cecilia. "I'll uh, see you later?"

"Lunch?" she asks.

"I'll be eating with Ms. Wolfe," Leon answers for me, eyes never leaving mine. "Thank you, Cecilia."

She gulps once, nods, does an awkward half-bow, half-curtsy type thing, and then zips out the door, leaving Leon and I alone.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," I blurt out before he can speak.

He just shakes his head. The motion of the chair is stilted with only his one hand to push it. "You have nothing to apologize for. Really, blue jay. It's a shitty situation all around. I'm proud of how you're handling it."

An embarrassing warmth starts glowing in my stomach. *He's proud of me.* I can't remember the last time anybody was proud of me.

"How was nutrition?" He has to stoop slightly to grip the chair handle, his voice coming from over my head.

"Er, boring?"

"I remember it being a bit of a snooze-fest," I can hear his smile.

“I didn’t expect there to be any alphas in it at all.”

“Why not?”

“I just—cooking is kind of domestic. A woman’s task.”

“Gender roles are out. Happy, well-fed omegas are in.”

“Ok, ok, enough propaganda.” I hold up my hands in mock-surrender.

“Oh, I didn’t mean—” Leon breaks off, realizing too late. “I’m sorry, Indie. I didn’t mean anything about—”

“It’s fine,” I reach up and pat his hand. He flinches. I twist to look and realize—the knuckle on his middle finger is split, the wound inflamed and red. “What happened?” I ask.

“Nothing.” He turns the hand, putting it on the underside of the handle to hide the split from sight. But with only one hand, he doesn’t have enough control over the chair, and we veer in the opposite direction. Right before we crash, he hooks his bad wrist over my shoulder and yanks me to a stop.

I cling to his arm, heart racing as I see just how close my bad knee came to smashing into the wall.

“I’m so sorry,” Leon murmurs.

I don’t reply, waiting for my heartbeat to settle. I clench his arm to my chest, the pulse point on his wrist directly over my fluttering heart.

“You can let go now, Indie.”

I relinquish his left arm and twist to watch him cradle it with his hand. The split knuckle looks painful.

“What happened?” I ask again. “Your knuckle. Did you get in another fight?”

He shakes his head, gripping the handle of the wheelchair again and setting off. “Nothing.” he repeats.

I don’t push it—I still feel bad after yesterday. He’s keeping my secrets at great cost, the least I can let him do is keep his too.

Alicia is waiting for us in the med hall with a thin paper gown for me. I refuse to let her help me get changed, even though it takes me longer to do it alone. I’m flushed and panting from the exertion of it by the time she comes back with Dr. Gray in tow.

“Hello, Indigo.” He smiles at me. I peer over his shoulder, looking for Leon.

“Where’s L—Trainer Midas?” I ask.

“Oh, did you want him to come in?” Dr. Gray asks.

Too late, I realize that he didn’t come in last time. Not for the exam portion. He was just there for the conversation afterwards. I look down at my knees, sticking out of the paper gown, misshapen and knobby. The left is still slightly more swollen than the right. My legs are hairy; shaving is just too much to manage in the cramped handicap shower stall. My shins are covered in bruises, and my feet are callused and gross. I don’t want Leon to see me like this, but I realize I’m nodding anyway. I don’t want to be alone either. Not with Dr.

Gray, even though I know he's a good and respectful alpha. It just feels *wrong*.

"Let me go get him," Dr. Gray says, no judgment in his eyes. He's back a moment later with Leon close behind.

I duck my head, unable to meet his eyes as he follows the doctor in.

Dr. Gray returns to his seat in front of the computer, and Leon grabs a rollie-chair from the side of the room and wheels over next to me. He rests his hand on my leg like he's done it a million times before, like we're already bonded and he doesn't care who in the world knows. I fight the urge to sag into him, wishing that the paper of the gown weren't in between us. Then I tamp down on that thought as a flare of black tea floods the room, cursing my pheromones.

Dr. Gray—who is quickly becoming one of my favorite alphas, if only for his discretion—makes no comment, checking my vitals methodically before moving on to testing the range of motion in my knee.

"This is healing well," he comments as he bends my ankle in every direction. "I would say you can start partial weight bearing now. I think the crutches will be more feasible if you're using them as an aid rather than complete replacement. Want to give it a go?"

I nod eagerly—anything to not need to be pushed around anymore.

He leaves the room and Leon squeezes my thigh gently. His hand can practically wrap around the whole thing, I notice with grim pleasure. I trace a finger over the split on his knuckle and he pulls his hand away sharply. “Let me clean that up for you?” I ask. “Or the doctor?”

“It’s fine,” Leon dismisses, perfect impassivity sliding over his face as the doctor comes back in with the crutches.

He’s right—they are much easier to wield with both of my legs in action. I take a few tentative baby-steps, feeling like a newly hatched chick as I wobble. It takes me about five steps to realize how horrifically weak I am. My arms scream with exertion and I’m breathing hard. On the sixth stride, I place the crutch too far forward and teeter, on the verge of falling. I force myself to remain upright, even when Leon’s arms fly out to catch me.

“First, crutches. Next, marathons,” I joke.

Dr. Gray smiles, but Leon’s expression is stormy again. What did I do now?

“How about we head over to the scale?” Dr. Gray suggests.

I grimace, but follow him and Leon out of the exam room and down the hall. At first, I try to keep up with them, but even their slowed down pace to accommodate me is too fast. I’m too weak.

“Quick break,” I huff out. They stop and turn, not having realized I wasn’t with them anymore.

“Let me get the chair.” Leon turns back to the room, but I stick a single crutch out across the walkway to stop him.

“I said break.” I try to make my voice sound stern. “I need to get stronger.”

A muscle flexes in his jaw, but he doesn’t try to move the crutch. As always, he doesn’t force me to do anything I don’t want to.

After a few more seconds of leaning against the wall and willing my heart to not explode in my chest, I push onwards.

“Now, Indigo, I want you to face me this time,” Dr. Gray says. “Don’t look at the number on the scale.”

I roll my eyes. “Please don’t be one of those doctors. Please. I’ve been eating all week, L—Trainer Midas will tell you. Cecilia and Ms. O’Brien too.”

“Exactly. Seeing your weight increase is a sign that treatment is working, but can also be triggering in the early stages of recovery.”

“Please?” I bat my eyes at him, trying to use some of the omega charm I’ve supposedly been blessed with. No dice. Dr. Gray helps me up onto the little platform and then keeps his hand hovering over the little indicator as it sways and jostles its way towards the number that makes up me.

I feel my cheeks burn as I realize Leon can see the number. Our eyes lock for a moment before he looks away.

“Ok, let’s head on back to the room, get some blood from you, and then we should be good to go until next week.”

“More blood?” I ask.

“Now that you’re eating more regularly, we might be able to get a better idea of when to expect your heat. Give you some more precision than just a vague ‘soon’.”

I trek down the hallway after him again, doing my best to hide my heavy breathing. When we’re back inside I sit on the table and hold out my wrist and watch his expression as he takes in the dark bruises on my forearms from the wheelchair.

“Ok, Indigo.” He doesn’t miss a beat, “I’m also going to have you come in on Monday for an iron infusion. I was hoping your diet changes would be enough, but I don’t need to wait on blood results after seeing this bruising. Stop by when you’re out of class for the day.”

Leon’s already seen the bruises, but the way his gaze rakes over them makes me want to hide them from sight again.

When the blood draw is finished, they leave the room to let me get dressed. It takes me longer than it should, as usual, and when I emerge into the waiting area a surprise greets me—Hollis Midas, standing next to Leon and looking distinctly uncomfortable in his pressed suit and shiny black shoes. They’re both watching the hallway I emerge from, having scented me before I arrived.

His dark brown hair is perfectly styled, olive skin glowing, his five o’clock shadow clean-cut around the edges, and he looks like he’s about to step up to a podium and tell me about my taxes. He smells of fresh pine, pungent and sharp. I’ve only spent a short time with him prior to this, but his scent

seems stronger now as well, somehow more saturated than it was before. I have to be wrong—it was probably just all the other scents around us that diluted him.

He turns as soon as I enter the room, a brisk, business-like smile spreading across his face.

“Indigo! It’s good to see you.”

“Hi, Mr. Midas.”

Unlike Leon, I have no issue calling Hollis Mr. Midas.

His brow furrows. He clears his throat. “Please, call me Hollis.”

Unlikely.

I wish I had opted for the chair—I’m sweating from the exertion of the crutches. I can only hope I haven’t made pit-stains on my shirt. I smooth my hands down my front and notice the spots where my jeans are worn down to the threads. My shoes have holes in them. I’ve always thought that if I’m skinny enough, my clothes don’t matter, but standing in front of Hollis Midas, I feel horribly shabby.

“I saw your medical heat registration come through this morning. I figured I’d pop over on my lunch break to invite you over tomorrow for dinner.”

“Dinner?” I echo.

“Oh—er,” he blanches. “I mean, we don’t have to eat, we could, I don’t know—”

“Dinner is fine,” Leon cuts Hollis off, saving him from wherever that sentence was going.

I look between the two packmates—they both hold themselves in the same way, their stance wide, shoulders squared. Leon’s barely taller, a tad bulkier, more muscle-bound, while Hollis is more lithe. Of course, for Hollis, ‘shorter’ here means a casual six foot six.

The thought of eating a meal with them makes me faintly nauseous. Still, I thrill at the thought of spending time with them. Seeing their home.

A warm feeling tightens my low belly. A second later, the smell of bergamot and black tea and something else, something fresh and sweet, fills the room.

Hollis is a politician through and through—his nostrils flare when my scent strikes him, but it’s his only tell. His smile remains plastered on his face, bright and fake. Leon, on the other hand, makes no effort to hide his reaction. I swear I can hear his teeth grind, and he shifts in place, rocking from foot to foot. He turns away from me, his good hand coming up to scratch the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” I say, feeling the color leave my face, along with every last shred of my dignity I had remaining. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“This is natural, Indie.” I wasn’t expecting Leon to speak, but when he turns to face me again, the anger from before is replaced by something else entirely. “It’s natural. It’s ok. Don’t be embarrassed. We live close by, if anything happens we’ll

drive you right back here and you can be in the suites within thirty minutes. It's what we used to do for a living. Escorting pre-heat omegas. Tell her, Hollis."

Hollis nods, his smile cooling to something a little more real. "It's true. Ensuring an omega's safety when she's about to enter her most vulnerable state is a privilege, and one we take very seriously."

It sounds like a slogan, not a promise, but the calm sureness in his voice works. Or maybe I'm just a sucker for him, for the way he looks like the lead in a rom-com and seems to always be in charge of his own life. I wish I could stand beside him, seem so polished and presentable and confident for the world.

This is what I wanted, right? Get registered for the medical heat so I can hang with them without the Coalition bothering us? Now that the opportunity is here though, it feels dangerous. Too tempting.

Already I can feel myself yearning for Leon to come closer. I want him to carry me back to my room. I want to curl up with him in the dark and let him make this tight feeling inside of me go away. Hollis too, though he seems too perfect to ever be sprawled out in a pack bed, sweaty and high on sex and pheromones.

The thought makes me blush, and I find myself looking at everything in the room but the two alphas in front of me—the old magazines and health pamphlets spread on coffee tables, the strange chairs in varying widths and heights you only ever see in doctor's offices, the posters on the wall about safe sex

and recognizing signs of abuse and covering your coughs and sneezes.

“Sure,” I finally choke out. “I’d like that. Risk and Joshua too?”

“Absolutely.” Hollis’s voice is butter, warm and silky. “Risk has been talking about you non-stop since Wednesday. I took the liberty of bringing a permission slip in hopes you’d say yes, let me just zip it over to the Headmaster, then I have to get back to the Coalition. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

I turn just in time to catch him in a moment of doubt—he looks like he doesn’t know if he should shake my hand or give me a hug or just leave, and he ends up settling on a curt nod. One for me, one for Leon, and then he’s gone.

“Am I ever going to do anything but humiliate myself in front of you and your packmates?” I turn to Leon. I meant for some part of that to sound funny, but it only sounds pathetic and sad.

He’s smiling anyway.

“What’s so funny?” I ask, because it sure as hell isn’t me.

“I don’t know who was more humiliated there, you, or Hollis.”

“*Hollis?* He sounded like he was about to give a campaign speech. A *victory* speech. Humiliated?”

Leon just shakes his head, a wry smile wiping the tension from his features. I won’t pretend to understand, but I’m glad

that he's smiling. "Want me to get your chair?" he asks, noticing my good leg shaking underneath my weight.

"Yes please," I sigh.

He's gone and back in a flash, wheeling the chair right up behind me so all I need to do is sit. I slump down and awkwardly maneuver the crutches until they're propped up against my side.

The class period is almost over, so Leon starts wheeling me straight to the cafeteria to pick up our lunch tray. I chew on my lip as we roll, mulling over the appointment.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Leon asks.

"I hate not knowing my weight," I say. "It isn't fair. It's my body."

"Do you really want to know?"

"Of course I do." But I realize as I say it that I haven't thought about my weight even once in the past week. I've worried over most meals, stressed about the sugar in the fruit and the cheese in my sandwiches and the butter in everything they feed me, but the actual number?

I weighed myself every morning up at Adams, but I haven't even tried looking for a scale at the Complex. Partially because I've been constantly chaperoned because of the chair, partially because there's just been too much going on. But now that there *is* a number to know? I feel the unease.

"I'll tell you, if you swear you can handle it."

I turn to him sharply. “You’d tell me? Even though the doctor said not to?”

He shrugs. “I don’t believe in hiding the truth from my— from my friend. You deserve to know. But only if you promise that you’ll keep getting better.”

I blow out a slow breath. “I don’t have much choice, do I? With you and Cecilia watching every meal.”

“No. But *you* need to *want* to get better. You can’t just be doing it for us.”

I *need* to know that number. But I need Leon to be proud of me too. I feel the two desires settling within me, facing off, each suspicious of the other.

“I threw up yesterday,” I whisper without thinking. “After lunch. Not on purpose. I was just anxious.”

“Oh Indie,” Leon’s voice drops. He stops the chair outside the cafeteria and comes around to kneel in front of me. His green eyes are stormy seawater, roiling with concern. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“No, it wasn’t—please don’t apologize, I just—since you said we should be honest. I wanted you to know.”

He nods. I can feel him evaluating me. Whatever he sees passes muster, because he says, “you weighed 111.1 pounds today.”

I do the mental math quickly. “I gained 2.9 pounds.”

I let myself feel that, roll the number around in my head. I wonder where on my body it is, the new fat. Is it in my arms? My thighs and stomach, stockpiling for later? My chin, ready to hang and jiggle when I speak? I wonder if any of it is muscle, from my pitiful attempts to wheel the chair around.

“How is that hitting you?” Leon asks.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “I keep waiting for the panic, but I just feel kind of numb.”

“Do you think that’s a good or a bad thing?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “I feel like I don’t know anything.”

“Well, I’m proud of you.”

I look down at my hands, not wanting him to see my reaction. “I guess it would be nice to be able to walk, huh?”

“Ehh, I don’t mind pushing you around.”

I whip up to glare at him, he’s already walking inside the cafeteria to grab our tray. I swear I see his shoulders ducking up and down, like he’s laughing at being able to drop that bomb and then disappear on me.

Muted

JOSHUA

Indie is a reed in the breeze when I pull up outside the Complex. She stands on the curb in front of the admin building, leaning forward on her crutches. I see how tall she is now that she's not in the chair.

Everything about her is washed out. Her faded jeans and nothing-colored jacket and pallid skin. Only her eyes seem fully present, piercing and intent. Kind of like Hollis's, I realize.

His scent is all over me. I've spent the last two nights sandwiched between him and Leon, waking up to Risk crushing me from above after arriving home from work. I've never slept so well. Leon's broad bulk and Hollis's scratchy stubble and unguarded, peaceful expression. Risk poured over me like syrup on a short stack. The bond has been filled with my aftershock smiles and Risk's far more explicit replays. Hollis and Leon have pretended to be irritated, but their self-conscious pleasure burbles in response every time.

Hollis actually called me yesterday from work to shut Risk up during his hundredth or so replay of his kiss with Indie. Hollis would deny it, but I think he nearly lost his cool at his desk. Every time I think of it, his anger darkens the bond in response. He wouldn't be caught dead in something as coarse as a rut.

I dash out of the car before Indie can take a step.

“Hi,” I grin, suddenly shy. I curse the crutches for keeping me from hugging her. I wonder if her skin is as soft as Risk's memory of it.

“Hi.” She smiles back. Are those dimples? “Sorry you got stuck on chauffeur duty.”

I laugh. “*Stuck?* I had to win these keys, gladiator-style. Trials and tribulations for the privilege of your company.”

Her eyes widen before she realizes I'm joking, then narrow. “Oh, shut up.” She rolls her eyes, but she's smiling.

“So, how do we make this happen?” I ask, looking between her and the Escalade. Hollis got precious about his GT and Risk's ancient Bronco is somehow even *more* lifted than the SUV, so here we are.

“I don't know.” Indie looks at the gleaming back car. “I fell asleep on the way back from the hospital. Leon carried me in, I think.”

“Well then, carrying it is,” I smile.

We maneuver together, and when her arms close around my neck so I can lift her to the seat inside, I do my best not to let

on how she's affecting me. She is intoxicating, spicy black tea and sharp citrus and all shyness as she lingers in the embrace a moment too long and lets me go a little too jerkily.

"Oh!" she exclaims once she's seated and can see the gift on the center console waiting for her. "Is this for me?"

I slide in the driver's seat before answering. "Yup. From me."

I wrapped it in light blue paper with a lavender bow. A simple wrapping job, I thought, but the way she's looking at it, you'd think it was solid gold.

"You didn't have to do that," she murmurs, stroking her hand over the paper.

"I wanted to," I shrug. "Go on now, open it."

But she isn't opening it. Her fingers are tracing the bow, the folds of the blue paper, the spots where the corners tuck into themselves. I like to think I am a pretty good gift-wraper, but this level of adoration seems excessive.

"It's just so pretty," she sighs. "Did you wrap it?"

"Yes." I smile. "I used to love doing origami. And now I think you're going to like the wrapping more than the gift inside."

"Sorry," she says. "I just—I can't remember the last time I unwrapped a present."

"What about Christmas gifts? Your birthday?"

She shakes her head mutely and starts unwrapping. Clearly she doesn't want to talk about it. Did nobody ever give her a gift? I know from what Hollis has told me that her parents aren't great people but... not even friends?

She tries not to rip the paper. Her fingernails are brittle, and one breaks when she tries to slice through the tape with it. She shakes her head a little—embarrassed or impatient, I can't tell. Watching her work is hypnotizing. Her dark brown hair will be reddish and glossy when she's healthy. There's a little mole on her cheek, the barest freckle on otherwise flawless skin. Her bottom lip is too full, with a scar in a horizontal line across it. I see why after a moment when she digs her teeth into that exact spot. Three little lines appear between her eyebrows when she concentrates. Her fingers seem almost too long for her, unwieldy, fumbling with the tightly pressed creases. I could watch her for days.

“Oh.”

She holds the book in both hands, paper forgotten in her lap, her left thumb grazing over the title: *100 Selected Poems*, by e.e. cummings. The spine is creased and the corners dented and the cover is peeled back slightly in one spot. I worry for a moment that it's too tattered for her. Too ruined.

“I marked some of my favorites for you,” I offer lamely. It's a pretty severe understatement for *I spent three hours trying to choose poems that wouldn't overstep or make you feel weird or be too overtly sexual or that you might find boring but also*

still somehow say hello I would like to love you, if you'll let me.

She cracks the spine and I watch her lips part slightly as she sees my writing on the inside cover. This book has been with me since I was a kid under the covers with a flashlight, reading past my bedtime. There are penciled-in thoughts about love; Leon with his blonde hair and easy manner, Risk with his frightening, frenetic zest for life, the eroticism of nature and how unfair being an alpha is, held to standards so dichotomous I used to think they'd make me explode. Idolizing Hollis from afar, then from much closer, thinking I wanted what he has, then realizing what I really wanted was *him*. My former pack, all the ways I tried so hard to be what they wanted me to be. All the ways I failed. Indie's eyes drag over my penciled words, her fingers fanning the pages until she comes upon the first pink sticky note.

*my mind is
a big hunk of irrevocable nothing which touch
and
taste and smell and hearing and sight keep hitting
and
chipping with sharp fatal tools*

It's the best description I can offer for the bond. Defenses against a reality too painful to call your own. Changing you, shaping the marks you leave on the world.

She flips again, this time landing on Leon's favorite—I marked it for her to read, knowing his nickname for her came from it:

*may my heart always be open to little
birds who are the secrets of living
whatever they sing is better than to know
and if men should not hear them men are old*

“Oh,” she says again. “Little birds.”

“Like you.”

I wonder if she hates it.

When she turns to look at me, I know she doesn't. Her eyes look like my heart feels after reading a poem that hurts in a good way.

“Don't feel the need to read the whole thing at once,” I say. “Cummings deserves some sitting with.”

Her teeth work her lip and I want to reach out and graze it with my thumb. I don't want her to hurt herself.

“Thank you isn't enough,” she finally mumbles. “All these beautiful words and all I have is ‘thank you’. Seems silly.”

I smile.

I put the car in drive and she's silent, looking at the book from every angle, taking in its ragged edges and dog-eared corners.

“This is yours,” she says eventually.

“Yours now.”

“Are you sure?”

“I first read it when everything in my world was exploding. If you can decipher my disastrous handwriting, you’ll see. I figured your world is kind of exploding right now too. Maybe it could help.”

She keeps reading as I drive. Not the poems—just the inside cover, with all my scrawled teen angst. I re-read my musings before I gave it to her, making sure there wasn’t anything too precious. Some are embarrassing, some tender, but I want forever with Indie. I want her bonded, existing inside me all the time. There isn’t anything I’d hold back. So I didn’t erase anything. She chews her lip and furrows her brow as she reads my softest thoughts.

“Your parents were awful,” she finally murmurs.

I smile. “Yeah. Yours too.”

She smiles. “Yeah.”

“They disowned me when I was seventeen.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. The best thing they gave me was my freedom.”

“I used to think the same thing.” Indie chews on her lip some more.

“Not anymore?” I ask.

Her eyes are still on the page in front of her. “I don’t know,” she says. “People thought I belonged to them, but I belonged to me. Now I belong to the Complex.”

“Not a fan?” I ask.

“Never needed a permission slip to have friends before.” She shrugs as we pull into the driveway. She has a point.

27

illuminating

INDIGO

“**Y**ou *live* here?” I ask dumbly as Joshua pulls up to the mansion.

“Yes,” he laughs. “It’s a bit flashy for my taste, but it’s been in Midas Pack for generations.”

It’s a massive colonial manor house, with white pillars framing the cherry-red front door. The white walls stand tall, with windows jutting out of the eaves.

“Wow. It’s... large.”

“You strike me as more of a cozy house in the woods type of girl.” Joshua parks, and before I have a chance to answer he’s out and around the front, opening my door for me and helping me fumble my way out.

“I do love cozy, though now I wonder if that’s just the omega in me,” I say.

The front door opens, and Risk bursts from inside like he was loaded in a slingshot.

“Indie!” he cries. He doesn’t bother with the logistics of crutches. He wraps his arms around my waist and lifts me into the air, spinning me around in a vice-grip hug. The crutches clatter to the ground and for a moment I’m afraid, but then his laughter infects me and I feel my own bubbling up my throat. I let it loose, liking the way it sounds as he sets me down and I get to look at him for real. He is cinnamon eyes and reddish-hued waves and a septum piercing over blinding white teeth, tawny skin and boyish smile, hands still on my waist, holding me steady as Joshua picks the crutches up.

“Hello, Indigo.” Hollis stands on the front step. “Risk, let her go, she didn’t ask to be picked up.”

“It’s ok,” I say. I like the warmth of Risk’s palms on my waist far too much.

Hollis is wearing a black v-neck, stretched taut over his muscles in drool-worthy definition. His jeans are fancy too. He looks like he’s ready for a photoshoot. Leon lurks behind him, wearing his usual white thermal shirt and fatigues. I wave at him and he waves back. I wish he’d come hug me.

“Knife time?” Risk doesn’t let me go, even once Joshua has handed me back my crutches.

“Sure,” I laugh, unable to stop myself. “Knife time.”

“Are you sure you don’t want a tour?” Joshua asks.

“I’ll give her one.” Risk turns his body protectively, shielding me from the rest of his pack.

Before I can speak, he's lifted me again, and I hear Joshua groan as the crutches clatter back to the asphalt.

"Risk!" Hollis barks, but Risk's already slinging me onto his back like I weigh nothing. Then he's charging forward, arms hooked under my knees to keep me from slipping down.

We blow by Leon and Hollis and I barely have time to hear Leon warn, "mind her knee!" before we're bounding up a flight of stairs.

"You're a horrible guide," I grumble, but I'm smiling.

"House doesn't matter," Risk grunts.

"Only knives?" I tease.

"Mmhm, knives and Indie." He opens the door to a room and slips us inside.

"Me?"

He doesn't grace that with words, instead cocking his head to the left, so my chin falls right in the gap between his jaw and shoulder. I'm blasted by woodsmoke. My face goes warm and my toes go cold and somewhere in between is on fire. Rather than my now-reliable hairpin trigger shame, however, I find myself giggling at the brazenness of it—I'm so used to trying to disguise myself and my scent, but it's like Risk speaks to me with his. He emanates *want*, and I bite my laugh off as I feel my body reciprocate. As I *let* myself feel my body reciprocate.

"Mmmm," Risk hums. Then he sets me down, and my focus is drawn away from where our bodies touch to the room

around us.

My jaw drops.

It's dominated by a pegboard wall in bright cherry-red wood, every inch covered with weapons.

My eyes scan the vast array—an entire corner dedicated to knives, ranging from tiny switchblades to hunting knives to a literal machete. Next is guns: pistols, a shotgun, automatic rifles, old-school revolvers and a massive sniper rifle gleaming with dark oil. The rest of the collection looks like it belongs in a museum—a two-handed broadsword, a mace, a *battle axe*.

“Where did you get *that*?” I ask. I want to get closer, but I'm crutch-less. Risk notices, and without my needing to ask he grasps me gently around the waist and lifts, gliding me across the room to stand closer.

“Rescue mission.”

“Rescue mission?” I reach out and graze my finger along the wooden handle—it's polished to a shine, not a speck of dust visible.

“Omega got kidnapped. We went after her.”

“Is that common?” I turn to him. “Kidnappings?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. Too many alphas. We won't let anybody get you though.”

“That's very kind of you,” I murmur. I don't know if it's Risk's thrumming energy or my own wanting or the scents of

Midas Pack soaking the air around me, but the threat of kidnapping feels distant and false.

Risk is looking at the weapons now, and it's the first chance I've had to admire him in semi-stillness. He looks so *young*, with full lips and apple-like cheeks. His loving gaze for the weapons makes me smile—maybe I should be concerned that he's so enamored with instruments of death, but something about it just seems right.

“Who built this?” I nod at a tiny gap of uncovered pegboard. “It doesn't seem like hardware store stuff.”

“Leon.” Risk smiles wistfully. “I helped. Want a knife?”

He takes one from the wall.

“Me? A knife?”

“Yeah. So if I jump you again you can stab me.”

I turn to him sharply. He's being completely earnest.

“I wouldn't *stab* you, Risk.”

“Why not?”

“Why do you sound *disappointed* by that?”

He doesn't answer, crossing to a chest of drawers and rummaging around inside until he emerges with an olive-green strap of some sort. Then he returns and drops to his knees in front of me. I almost stumble backwards to make space, but he hooks his arm around my waist and holds me still as he places the strap around my right thigh. I realize then what it is, but stay silent as he tightens and adjusts it.

“You’re too small,” he grumbles. “But it’ll do.”

He steps away and takes me in.

I look down at the knife strapped to my thigh. I undo the keeper holding the knife in the sheath and pull it free, admiring the steel. It’s a hunting blade, one edge serrated and the other gleaming sharp, culminating in a wicked tip. The handle is dark wood, small enough to fit comfortably in my palm when I grip it.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper. “But I don’t know how to use it.”

Risk moves behind me, and he’s gentle and slow as his hand falls over mine, his elegant fingers helping mine settle in a firm grip on the handle. “Stabbing, opening boxes, big broad cuts. Careful.” His voice is soft and sensual—for the knife or for me, I’m not sure. I shiver, then lean into his warmth.

He shifts his hand, helping my fingers grip the handle in a different configuration. “Killing blows, slitting throats, smaller slices. Safer.”

He takes the knife out of my hand and crouches behind me, his head coming to rest in the small of my back as he slides the knife back into the sheath and snaps the strap closed.

“Careful when sheathing.” He slinks back up to stand in front of me, his eyes twinkling with the double entendre. “Next time I’ll give you a gun.”

“Will Hollis be ok with that?”

His expression darkens.

“I’m sorry, I should—“

“Hollis has a gun,” he says simply, cutting me off. There’s no anger in his voice, despite the lingering shadow in his gaze. I wonder what his relationship with his pack leader is like.

A knock makes us both turn. It’s Leon, peeking his head just inside the room. He looks between me and Risk, standing only inches apart, and I realize how it must appear. Part of me wants to step back, like we could get in trouble for being so close, but without my crutches I’m powerless to move.

“Hollis and Joshua are cooking, I figured I could give Indie an *actual* tour of the house, then we could keep them company?” Leon’s voice carries no hint of jealousy or disapproval for my proximity to his packmate. I watch his eyes glide down to the knife holstered on my thigh. He smiles. “I see you’ve been equipped.”

I shift, my hand coming protectively over the handle. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Very cool. You ok if I carry you? Don’t want you wearing yourself out crutching the stairs.”

I nod, fighting back my stupid grin as he comes closer and lifts me into his arms, cradling me in the way I’ve become so addicted to.

“Is this hard?” I ask. “Without your hand?”

“No. See?” I look at where his stump emerges from beneath my knees. “No hand necessary.”

I want to reach out and touch the stump, but I know it would upset him, even when the sleeve of his shirt is tucked in and concealing the puckered scar from view.

“Let’s head—“

“Show her the pack bed!” Risk cuts him off.

Leon’s cloves intensify alongside my own citrusy black tea.

“She doesn’t need to see that,” he says gruffly.

“Um, actually, I wouldn’t mind,” I shrug. “I’ve never seen one before. In person.”

Leon raises an eyebrow. The thought terrifies me, actually, but I want to know. My imagination has been running wild with me and I want to ground my fantasies and fears in something real. Something that *isn’t* Leon Midas. A physical place seems like a safe-ish middle ground.

“Ok,” he acquiesces, carefully bending us through the door so my feet and head don’t get knocked. “But it isn’t clean. We’ve been, uh, sleeping in there, for the past few nights.”

“So, you all have rooms, but you also sleep in the pack bed?”

“Mmhm,” Risk nods, walking backwards in front of us. “Pack bed is better.”

He opens the doorway at the top of the landing and Leon carries me over the threshold.

The scent that hits me is a brick wall. The guys are all over the house—Risk’s room dripped of amber woodsmoke, and

Hollis is strong in the kitchen we breezed through on our way up, piney and clean, but this is something else entirely. It's like I've been dropped in a vat of their pheromones; every inch of me soaked in a sunny sensation that starts in my center and bursts outwards. A moment later, black tea and bergamot are swirling into the mix, the combination of all of us a golden glow.

I vaguely watch Risk stagger until his back hits the wall, then slide down until he's sitting on the floor. He groans loudly. I barely even register the actual space—a massive low bed, bigger than a California king and strewn with dark grey pillows and blankets and comforters. It dominates the room, and all I can imagine is Leon setting me down there and treating me like the alphas treated their omega in the video on Thursday. Leon, who's shuffling me in his arms uncomfortably.

“I think that's enough pack bed,” his voice echoes from far away, and then he's turning and we're out of the room. I don't even realize I'm whining until we're in the hallway and the cleaner air cuts through the syrupy thickness in my brain.

“Oh god,” I groan when reality sets back in, burying my face in his neck even though I know it will only make his scent stronger. “Do you have de-scenter? Please tell me you have de-scenter.” I am soaking wet, my entire body throbbing with the need to go back inside. Risk is in there, waiting for me. For us.

“You don’t need to de-scent, little bird, it’s ok. We both did it too.”

“Did what?”

“Spiked.”

I blink. “I thought only omegas spike.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. We are all victims of our pheromones. Your spike feeds ours, ours feeds yours. A cycle.”

“Does that happen every time an omega is around a pack?”

Leon shakes his head, carrying me down the stairs and away from the kitchen. “This is the media room,” he says, changing the topic. “I’m guessing Risk will try and get you to play a game after we eat, but may I recommend challenging Hollis to some chess instead? You might be the only one he’d actually say yes to.”

“Chess? I suck at chess.”

“So does he. Don’t tell him I told you that.”

“You don’t want me to tell Hollis an awful lot, ya know.”

Leon grimaces. “He should get to make his own impression. He’s just not very good at it.”

I smile—Hollis may be stiff, but his gestures are sweet, even if they do feel over-practiced. “He’s doing just fine,” I say. “I think making an impression is all he’s ever done, and he wants me to get a different one than he’s used to aiming for.”

“You are remarkably perceptive, little bird,” Leon says. *Little bird*. It means more now, knowing it comes from a poem. From the notion of knowing little things. Of being listened to.

He relaxes as he walks me through the rest of the first floor, explaining each room. It doesn't seem like they use most of them. I lean into my senses—the pack's scents are everywhere, but there's also dust, lemon-scented cleaning products, and, under it all, different alphas. I can barely parse them, an earthy clay-like scent, green tea, cinnamon, and something soft—maybe jasmine? An omega for sure.

“Wait!” I cry out as we pass by a door and I spot a glint of black polished wood. “Who plays piano?”

“Joshua.” Leon detours inside.

The grand piano dominates the space, hood lifted, keys gleaming. Beyond the piano, windows frame a manicured yard with trimmed hedges, bordered by endless dark green forest. The far end of the room is devoted to a large brick hearth, with a massive couch and some overstuffed easy chairs settled haphazardly around. It's a peaceful space, more lived in than the dusty parlors we passed by, though the pack's scents inside are still slightly faded—they haven't been here for a while. When Leon rotates us, I realize that the wall to the right of the door is lined with shelves, filled with hundreds upon hundreds of books.

“Oh,” I gasp. “This is... this is beautiful. This room is my favorite.”

“Joshua too.” Leon smiles. “A lot of these books came with the house, but pretty much everything non-leather you see is his. Well, except for all of the Tolkien and Asimov. And Butler. Most of the nerd stuff is mine. But all of the classic stuff is him.”

“What did Joshua do?” I ask. “Before the incident.”

“He was a tactical coordinator. A lot of cyber-security, mission research and scoping. If Joshua is anything, it’s thorough. He appreciates details and sees things the rest of us don’t.”

It makes sense. It isn’t difficult to imagine his fingers dancing across the ivory keys in front of us, drawing out a melody to match his bittersweet smile. It’s equally easy to picture him folded into one of the overstuffed chairs in front of a roaring fire, eyes gliding over the pages of a thick paperback.

“Will he play for us after we eat?” I ask.

Leon’s expression darkens. He shakes his head. “He hasn’t played since the attack.”

“That’s the first time you’ve called it an attack.”

He stiffens, then shrugs. “We talked about honesty yesterday. You deserve mine too.”

I wasn’t expecting that. “Will you tell me what happened?”

“If you want.”

“I don’t want to push. But I do want to know.”

“How about the first time we go to the treehouse?”

“We can’t go today?”

“I don’t think either of us could climb a ladder right now,” Leon’s smile returns as he squeezes me into him slightly, making obvious my placement in his arms rather than on my own two feet, as well as his stump.

“Fair,” I relent.

“Plus, I think Hollis and Joshua are nearly done with dinner.”

With perfect timing, my stomach rumbles loudly.

We head back to the kitchen, the aroma of tomatoes and basil and sharp spices leading the way.

Magical

HOLLIS

Indie is smiling when Leon sets her down at the kitchen table. She runs her fingers over the cover of Joshua's book, then turns and catches me watching her. Her eyes jerk down to her lap, her cheeks flushing. *No*, I want to say, *please look at me. Don't be afraid.*

I stir the marinara and wait for her to look again. This time she holds my gaze, though I can tell it's hard. Her eyes are cocoa brown, darker than Risk's or mine. They are inquisitive, watchful like an owl. I want to be the answer to all of her unasked questions.

The bond sings with her. Risk swindled Leon into showing her the pack bed, but thank god he had the sense to yank her out before Risk could embarrass us any further. I beckon him down now in the bond, but he's putting static up in front of his presence. The way he always used to when he didn't want me knowing of his misdeeds.

I do my best to let it go. It isn't as difficult as it used to be. Cooking with Joshua has me humming and skating around the kitchen, grabbing extra spices and peeking over his shoulder as he chops basil and grates cheese. He jumps every time, little flares of excitement and embarrassment and nerves coursing through him, unhidden in the bond. After nearly a decade together, I have to marvel at how new he feels.

He's floating again. I didn't realize I had stranded him in a desert, draining the ocean that he sailed on.

I've watched one pack fall apart in this house already. I won't allow it to happen again.

"Hungry?" I ask Indigo. I mentally facepalm. *Anorexic omega 101: What not to ask.*

Before I can apologize though, she smiles. "Starved. It smells amazing." She doesn't *seem* anxious. Leon's irritation flashes in the bond—he thinks I should have known better than to ask. I focus on her face, forcing him to tune in as well—*she's fine.*

"What do you think of the house?" I ask, trying to block out his overprotective attitude.

This is why I'm no good with the bond—it's just too much. Risk leapfrogs so easily, feeling all of us as acutely as reality and reacting to each in turn. For me, it feels like four people talking at once, vying for my attention; Indigo in front of me, and the rest of my pack in the bond. Joshua is good about quieting himself, not demanding attention, but Risk is in HD,

all the time. I'm not sure if he doesn't know how to hold back or just doesn't want to.

"The piano room is my favorite," Indigo replies. Then she turns to Joshua. "Will you play for me after dinner?"

We all freeze.

His reaction blooms in the bond—the initial clench of nerves in his belly, then actually *thinking* of the act. Sitting on the padded leather bench, delicate fingers sprawling over the ivory keys, eyes traversing the score in front of him, reading the key, the notes, chords bleeding into each other, one after the other. He hollows, the picture barely visible through the thick blue fog he's lived in these past weeks. He *remembers* he once felt joy, he *knows* that he would probably feel it again, but the effort is so great he doesn't think he can. He doesn't think it's worth it.

He starts mechanically grating parmesan again. "I'm um, pretty out of practice."

"Chopsticks?" Indigo chirps.

She knows what she's doing. Joshua is squirming inside, his desire to please her warring with the blurry, immovable boulder that is his depression, holding his brain hostage. I want to enter his head and free him. All I can do is open the bond wider. My peace is his peace. His gratitude is immediate.

"I can do some chopsticks," he offers. "Maybe even heart and soul."

“I can play the harmony!” Indigo grins. I watch something flit behind her eyes, wiping the smile away for a moment—a memory, something unpleasant, but then it’s gone and she’s smiling again, turning to me. “And I’ve heard that you can wipe the floor with me at chess?”

Leon’s smugness is soupy. I glare at him before putting my smile back on for Indigo. “I’ll play,” I say. “Though I’m not as —”

Like a demon summoned, Risk leaps down the stairs before I can say his name. The air around him is a miasma of skunky green.

“We eat?” he crows. His eyes are red-rimmed and bleary.

I watch Indigo—she’s already anxious, and this is what Risk does? Invites her over and then gets high? Her eyes are wide as Risk presses his entire body to Joshua’s, peeking over his shoulder and planting a kiss on his cheek before whipping around and ducking under my arm stirring the sauce. He bends over the pot and takes a deep whiff, pressing his ass into my crotch. I step away, barely holding my anger back, but before I can snap at him, he’s danced over to the table, dragging the chair next to Indigo’s closer and then plopping down, pressing the length of his leg to hers. “Smells amazing,” he sighs, not specifying whether he means Indigo or the sauce.

Indigo is smiling. Beaming, really.

“Sorry about him,” I grunt, waving the skunky scent away. I won’t pick this fight, not now, not with that smile on her face and this glowy warmth permeating my chest in response.

She grins. “It’ll probably taste *extra* good now.”

“It’s still *uncouth*.” I glare at Risk, fending him off before he can invite her upstairs to partake. He just leans back and grins. The dopeyness of his high permeates the bond, the lowered inhibitions and giggle-worthy silence and truly intoxicating smell of the spaghetti sauce beckoning to him.

Joshua bristles as Risk’s attention turns his way, a battering ram of adoration. It’s the kind of thing he knows better than to direct at me. Of course, when it comes to Joshua, he never holds back.

“Stop it, we have a guest,” Joshua scolds. “Use your words.”

“Fine. Your ass is *fantastic* in those jeans.”

Joshua’s neck goes splotchy, his alabaster skin strawberry pink.

Indigo bursts out laughing.

Leon’s reaction is immediate and impossible to ignore—just like Risk a moment ago. A tidal wave of pleasure so powerful I have to stop my stirring and grip the stove to stay upright, nearly burning myself in the process. Risk is smirking, and Joshua’s grimace is sliding off his face, overtaken by his lopsided smile.

Something seizes my heart at the scene. Leon’s eyes glued on Indigo, her head tossed back mid-laugh, Risk adhered to her side and Joshua pretending not to enjoy the compliment. I want to freeze everything, force it to stay still, to stay right *here*, but I know I can’t. It’s slipping away already, Indigo’s

chin tucking back down, Joshua schooling his expression to stillness, Leon looking away so Indigo doesn't catch him staring.

The loss is almost more painful than the pleasure was good.

See? We need her. Leon's thoughts are so close to my own I can barely tell them apart. I'd be a fool to argue.

The table is a marvel when it's filled—the big pot of spaghetti sauce, the basket of crusty garlic bread dripping with butter, the giant bowl of salad, sprinkled with croutons and parmesan. I fight the urge to preen at nourishing my pack. The tomato oregano paprika heat still doesn't come close to comparing to the combination of our scents though. All of us. Together. I breathe in deep, the story in the air so good it hurts.

Risk dives in and serves himself first. I'm about to scold him before realizing it was deliberate—Indigo didn't want to go first, even though she's the guest. He didn't need to think about it—he just took care of her. In a way only he would know how to.

“This looks amazing,” she says as she fills her plate. Leon watches her a little too intently, and I mentally tsk at him. The amount of food she takes is perfectly acceptable. I ignore my own urge, to pull her onto my lap and feed her bite by bite from my hand. That would be obscene. I try to hold the thought back from the bond entirely, but of course, everybody picks up on it. They do me the kindness of letting it float away—Leon and Joshua are thinking something similar, and Risk is

thinking something entirely different but somehow far more obscene.

Indigo just seems... *above* instinct. Which is a problem. Her heat is going to hit her like a brick wall, and there's nothing we can do to help her. We could be her guides, but if she knew about us, if she knew we're fated mates, I wonder if she'd be able to see us as anything other than a threat. She's just so young. She isn't ready to hold all the parts of herself, not yet.

We finish serving and then we're all waiting for Indigo to finish dusting her pasta with parmesan. She feels our eyes and freezes. "Did I do something?"

Leon nods at Risk. "Hand him the cheese when you're done."

She immediately hands it to Risk, wanting our eyes off her. He up-ends the bowl, relishing Indie's horror as she takes in the now 1:1 ratio of cheese to everything-else-on-plate. He stirs the muck all together—salad, noodles, bread, cheese, sauce, all of it. One of my least favorite habits of his, if only for *texture*.

"He gets mad if I don't grate enough cheese," Joshua grumbles to Indigo, who is still aghast.

"Yum," Risk says through an over-stuffed mouthful.

Indigo shudders. She takes a bite that I do my best not to watch, then hums in pleasure and turns to me. "This is *amazing*. How did you learn to cook like this?"

I try to ignore the twist in my low belly at the humming sound, focusing on her words instead. “My mom taught me. She was the best cook.”

Joshua and Leon nod their agreement.

“Did you grow up here?” Indigo asks. “Joshua said the house passed through your family.”

I nod. “My birth pack lived here until my mom died.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s ok. She got sick, and the pack wasn’t very good at keeping things together once she was gone. The place had been empty for a few years by the time we got here. Had to put in a little work to fix it up again.”

“Where’s your birth pack now?” she asks.

“They’re not a pack anymore.”

We all wince in the bond. It’s instinctive, like watching somebody’s knee bend backward and holding your own. Bonds are sensitive things. What we’ve been through the past two months only makes it worse. What I put us through.

“I didn’t know that bonds could be broken.” Indigo’s voice is quiet.

“It’s rare,” Leon explains. His typically gruff voice is velvet soft, like he wishes he could protect her from the tragedy I almost subjected us to. “But it does happen, if a pack reaches a point of strife that the bond is irreparable. Other packs are forcefully disbanded, as punishment for a crime.”

“Oh,” she breathes. “That’s... tragic.”

“My Pack Alpha was... a lot,” I explain. “He and the others are on better terms now, but my sisters and I haven’t seen them all together since our mom’s funeral.”

“You have sisters?” Indigo perks up.

“Two,” I say. “You’ll need to meet Meghan, she’s an omega as well. Do you have any siblings?”

I already know the answer, but every part of me wants to hear more of her voice. To hear her story from *her*, not from snippets of Leon’s and Risk’s memories or white paper in manila folders at the Coalition offices.

“A little sister,” she answers, her face growing conflicted. “Lise. She’s twelve now, I guess. I haven’t seen her since she was four.”

The anger is a hot stone in my belly. I do my best to quash it, knowing it will only fuel the same feeling in the others.

Risk is practically preening, of course. “Welcome to the trauma tribe.” He holds up a hand and Indigo giggles as she high-fives him. An easy escape from having to explain more. Risk read it perfectly. Of course.

“Your family suck too?” Indigo asks him.

“*I* think my childhood was *great*. Hollis disagrees.” Risk falls on his own sword with ease, his HD-replay mind drifting back in time, taking us all with him in the bond.

Once upon a time he tried to hide this from me. He didn't understand the anger it inspired. Not at him. At them. He's so used to my anger being directed at him. Shame tangles with the image filling my mind.

The double-wide trailer, hazy with cigarette smoke and dust. Clothing and empty cans everywhere. Shirtless, tattoo-covered alphas lolling about. Risk on the floor, ten years old, beer in one hand, cigarette in the other, a caricature of the adults around him. He burps as a mousy, hungry-looking omega follows a hairy alpha to a room. They don't close the door, and Risk watches her ride the alpha, breasts bouncing with every thrust. He was ten fucking years old.

I grit my teeth. "Risk had packmates, not parents. Big difference."

"Me and the boys, all the way," Risk smirks. Not a negative emotion in sight.

"Did you not have a mom?" Indigo asks.

"Nope." Risk slurps a noodle. "No need."

Indigo's brow furrows in confusion. Leon explains. "Omegas on rotation get to set the terms for their heats. Most sign a contract that says if any kids result, the pack assumes responsibility for them. Risk was one of those kids. Five alphas and him."

Indigo's face falls. "That's awful."

"Nah." Risk shakes his head, leaning in to mock-whisper in Indigo's ear. "They're just jealous. I had way more fun than all

of them. Me and the boys.”

The bond is fraught. Joshua’s concern for Risk and worry that Indigo will be scared off, Leon’s protective instincts, not wanting her to know yet another ugly truth of her identity, Risk’s white-noise complicated feelings, not quite capable of grief, but definitely not pleasure either, and then my own admonishment and guilt and concern, for both Risk and Indigo.

“Fun is good.” Indigo weaves her way through the emotions easily, reading our expressions. “Seems like you lucked out with your boys now though.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Risk’s white-noise turns syrupy sweet again, a firehose blasting us with his love. It’s like a dog that won’t stop trying to lick your face.

Under the table, he settles a hand on Indigo’s thigh. I want to scold him, but the touch is so gentle, so unlike him, I can’t bring myself to. Indigo sags into it. I wonder if she recognizes that peace for what it is. She’s fighting it though, trying to hold herself upright, even as every instinct in her screams to lean closer.

Something inside me gives a complicated squeeze.

Insensate

INDIGO

After dinner, Leon carries me into the library, where Joshua begins sorting through sheet music, Hollis grabs a chessboard from a shelf, and Risk sets about building an incredibly inappropriately sized fire in the hearth.

I like watching them all. Joshua's hair keeps falling in his eyes as he shuffles pages, and the way he shakes his head to clear his vision is sure to give him a crick in his neck. Hollis furrows his brow as he sets the pieces on the board, making sure each is in the exact center of its respective square. Risk keeps kneeling back, looking at the massive pile of wood in the hearth as though asking himself, *more?* The answer is always yes, and when he finally strikes the match and watches it all go up, his smile is meditative. The flames climb over the wood, greedily expanding until the confines of the brick hearth are sorely tested to keep them contained. Leon hovers over me, putting pillows behind my back and under my bad knee

and tucking a blanket over my lap, stepping back to look at me broodingly before diving in to make more adjustments.

“I’m comfortable.” I finally stop him when he leans in for the fourth time. “Thank you.”

He nods gruffly before plopping down on the end of the couch, watching Risk and the fire warily.

Hollis finishes setting up the board and pushes it close enough to the couch for me to play without moving. Then the first notes float into the air; *Nocturnes Op. 9*. Chopin. Of course.

We all fall still. The only other sound is the low crackling of the fire. Even Risk is motionless, the flames reflecting in his eyes with a warm amber glow. Hollis’s eyes drift shut and a smile tugs the corners of his mouth upwards. It’s understated—not his usual politician’s smile. More earnest.

My shoulders relax as the melody fills me. I hadn’t even realized they were tense. Leon lays his head back on the couch.

Joshua’s music is poetry. It touches something raw and true inside that makes me feel simultaneously wise and young, an impossible duality. None of us moves, letting the melancholy wash over us. Our scents dance in the air, weaving around each other in an intricate dance.

I want to lock this moment inside of myself, find some way to keep it with me forever. It’s not just our scent or the warmth from the fire, the easy comfort of a full stomach or being

fussed over and cared for. It isn't the hauntingly beautiful music, or the game of chess positioned in front of me. I feel *safe*.

Hollis's eyes drift open slowly and he leans forward, nodding for me to go first. I bask for just a second longer, then slip my pawn into the center of the board.

We don't speak as we play, letting Joshua's music and Risk's fire provide the soundtrack. Leon watches, his gaze lazily traversing the room. Something tells me he's doing exactly what I was, drinking it all in and stashing the feeling away.

As the music winds down, I have to turn and watch Joshua play. His eyes are half-closed, lost in himself. I watch his curls fall in his eyes as his body lilts with the music, following the steady arpeggios and wavering in the polyrhythms. The inevitability of the song is in the set of his shoulders, the love letter written in the furrow between his brows.

When he finishes, there's no fanfare. None of us want to burst the bubble. He pads around the piano and sinks to the floor next to where I sit, watching the board as I make my last desperate ploy. I open my mouth to compliment him, to thank him, but he can't meet my gaze, and I sense that he would cringe away from any praise I offered. I graze his shoulder with my thumb instead, a gentle touch, hoping he understands. His cheeks stretch with a self-conscious smile.

"You're not bad," Hollis praises me after I knock my king over in defeat.

“Thanks.” I grin, the compliment making me happier than it should, even though I lost. “Ok, Joshua, your turn? Redeem me?” I almost reach out and comb my fingers through his shaggy hair before thinking better of it. I don’t want to burst the bubble.

“Let Risk play,” he says.

Risk has been in a trance in front of the fire this entire time, so I hadn’t considered him a viable option for any sort of activity, but when Joshua speaks, he turns to face us.

His expression melts me. The boyish mischief that seems to permanently occupy his features has faded away, leaving behind a youthful innocence that makes me want to hold him tight and protect him from the world.

He doesn’t say anything, just crawling over until he’s sitting on the floor between me and the coffee table. He drapes his legs over Joshua’s lap and leans forward, watching Hollis reset the pieces.

“Been a while, huh?” Hollis smiles. It’s tentative, like he’s aware of how fragile this sleepy state is on the perpetually frenetic Risk. Like he’s afraid of wiping it away with his words.

“Hope you’ve improved.” Risk’s eyes twinkle as he shifts his pawn forward.

Unlike our game, where I had to think on every move while Hollis watched, Risk’s moves are fluid and efficient. Hollis has barely finished moving his pieces before Risk is mapping

his own, and my jaw drops when Hollis flicks his king over after just a few minutes of play.

“Wait, what?” I do a double take.

“It’s mate in three, though Hollis could have pushed it out to mate in six if he was willing to sacrifice his queen.” Risk leans his head against Joshua’s shoulder as he speaks. Hollis clears the board, shaking his head in good-natured disbelief.

“How did you learn to play like that?” I ask. Risk is the last member of the pack I would have expected to be a chess prodigy.

“He didn’t,” Leon chuckles.

“He has a million-track mind, and chess is one of the only activities that actually uses all tracks at the same time.” Joshua’s fingers weave through Risk’s hair as he speaks. The softness of the gesture makes me ache. “Or at least, most of them.”

“Will you teach me?” I ask.

Joshua says, “Risk isn’t a very good teacher.”

But Risk nods. “It will be easier when you have the bond.”

“What?” I ask dumbly at the same time that Hollis and Leon bark, “Risk!”

Joshua has stiffened, icy blue eyes frozen on me.

Risk looks around, bewildered. “What?” he asks. “Like we *wouldn’t* bond our fated mate?”

The night shatters.

The rest of the pack is saying something, but I don't hear it over the dull roar in my ears. The room tunnels until all I see is the fire in the hearth, flames licking at the smoke-darkened bricks. I can sense frantic movements around the periphery of my vision. All of the distorted facts and feelings sort themselves into neat, clean rows.

Fated mate.

How did I not see it before?

How I felt with Leon, right from the start. How his scent differed from Wilder's and Dr. Gray's. My kiss with Risk, laced with need rather than fear. How the compounding of the pack's scents with mine becomes a physical presence. Leon at my appointments, having lunch with me, Hollis and Risk inviting me over, Joshua giving me poetry. Not just friendship. Fate.

I startle back to reality. The air is sharp. Leon has moved close. Joshua and Risk are still on the ground, wide eyes locked on my face. Hollis is across the room, staring out the window, arms crossed in front of him. I see a muscle flexing in his jaw—just like Leon, in the exact same spot.

“Blue jay? You ok?” Leon asks.

My stomach sinks.

Nothing has changed except my awareness. But everything is different. There's never been a maybe, not for them. They lied to me. This entire night, in the pack bed, at the dinner table, they knew what they wanted. Me. Naked. Vulnerable.

Leon's anger over the pack sheet. His refusal to kiss me. Something black and sharp twists inside me.

"Take her home, Joshua," Hollis orders.

"What?" Risk springs to his feet. "No!"

"Enough out of you." Hollis whips around, his dark eyes turbulent.

"She's our *mate*," Risk counters. *Mate*.

I watch him glare at Hollis and know something is passing through the bond when Joshua suddenly hisses, "*enough*."

"Home. Now." Hollis can't even look at me. He turns back to the window. Joshua storms out.

I'm numb. There is no me, not now, just the words echoing in my mind and the movements of my pack around me, angry and upset.

My pack. No. Not mine.

I'm grateful to Hollis. He is austere and distant. Safe.

Leon's green eyes are liquid with concern. I am terror. A man, nearly seven feet tall, biology tailor-made to... what, breed me? He reaches like he might touch me. I flinch away. He yanks his hand back. I don't know what I want him to say, what I want him to do, but his silence feels dangerous. He *lied* to me. His eyes are anguished, his hand rubbing tense circles around his stump.

He could hurt me.

The rational part of my brain knows he would never, but I'm beyond rationality now. I am hyper-aware of his fatigues and how they stretch over his muscular thighs and what is hiding underneath and I don't understand how last night I could blush with embarrassment and pleasure imagining it and now the thought makes all the blood drain from my head, leaving me barely hanging on to the buzzing black edge of consciousness. How I clung to him on Wednesday, desperate for more, but would cringe if he dared move closer now.

Joshua returns, my crutches in hand. "Here, Indie," he sighs. "Let's get you home."

I tear my gaze away from Leon and struggle to my feet. Risk opens his mouth as though to say something, then lets out a low growl instead.

"*Enough.*" Hollis's voice drips dominance. I shudder. Risk cringes, and that is *wrong*. I want to comfort him. I want to run.

I follow Joshua out. Right before I cross the threshold, I stop. "Thank you for inviting me."

Hollis turns from the window. His eyes are cold.

Was he imagining me naked tonight? Was he picturing my body under his? Did he hear a word I said? I can't imagine this stony exterior overtaken by lust.

It's hard to believe he's the same Hollis that smiled with pride over the dinner table earlier, or laughed as Risk decimated him at chess. All I see are tense shoulders and

puffed chest and tight jaw and *anger anger anger* making a giant impenetrable fog around him. But under it all... I shake my head. I am not big enough to allow this complexity in myself. I can't even begin to imagine it in others.

Joshua asks before helping me into the passenger seat of the Escalade. His caution hurts more, juxtaposed with everything that's happened.

"Are you ok?" he asks when we finally pull onto the road.

I don't say anything.

"You didn't know," he says.

"I think I did."

"You're angry."

"Yes. No. I don't know."

"We fought about whether to tell you or not."

"I don't know if I would have believed you if you had. I'm just—I'm afraid."

"Of us?" He fails to disguise the hurt in his voice.

I bite my lip. "You were safe because you were off-limits. I could crush on you because I knew it would never happen. But if we're fated mates... that's not safe anymore."

Joshua nods. His knuckles are white, his grip choking the wheel.

"I just don't understand how you could respect me after my heat. After seeing me. How you could *like* me."

A muscle pulses in his jaw.

We're silent for a while.

"We didn't want to scare you," Joshua whispers. "The medical heat was already difficult to take, but now..." he shakes his head. "There's just no *time*."

"I know."

Joshua's grip on the wheel tightens. I worry it will snap. His fingers are long and elegant, capable of drawing such beautiful music out of a piano. Clinging white-knuckled to the wheel like it might tether us to reality in the speeding car, forest blurring by.

"We don't just want your heat, Indie," Joshua murmurs. "We want *you*. Poetry and telling jokes and playing chess and commiserating over shitty families. The dinner table, the library, all of tonight—don't tell me you didn't feel it."

I did feel it. The thought is nauseating now, too good, too intense.

"Can we not talk about it?" I choke. The anxiety is swelling in my gut, making my gorge rise and sweat bead at my temples. Joshua looks over. I know what he sees: gaunt, grey-faced Indie. Indie the Impossible.

He drives. I chew on his words. It wouldn't be like that, after they saw me. It couldn't. Once I'd been naked, useless and pliable in their arms. Had them all inside me, one after the other, taking turns. Been displayed, with every flaw in plain

sight. I just can't reconcile the two versions of myself I might be with him. With them.

"I'm sorry," he whispers as we make the turn-off for the school. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I maul my lip with my teeth. "I'm sorry your hormones stuck you with me."

"I'm not."

I look at my hands in my lap. My fingers are knobby, too stubby to be beautiful. My clothes are dirty and baggy and accentuate all the wrong things. My hair is stringy and thin and my skin is ashen and I'm too tired to even walk the length of a hallway, and this beautiful man next to me thinks he wants me.

I bark out a laugh. It's a nasty thing, and Joshua's brow creases with concern. "What's so funny?" he asks.

"Just... fated mates. What a joke, right? Four supermodel alphas and me. Indie the Ignominious."

Joshua's lips purse. "Ind—"

"And don't start going all 'no, Indie, don't be mean to yourself' either," I cut him off. "I'm well aware that I'm also melodramatic and ridden with teen angst. Add it to the list of reasons you guys shouldn't want me." I'm getting worked up now. The words come easily, cutting and sharp. "But you do, right? Because that's all it is. Hormones and knotting and getting me naked. Damn the sense of it, the logistics, fucking *reality*, whether we even really *like* each other or not, none of

that matters. Fucking *flesh*. That's all you care about. And it's not your fault; you've been taught that that's ok! That it's normal! Little paper memos of whose penises I should consider to fucking 'manage' me, right? That's all I am, a puzzle piece, a hole for a knot. Right? That's why you invited me over, even when you're not on the list. Gaining my trust, hedging your bets, and getting me in bed for the next one, right? Sorry to burst your bubble. Not happening."

The car lurches to a stop in front of the Complex. Joshua doesn't look at me. His neck is splotchy red. His hands fall to his lap. He stares at them.

There's no air in the car. How could I have just said that? To sweet Joshua, who gave me poetry and *Nocturnes* and nothing but kindness?

The air burns.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I don't know—I don't know why I said that."

Joshua's jaw works. He doesn't look at me. For a moment I worry he might cry. I want to touch him, do *something* to alleviate the pain I just caused.

Fated mates.

A cruel joke.

If that's us—which I know it is, no matter how impossible it seems—then why is everything so hard?

I have never wanted anything so much as I want Midas Pack, and I can't imagine anything as terrifying as actually having

them.

Joshua is still silent, head bowed, fists clenched. His petrichor scent has gone full downpour, wet granite, rain-soaked muddy jungle. I am over-steeped, citric acid sharp.

“I’m sorry,” I fumble. “I’m so—”

“It’s ok,” Joshua says. His voice is not ok.

He gets out of the car, retrieves my crutches and book, and helps me to the ground. His hands are cool and dry and leave mine too quickly.

“Joshua...”

“I’ll see you on Monday, Indie.”

I have to say something, anything, but nothing comes. I can’t let him think I want him. I can’t want him. I can’t.

He waits for me to crutch into the building before pulling away.

30

Manifest

RISK

“**R**isk.”
I am all Joshua, zeroed in, bond electric.

Shame and fear and long pauses and soft words. Indie is afraid. Indie is hurt. I hurt Indie.

“RISK.” Hollis is anger anger anger and words words words.

Joshua is smaller smaller smaller.

“I swear to god—”

“He’s in the bond, Hollis. Listen.”

Indie hurt. Indie scared. I hurt Indie. I scared Indie.

Hollis. A black cloud rolling through the bond. Pulsing purple lightning flashes. Thunder deafens. I reach, desperate for Joshua. I’m choking, drowning, blind.

“Please,” I gasp.

Indie’s fear is acrid and sharp. Her words are lances. I barely feel them, but they run Joshua through. He crumples.

I'm on my feet. I have to go. I have to go to him. To her. To them.

The black cloud thickens. "No."

It solidifies around me. I am frozen, locked in a nightmare. Attacked from all sides.

Hurt kill stab slice little alpha, do it, cut off your finger, hit yourself, go on now, just a slap—

"Hollis!" Leon's yell is miles away.

I'm on my knees. My hands are on my ears. It only traps the orders inside.

Then, BAM. Flattened. Voices smothered. *I'm smothered.*

"Hey, shh, right here, right here Risk." Leon's voice. On me, in me, everywhere.

The black cloud dissipates. Hollis is waves of shame lapping on Leon's shore. I am shipwrecked. Water in my lungs. Drowning on dry land. Joshua *Joshua Joshua JOSHUA.*

"He's ok." Leon, louder, bigger. "Shh, feel him, Risk. Feel him."

I cringe. The storm is gone, but the bond isn't safe. Not like it was. But Joshua. *Joshua.*

I reach. I feel him.

He's driving. He is ok. He sends me ok. They're all ok. Except her. And me.

Shut up stupidstupidstupidstupidnotaboutyou.

“Sorry,” I mumble.

“It’s ok,” Leon says.

No it isn’t, Hollis thinks. Ouch.

Indie’s face, pale, anguished, angry, scared. Ouch.

Leon’s anger. At Hollis, not me. I try to suck it away. I deserve it. *Don’t fight*.

I realize Leon is lying on top of me. I am a Risk sandwich.

Hollis roils. I ache. I need a pill, I need to run, I need to slice this feeling from my heart.

“No,” Leon murmurs. He hears me.

I throw up static. He smushes harder. “*Risk*.”

His voice is soft. I hate it I hate it I hate it I hate it.

“Don’t.” Leon’s voice is harder now. For Hollis.

“Somebody has to plan.”

“We plan together. Wait till Joshua gets back.”

“Oh, are you Pack Alpha now?”

“Do you need me to be? Because your packmate is right here and he needs you.”

“He caused this.” Hollis is a guitar string tuned too tight. *Pluck pluck pluck*. Ouch.

“*Hollis*.” Leon’s growl is deep. The string shreds. Hollis’s memories explode in the bond.

This house, when we first arrived. Dusty, empty, derelict. Scents everywhere. Sorrow. Memories of being little, sunlit afternoons, chasing sisters in sock-feet on polished wooden floors. His mother's hospital room. His fathers. Points on a compass in the sterile space, as far from each other as they could get. No true north.

Me. Ouch.

I snarl whine whimper cry. His thoughts of me are a messy blur. I'm a messy blur. Passed out in the bathroom, vomit crusted in my hair. Leading a strike team, long silent strides and polished black gun. In the hospital, so many times, so many broken bones and concussions and stitches and rainbow-colored pills. In bed, hair all tangled and sleep in my eyes. He loves me and he hates me and I think I want to die.

The front door opens and I am wired. *Joshua.*

Leon doesn't let me up. He and Joshua are in the bond. Murmurs to each other I can't parse. Too much self-loathing.

"Hey." Joshua's voice is quiet. Leon lets me sit.

Joshua. He is paper-thin skin and purple circles and tired eyes. Chewed lip and black curls and hands on my shoulders and I need *more more more more more*.

But he holds me at arm's length. "You can't do this, not now. I feel how big it is. I feel it too. But we have Indie to think about."

I need him like I need air. A shield between me and Hollis. A buffer. Not fair *notfairnotfairnotfair*. He sighs. He leans back.

Away. I reach, but he leaves leaves leaves.

Then. Hollis. On his knees. In front of me. My heart stops. I want to slice slash burn myself. I want to bare my throat and whine and beg. I want to turn and run and run and run and run. I want to touch.

He clears his throat. He opens his mouth. He closes his mouth. The bond bubbles. Slow. Fumbling.

Another cloud in the bond. But this one is misty velvet soft. Pale blue sky and early morning fog and dewy grass and his warmth next to me, in front of me, pine fresh everywhere. *Sorry.*

I'm shaking.

Love you.

I clench my fists.

He pries my fingers apart. He puts my palm on his chest. The other on his clean-shaven cheek. His heart thuds. His mouth speaks. "I know you didn't mean to. I know it wasn't on purpose. I know you care for her too. I know you're trying your best. I know, Risk. I know you."

I feel his mouth make the words. I let them wash over me. I try to listen. My toes are squinching in the wet grass of the bond. Joshua is there now. Leon too. We all feed it. Cool air and a new day ahead.

"We need to figure out what to do." Joshua's words are soft. "Risk only kickstarted the inevitable."

“Indie the Inevitable.” Everybody looks at me. “Right? Midas the Miserable and Indie the Inevitable.”

Hollis’s amusement sparks. He lets out a little huff of a laugh into my palm. It fades too quick.

“What do we do?” Leon asks. His misery is Indie’s eyes right after I spoke. When the shock faded. The trust he earned, soured to fear. He wears grooves in the memory, playing it over and over.

“Rogue?” Joshua asks.

Hollis doesn’t need to say no. The bond flares with his disgust. His heart pounds under my palm. Forsake the government he built? No way.

“Why don’t we appeal?”

Everybody looks at me again.

“What?” I ask.

“Appeal what?” Hollis says.

“The sheet.”

“You can’t just *appeal* the sheet,” Hollis says.

“No. Indie.”

I conjure the rule from the recesses of my mind. Hollis blanches.

“Is that... is that right?” Leon asks.

Joshua is already up, headed to the bookshelf for the Coalition law book. I don’t need to check. I know it’s right. He

reads the words out loud anyway. For Hollis.

“In the rare case of an omega signed as ward of the Coalition who may disagree with her designated pack selections, an appeal process may be filed on her behalf by her legal guardians, the signatories of her Omega Agreement, and the pack she wishes to mate with, provided the pack be in good standing with the Coalition and not determined to be genetically disadvantageous to future offspring. The appeal will be considered by the Office of Genetic Diversity and, if approved, taken to the Board of Governors for a direct vote in the quarterly Panel for Internal Affairs.”

“How did you remember that word-perfect?” Hollis asks me.

I glow. I blush. I try not to remember. Twelve years old. Under the covers, flashlight on pages, sounding out too-big words. Big leader Hollis and book smart Joshua and easygoing Leon and Risk, baby Risk, unwanted Risk, liability Risk, stuck on like a tick Risk, determined to be worthy Risk. Hollis sees what I try to hide. His arms are around me. I am smushed crushed loved and I squirm because toogoodtoogoodtoogood but he doesn't let me go.

“That's still...” Leon's voice pulls us back. “She has to do it. She has to admit she wants us.”

“And the signatories. Her parents.” Joshua burns.

“The Coalition panel is quarterly. We'd have to expedite.” Hollis plots.

“And the psychiatric clearances.” Leon sighs.

“That’s only like... four things.” Everybody looks at me. I shrug.

Laughter. Big roaring belly laughs shaking my body because Hollis hasn’t let me go yet. I hope he never does.

Impossible

INDIGO

When I get to my room, I bury my face in my pillow and scream.

My sinuses inflate, the force of it ricocheting through my skull.

I should have said more, I should have apologized, I should have told Joshua how badly I want him, them, how scared I am, how ‘crush’ is a vile understatement for this mossy growth in my chest that pulls towards Midas like leaves turn to the sun.

It isn't pheromones that made Joshua give me a book of poems, or forced Risk to part with one of his precious knives. Leon's warmth and nurturing is all him, and Hollis's brief moments of earnestness are truth, not a hormonal ruse. I can't be the only one who thinks Joshua's freckles are beautiful, or sees the flames flicker in Risk's eyes. None of that is my body playing tricks on me. Right?

Yet I had to go running my mouth. Cruelty and sharpness. I should have held his hand. I should have hugged him goodbye. I should have explained.

Even as I think it, I can't make myself believe. I can't make myself take this seriously. Not if it's a trick of biochemistry. Genetic compatibility does not a love-match make.

And yet.

I close my eyes and try to imagine myself on the couch again, Leon at my feet, Hollis's brow furrowed across the chess board from me, Risk's shoulders hunched in front of the fire and Joshua's song floating between us all. I wonder if a pack bond would be like that music, something so beautiful and special and shared.

I try to recall the peace of it, but it's like having the flu and trying to remember what 'normal' feels like when your fever is 102 and you've been vomiting all day. It just isn't there, not now.

I'm panicking.

It's almost a relief to realize. No thought is safe. I try to conjure safety, to remember the last time I felt it. Everything comes up Leon. In his arms, across his desk, next to him, *near* him. I dig back in my memory, trying to think of Adams. It feels so long ago. Rose and Cam weren't safe. My room was lonely and comfortable, but safe? Nothing compares to the memories of Leon's broad chest against me, the rumble of his purr rolling into my body. His cloves and cedar and quiet, solid presence.

I try to go back and rewrite those moments. I try to make them dangerous. Sitting in the doctor's office with my knobby knees and hairy legs, he wasn't undressing me with his eyes. He *stopped* Risk from kissing me, fought his own packmate just to keep me safe. He pulled back from my silent begging on Wednesday night, refusing to kiss me. He tried to get me to choose another pack, any other pack, for my heat. How hard must that have been for him, to tell his fated mate to give herself over to another pack?

Last Friday. Only eight days ago.

He saved me.

Not just on the hillside. Afterwards. My life as I knew it ended, and he was there. Through Wilder acting like a jerk, through his own flashback, he was there. He purred for me.

I want to hit myself. How did I not realize? After reading the textbook, the section on purring the next day? What kind of moron am I?

I take a deep breath. Then another. I burrow into my little pseudo-nest and inhale, letting Leon's scent wash over me. I try to imagine the me of eight days ago finding comfort in an alpha's scent, sniffing at his clothing like a dog. It's a foolish thing—the me of eight days ago was so much less than the me of now.

I try to find the breaking point. When did my wanting become fear? I wanted him at my doctor's appointments. I wanted to eat lunch with him. I wanted him to kiss me.

I was enjoying the bubble of not having my heat yet, enjoying the attention of Midas Pack without any pressure that it might be a real romantic possibility. Not worrying that they'd see me, every ugly, vulnerable part. They weren't deluding themselves though. They never played pretend, not like I did. Right from the start, they've known me, all of me, even the parts I tried to pretend I didn't have. I thought I had them fooled, that they respected me because of how I denied my omega self. But that wasn't the case at all. They cared for me, even the parts I thought I was hiding, *especially* those parts. They treated me so tenderly, so sweetly. They didn't want to rush or force me. So they just... were there. Giving me what they could, when they could.

I swallow around something viscous in my throat.

It was so obvious to Risk, he let it slip. Like it's inevitable.
When you have the bond.

There was no urgency there, no threat. When, not if.

What happened was a worst-case scenario for all of us. Me, because I couldn't deny my nature anymore. Them, because my delusion finally imploded. As they had to know it would.

The panic is gone now. It's replaced by pressing urgency in my chest. I need to talk to them, to apologize. I curse my lack of phone. I curse the Complex, the Coalition, Wilder, everybody putting up obstacles between me and my pack.

I am powerless. No way to contact them, no way to choose them, not even now, knowing they're my fated mates. The injustice of it has me restless. I practically fall out of the nest

and rush to get ready for bed. When I burrow back in, I can tell sleep is nowhere close. I drink in Leon's fading scent and toss and turn and eventually sit up and grab the book of poems Joshua gave me.

I open the inside cover and read his penciled-in thoughts. He didn't follow any lines or make neat bullet points; every thought is just a blob on the page, with subsequent thoughts added around the original blobs until every square inch of white space is covered. I have to turn the book to the light and squint to read what he wrote. The first thing that catches my eye is just Leon's name, over and over and over again. Cursive, block letters, print, calligraphy, every possible take on font that a teenage boy could muster.

Two other names come up a lot, but not with the same ardent attention as Leon's: Thomas and Gareth. I wonder who they are. Under one occurrence of Thomas's name, Joshua wrote: "Don't do hair, unlaced shoes, white t-shirts, loose jeans, chain, but not dainty, touch girls more, smell bad on purpose".

His other notes are more cryptic: "darling damaged", "little bit of whimsy, little bit of melancholy", and "care less please just care less".

Some of the words are indented deeply in the page, pressed hard by an anguished hand, while others are whisper light, barely present between their darker companions, like he was afraid to write them at all. My own anxiety fades as I realize that he felt it too. He had all this love inside of him and, from

the looks of it, he was unsure who it was safe to give it to. Did he crush on Leon? Like me?

It seems obvious that Risk and Joshua are together romantically, but I don't know about the others. Risk seemed to flirt with them as much as with me, but Hollis and Leon didn't seem to reciprocate. Are they queer as well? Did Joshua ever get to resolve the feelings he penned into these pages for Leon? I can't imagine what sharing a bond would be like if they went unrequited all these years.

Leon did say they'd all been sleeping in the pack bed together.

I remember the bare column of Risk's throat as he slid down the wall earlier. The way his Adam's apple bobbed when he groaned. He was so overwhelmed by all of us. His eyelashes were so thick, the gold hoop hanging from his septum catching the low light of the room.

I remember the sturdiness of Leon's chest against me. How even as I began drifting in the haze of my own hormones, he was rock solid. The edges of his tattoo peeking from the collar of his thermal shirt. I wonder what the tattoo looks like.

To see the whole thing, he'd need to be shirtless.

The restlessness returns. My legs won't stay still. Joshua's words touch a glowing pulse inside me.

His curls. I wanted to reach out and pull one, watch it bounce, reshape it and lay it against the others. I remember the rasp of Leon's stubble against my palm. I want it again, I want

his face looming over mine, his breath mixing with my own. I want to inhale every part of him.

I don't realize my hand is between my legs until the pages of the book flutter closed. I *ache*.

I miss Hollis's amiable smile across the chess board, his shame-faced delight when he won. The furrow in his brow when Risk destroyed him. He stood so tall on Wednesday night, when those assholes in suits came and yanked Joshua away. He stood up to them, perfectly calm, protecting his pack.

The memory sends flutters through me. I've never touched myself before, always ashamed of the shapes my body would make, the rolls and angles and disgusting baseness of it. But I'm not even thinking of myself as my fingers begin exploring, feeling the parts of me I've been so ashamed of.

I'm thinking of Risk's peaceful smile, illuminated by the firelight. I'm remembering his lips, the inferno of his hard body pressed against mine. The angular set of his shoulders, his lithe movements, like he can't walk, only dance or run or jump. The way Joshua flushed when Risk complimented him, pleased and pretending not to be. Joshua's pale skin and rosy cheeks and full lips, the hollow of his throat and the way his shirt draped, casting the lean planes of his body just so.

My hand speeds up and the ache only intensifies, better but so much worse.

What would it have felt like if Leon closed the distance between us on Wednesday, right here in this room? If he had

lowered himself on top of me? I'm writhing, getting all tangled in my nest at the thought, imagining his hand on my cheek, my neck, my shoulder, my chest.

I imagine his stump. Untucking his sleeve and sliding it up his arm and placing the gentlest of kisses on everything he seems so intent on hiding from me.

I'm sweating now, my fingers slippery between my legs, moving faster and faster. I realize what I want—no, what I *need*—is to be filled. Knotted.

A curious horror creeps through me at the thought. Hollis's jeans fit him so well, could I imagine myself unzipping them? Tugging his sweater up, running my palm over the flat plane of his abs, towards what lay underneath?

I'm beyond shame, biting my lip to keep from making sounds. I imagine him to be soft, maybe hot like me. I imagine his arms closing around my body, holding me to him. I imagine him burying his nose in my hair, breathing in deeply, his shoulders relaxing as I palm his weight.

And that's when it all feels like a roaring ocean wave within me, frothing and foaming and chaotic and rising up and up and up until it crests and comes crashing back down in a roiling mass of sensation, everything squeezed and pulled and so *impossibly* good.

My body bucks, cloves and woodsmoke and pine and fresh rain and citrusy sweet black tea.

I pant in the aftermath, my sheets soaked with sweat and me, my heart thudding in my chest. Something inside me still aches.

My bedside lamp is still on. Crickets chirp outside. An omega laughs somewhere down the hall. A shower is running. I am throbbing, but the world around me is still.

Epilogue - Mall

HOLLIS

I'm not yet thirty years old, but there is nothing in the world that makes me feel as elderly as walking through a mall.

Children with phones as big as their heads and hair colors selected from a color-wheel rather than nature. Tinny music that belongs in a club and potted plants better manicured than most of the girls who are openly ogling us as we walk by. Their scents are all beta-bland. After Indie, every scent in the world feels canned.

“People actually want to look like *that*?” I ask, eyeing a mannequin wearing an outfit that looks like it was sent through a paper shredder before being taped into place.

Risk strikes a pose, imitating the mannequin. He pictures himself in the outfit.

“You’d be arrested for indecent exposure,” I grumble, but Leon is laughing and Joshua is already throwing an arm over Risk’s shoulder, dragging him along. “We’re *not* shopping

there,” I say. I will not have Indie walking around partially *exposed*.

All I wanted was to get her a phone. I sent her away last night before I calmed down enough to explain why. With her being phoneless, I have no method by which to reassure her that she did nothing wrong. To check if she’s ok. We’ve all been antsy, but I’m the worst. I was the one who sent her away. None of us can forget that fact. I don’t know what I was supposed to do differently, but the thought of her alone and frightened is painful. Frightened by *us*.

Buying the phone is only step one in alleviating the guilt. Without Risk working today, none of us has a reason to go to the Complex to give it to her. We fought about whether we should try to go anyway, but if she’s in her dorm, there’s no way to get to her. The dorm minders sure as hell wouldn’t let four alphas in.

Waiting is agonizing, and when Joshua had the idea to buy her clothes as well, even though I was adamantly opposed, it didn’t take much to wear me down. His memory of her calling herself ‘Indie the Ignominious’ was enough, actually. *Ignominious*. Deserving of public disgrace or shame.

Just the thought makes me want to snarl. Not my omega. She deserves to feel worthy and beautiful. And if we can distract ourselves from the restlessness of not being able to see her with the act of shopping for her, I’m game. Whatever it takes to make this uncomfortable feeling in my chest go away.

I don't know how we'll manage to give her the clothes without making her feel smothered or afraid or indebted, but we have to find a way. I need her whole. I need her to *feel* whole.

“Hello gentlemen! What are we shopping for today?” the beta that greets us inside the massive department store eyes each of us in turn. She's trying to figure out what we are to each other.

Joshua still has his arm thrown over Risk's shoulder. He's in his trademark white v-neck and fitted black jeans. Risk is in a bowling shirt straight out of the nineties with white-washed skinny jeans and cowboy boots. Leon is in the same white thermal shirt and fatigues that I'm fairly certain he buys in bulk from the Army surplus. I tried to wear a button up and slacks, but Risk refused to leave the house with me dressed the way I was. We ended up bargaining on our outfits, but somehow all I managed to talk him out of was the fur coat he planned on adding to his ensemble, while I'm now in jeans and a sweater.

“Women's clothes,” I answer. “Er, teenager, actually. Where do the cool kids shop?”

Risk bites back his chuckle and I glare at him. This whole department store thing is foreign to me. I have a personal shopper. Risk's wardrobe is mostly sourced from dumpsters and our closets. He protests this thought when it crosses my mind, showing me a picture of... A Salvation Army? *So* much better.

“Ah, a gift for... a niece?” the sales lady asks.

“Something like that,” Leon grunts.

Her eyes fix on him and travel up and down his body appreciatively before beckoning us to follow her. I suppose simply pointing the way won't do. “Have a special occasion we're buying for?” she asks.

“Street style is fine,” Joshua answers this time. The lady looks at him. I think she drools. I can't blame her. He is something to look at. The spark is back in his eyes, twinkling blue with mirth as he notices the effect he's having on her. Leon's gruff brawn is one thing, Joshua's sensitive lankiness is another. Both beautiful, but very, very different.

We arrive in the land of teenagers, bubblegum pop and pastel colors everywhere and a frightening array of clothing that ranges from flowerchild to motorcycle gang to boudoir. “Ok, do you know her sizes?” the sales lady asks.

“We'll take it from here.” I flash her a glossy smile and have to bite back a laugh as I get my own once-over.

“Ok, just flag me down if I can help with anything.” She looks uncertain about leaving us in the midst of the other teenage browsers.

“Oh, we will,” Risk simpers. She turns to him and blanches. I realize she smells like rice. Dry rice. How forgettable. She scampers off when Risk bares his teeth at her.

“I can't tell if she was attracted to you, frightened of you, or frightened of her attraction to you,” Joshua muses to Risk as

soon as she's out of earshot.

Risk imagines the options as checkboxes and methodically checks each one off in his mind. His arms circle around Joshua's waist and pull him close, then venture down to squeeze his ass. Joshua gives him a quick kiss before pulling away. I'm already scanning the sales floor to see if anybody saw the PDA—only the horrified sales lady is watching, and that only makes me smirk. Otherwise we're all clear.

“Focus.” Joshua pulls away. “Indie. I was thinking we should just stick to basics right now. Simple things. We don't know her style, we just want her to feel more presentable. We can take her out shopping to choose her own things... later.”

The zing of restlessness ricochets through the bond. Leon's good hand instinctively reaches for Joshua, and Joshua reaches back. Their fingers graze for just a moment before dropping again, and I can't stop the senseless wanting that slashes through me at the sight. They didn't need a reason. They just... touch. What am I waiting for?

“Ok,” I say, covering the weakness with words. “Let's each grab, what, one or two things? Then reconvene.”

“It's not a mission, Hollis,” Leon grumbles. “We can shop together.”

Irritation flashes, but I shove it down. Duh. *Together*. That's what this trip was meant to be, right?

“Of course,” I acquiesce.

“Thoughts?” Risk is already holding up a leather-looking corset thing.

“Absolutely not,” I growl.

“For *Joshua*,” Risk smirks.

Joshua rolls his eyes and holds up a knitted cardigan instead. “She gets cold a lot, maybe this?”

“If they have a matching one for guys, you should get it,” Leon says softly.

Joshua hides his smile, keeping the hanger.

“What about leggings?” Leon asks. “All girls wear leggings these days, right? We should get her a few sizes.” He does his best to sort through the hangers on the rack, but some of them are caught on each other. None of us miss him wince when he tries to use his stump to separate them, nor the accompanying flash of anger and shame in the bond. Risk slides in without a word, extracting three different sizes. He holds the tiniest up in front of Leon and squints, cocking his head. The bond is rife with the image he’s creating, effortlessly glossing over Leon’s shame with a picture of him in *very* tight black spandex.

“Gross!” Leon laughs, but he’s leaning in and hooking Risk with his bad arm, giving him a nuggie, and then Risk is imagining the horrid leather corset thing on him as well, and the image is hilarious and ill-fitted and Joshua is snorting as well.

I realize that people are staring at us, watching as Risk leans up to kiss Leon on the cheek immediately after doing the same

thing to Joshua. All I see are curious eyes and whispered words and I feel my cheeks grow hot—what are they thinking? All these normal people, oblivious to who and what we are. We probably look creepy, grown men shopping in the teenage girls' section and displaying over the top affection for each other. What if somebody from the Board of Governors is here, and sees my pack behaving so foolishly? A mother huffs at her daughter, re-hanging their shopping on a random rack before hurrying away, shooting us dirty glares over her shoulder. We're making a scene.

I turn to my pack, opening my mouth to snap an order to behave, but what I see gives me pause.

Risk is holding up a maroon velvet bodysuit, posing provocatively, and Leon has his arm over Joshua's shoulders as they eye the piece like they're art critics, all furrowed brows and mock seriousness, but Joshua is struggling to hold back his beaming smile, and I realize... they're *happy*.

The order lodges itself in my throat. The thought of ruining something so beautiful is abhorrent. In the midst of everything, with Indie's heat on the line and parts of the attack still raw and everything about our once glossy future thrown into chaos, they've snatched some joy. And here I am, about to rip it all away.

Risk noticed the mom ushering her daughter down the aisle. He pulls a long skirt from a rack and holds it over himself like a mumu, mimicking her shuffling gait perfectly with mock disgust on his face. Joshua and Leon laugh loudly, Leon's deep

boom and Joshua's melodic tenor, and something inside me twists.

The only audience Risk has ever cared to perform for is standing right here. And I try to perform for the whole damn world. Why did I ever think my way was better? Why did I ever care more about the opinion of some random beta prude at the mall than my own pack?

I turn and look at the racks around us. There's a grey pencil skirt on one and I grab it. "How about this?"

The guys all stop what they're doing and look at the skirt.

"Oh honey, no." Joshua's voice is teasing, but my cheeks are red as I shove it back on the rack.

"I mean, if we ever got invited to the Oval Office," Leon offers. I shove my embarrassment down, choking it back from the bond, but of course, Risk notices. Risk notices everything.

I turn my back to the group, pretending to examine a row of frilly blouses, trying to school my features into something acceptable. I scent woodsmoke before Risk's hand comes to rest on my back. I fight my instinct to look around, to see if anybody noticed, to cringe away.

He's thinking of the skirt. It's ugly, Joshua was right. Risk is imagining it with fishnets, a moto jacket, but it just doesn't work. I don't know what I'm doing.

"Whatever," I mutter. "It's no big deal."

And it isn't. I just don't know how to have fun like the rest of them. I don't know how to be funny. I'm not good at this

stuff.

Risk kicks the toes of his cowboy boots together. I remember when he got them. We were in Denver after a brutal, bloody retrieval mission, with a night to kill before our flight. Risk found a country western bar. He snuck off after dinner and when he met up with us out front, he was dressed to the nines in full cowboy regalia. Boots, hat, a big brass buckle, checkered shirt tucked into Levi's pre-worn to be perfectly faded.

Of course, his ponytail and piercings were in stark contrast with the traditional cowboy ensemble, but that didn't stop the betas at the bar from throwing themselves at him. Boyfriends looked on; in envy or lust, it was hard to tell. Risk picked up the line dances like they were already imprinted in his brain. I liked watching him. We all did—the mission was a rough one. It was nice seeing him happy. And the girls in their floral dresses and cowboy boots—well, I had liked them too. I didn't dance of course, but the memory is a good one.

Risk picks up on my memory. The girls in particular—swirling skirts and tan legs and big smiles. “That's you,” he murmurs.

His words don't do the idea justice, but his thoughts in the bond do. Simple. Not an attempt to impress anybody else. Just pretty dresses. Just because. Frivolous, really.

“I can't get her one of those,” I protest. But the thought of Indie in a dress, twirling around, joy in her eyes—my pine scent soaks the air.

Risk shrugs. He looks over at Leon and Joshua. Joshua is holding a bundle of hangers. Sweaters and shirts and pants in all colors of the rainbow.

“That’s too much,” I start, but then Risk is remembering Indie in her faded jeans, her taped-together shoes, the word *ignominious* heavy on her lips.

“I know,” I counter. I probably look insane to anybody around us—Risk is all bond-talk, and here I am just talking to myself. “But *I’m* the one who likes dresses. Not Indie. This is for Indie. Not us.”

My hand is already grazing over the brightly patterned fabric of a short sundress though. It’s all jewel tones in a busy pattern—it would set her hair and eyes off beautifully. Risk paints the thought effortlessly—Indie in the dress, smiling as she runs up to me, throws her arms around my neck in a greeting hug, steps back and gives a twirl to show off the skirt.

I feel like a teenager—it’s just so *innocent*, so simple. I want to wrap my arms around her waist in that dress. I want to swing her around and listen to her laugh and have her strong enough to dance all night long.

Risk takes the dress from me. Then his arm is around my waist again and his breath is in my ear as he whispers, “she’ll love it.” Just when I think he’s going to take it too far and try to kiss me, add me to his collection of public displays, he whirls away, laying the dress down on the massive pile in Joshua’s arms.

“Hollis picked this one,” he says loudly.

Leon eyes the dress critically, then smiles. “She’ll look cute in that,” he says, his lopsided grin coming easy at the thought of her.

Joshua smiles too, and that’s when I realize he’s sweating under the weight of all the clothes. “Need to hit the gym again, huh?” I tease, snaking my hands down his arms and lifting the pile free. It is stiflingly hot under the heavy load, and Joshua sags once I have the weight.

He shrugs, self-conscious. He’s never been the most motivated alpha when it comes to physical prowess. He’s still taller than your average beta, but he’s not bulky. He never will be. The physical requirements for field work were always difficult for him to pass, but he pushed himself. For us.

“I go before work every morning,” I say. “Come with me. Just some light weights, don’t even have to do cardio.”

Joshua does a doubletake. “Go to the gym? With you?”

“Not if you don’t want to,” I backpedal. “I just thought, you know, if you wanted—”

“Of course,” he cuts me off, nodding too fast. “Yeah. Totally. I’d like that. You don’t have to like, train me or anything though. I can just, like, watch you and learn. I don’t want to disrupt your routine.”

If I couldn’t feel his nerves in the bond, I’d think he just didn’t want to go. But I can feel them, and since my hands aren’t free, I bump my shoulder against his, smile and say, “don’t worry, I’ll kick your ass extra special gentle.”

He laughs.

Then I realize: *I* made him laugh. I fight to keep the embarrassing rush of pleasure from overwhelming the bond but of course it does anyway. People are staring and I'm carrying at least twenty items of clothing intended for a teenage girl and I laugh out loud, because I realize: I don't care at all, not even a little bit, and Risk is laughing too, because he's witnessed my little journey, and Leon is looking between all of us in confusion which only makes us laugh harder, and then he's laughing too and the only thing missing is Indie.

Soon, I vow. Soon.

Afterword

Thank you for reading Impossible, book 1 of the Midasverse!

A brief note on mental health:

Not everybody's experiences with their diagnosis will align with what's depicted in this story. Indie's anorexia, Leon's PTSD, Joshua's depression, Risk's... everything, all of it is very specific and not intended to be prescriptive or descriptive of a generic idea of their disorder. Very often when these topics are brought into a story, discourse tends to focus on how the illness/diagnosis was "handled".

Let's be real; trauma is a bitch, and it's also highly unique. The issues the pack deals with in this book are all based in personal experience, whether mine or that of critique partners/near and dear friends. All of the content was vetted by those who sourced it before reaching your eyes.

Please do not assume that the way mental health is handled in this book is 'correct' or indicative of my beliefs on how these things should be addressed. My characters, like me, are

flawed, and they often make mistakes. Sometimes the moral of a story shows itself in the flaws of its characters, and I urge everybody to read into Indie's and Midas Pack's actions with a critical eye. Just like characters develop, so do we.

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About the Author

Lyra Cole is a collection of bad ideas in a trench coat, masquerading as a corporate mastermind by day and an audacious author by night. When they aren't haunting their local coffee shop, they can be found with their toes in some grass or knee deep in yarn from over-ambitious crochet projects.

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Coming Soon

INEVITABLE

Indie the Ignominious. Midas the Mighty.

The secret is out: we're fated mates.

I'm theirs, they're mine. So why is everything so hard?

I thought I was overcoming my worst fear in admitting that I'd fallen for them. Now Midas Pack is on my side, but the safety their scent promises seems miles away.

When I need them most, Hollis teaches, Leon guides, Joshua soothes, and Risk distracts. But none of them can stop time.

Between feral alphas, restrictive Coalition laws, and ghosts from my past, everything seems determined to come between.

And my heat won't wait.