



THE *Alpha's*
RESURRECTION

MARLOWE ROY

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By

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Reader discretion is advised.

Dedication:
To my readers.

CHAPTER 1

Zorah

The touch skimmed down her neck like the slow meander of a single tear. Nearly imperceptible, the mere suggestion of a sensation near the top of her spine, it wheedled along her hairline. Feathering into her hair, the soft stroke of so many invisible fingers coaxed an unwilling shiver from her sensitized skin.

“... And *then* he opened his eyes and said, ‘what did I miss?’” Matteo brayed at the culmination of his anecdote, his loud guffaw jarring Zorah out of the seductive reverie. Bowing her head, she composed a weak smile and pretended to hide a giggle she couldn’t bring herself to fake for the story she hadn’t been paying attention to.

It was always like that when the touch found her. Seduced by its eerie, whispered caress, everything else faded from existence.

Back in the moment, Zorah scanned the gathered crowd. Around the firepit, with the alcohol flowing and the guitar twanging, the Pack party steadily gained steam. She ought to be circulating, getting to know the quieter Alphas who took a backseat to the more aggressive suitors like Matteo and Riddick, looking for the best mate she could choose. That had been her plan, after all. Her plan for the party. Her plan for the summer. Her plan for the rest of her life. A plan proving to be more difficult than anticipated.

It was fast becoming a problem. Between managing Grace and Lars’s unruly brood and helping with chores around the village, her days evaporated like water on hot stone. In a few short weeks, her parents would arrive at Morris Hill to fetch her home and finalize her mating to Nelson. A grimace pulled up her lips at the thought of her cousin’s grabby hands and oversized, rubbery lips. He was Alpha, sure, but a less appealing one she’d never met. Not that her parents cared. Omegas were rare, and as the only Omega of child-bearing age

in River Bend, they intended to leverage her Omega status in the most advantageous way possible.

“Are you excited about the Omega bunkhouse?” Matteo asked, sliding his head into her wandering field of vision.

Schooling her features, Zorah raised her cup to her lips. The strong liquor and tart berry juice mix was a rare treat. At home, even as a fully grown twenty-six-year-old Omega, she’d never been permitted to partake. Yet another resentment to add to the long list of constraints and prohibitions she’d lived with her entire life.

Buying time with an overly large gulp, Zorah studied Matteo’s expectant face. He was an agreeable enough Alpha, irreverent and funny, with a fun disposition and easy smile. Yet, like all the unmated Alphas vying daily for her attention, her Omega nature remained stubbornly unmoved.

“When will it be done, do you think?” she asked.

The Omega bunkhouse was the second large building project the Morris Hill Pack had undertaken that summer. The first being the reconstructed mess hall, and its completion provided the cause for the evening’s celebration. The original mess hall burned down during an attack by a rogue gang of Alphas earlier in the summer. Zorah’s memories of that night blurred together in a smear of red flame, black soot, crying children, and the howls of the dying rogues, summarily dispatched by furious Morris Hill Alphas defending their homes and families. She’d retreated to Hunter’s cabin along with the other Omegas and pups, to wait out the fight.

Everyone in Morris Hill survived, but the mess hall had not. As a further complication, after the smoke cleared from the fight, a half dozen terrified, unmated Omegas the rogues had been trafficking were discovered, and the Pack had nowhere to house them other than temporary tents. In the six weeks since, the Alphas busted tail to rebuild the mess hall from the ground up and added two new structures to the village: a bunkhouse for unmated Omegas and a private cabin for Omegas undergoing a Heat, unofficially dubbed the “Heat Hut.”

Zorah, for her part, lived with Grace and Lars while she took care of their kids, so the controversy around the Omega bunkhouse didn't affect her. But it remained a hot topic of conversation among the Alphas. They would much prefer the unmated Omegas become *mated* Omegas to solve the housing problem, but that was not the Morris Hill way. Here, Zorah learned — to her absolute astonishment — Omegas chose whom they mated, not the other way around. If her parents had known this was the custom in Morris Hill, they would've never consented to her visit.

“Another week to finish the cladding.” Matteo rocked his head side to side. “Maybe two. Working on beds to go inside. It'll be nice for you all, much better than the stinky old Alpha bunk.”

Zorah smiled. “Is it really smelly? Don't you clean it?”

Matteo wrinkled his nose. “I don't want to clean up after those slob. Riddick can mop up his own jizz puddle,” he quipped, tossing the jibe at Riddick as the curly-haired Alpha sauntered up to join their conversation. As usual, any Alpha occupying Zorah's attention one-on-one got interrupted by another one, or two, or three. “That's if he can pry his hands off his cock long enough to grip a broom.”

“Hey, Zorah.” Unfazed, Riddick flashed his high-beam smile, complete with a glinting gold tooth, and pulled at the healing scar that slashed across his cheek — a souvenir from the attack.

Despite her inner Omega's obstinate disinterest, Zorah couldn't deny his rakish good looks. With tawny brown skin and a wild tumble of cinnamon ringlets sprouting every which way, she could find no physical fault with him. Yet her Omega remained silent.

Riddick's fingers teased a soft hello against her elbow as he positioned himself close to her side. Of all the Alphas, Riddick pursued her affections with a relaxed, but determined, focus.

Matteo's brows dipped toward the bridge of his nose at the cozy insinuation, and Zorah flashed him a conciliatory smile

to dispel tension. For a bunch of tough Alphas, their emotions bruised easily where courting her was concerned.

“We’re talking about the Alpha bunkhouse,” she said to Riddick. “Matteo says it stinks, but maybe once all the construction is done, you’ll have time to clean up. Or perhaps you could bribe some Omegas to help you.”

Riddick rocked back on his heels, eyes sparkling in the reflected firelight. “That would be such a kind gesture, we would be so appreciative.”

Zorah’s smile stretched. “I said *bribe*, not guilt.” She rested her index finger on her chin in mock contemplation. “Maybe you could offer a trade. Do you have anything to exchange?”

“And before you open your mouth to offer your dick,” Matteo interjected, “think of something she might actually want.”

Suppressing a genuine giggle, Zorah flashed Matteo a chiding look at his vulgar joke. He never censored himself in deference to her supposed delicate Omega sensibilities. None of them did. But once she got over the initial shock, Zorah found she liked the scandalized thrill of their off-color jokes, and not just for the transgressive exhilaration, either. The ribald banter underscored another important difference between Morris Hill and River Bend: no one here treated her as a fragile, precious thing to be coddled and sheltered. Here, she was a whole person. A desirable Omega, yes, but a flower that could bloom freely in the sun, not one preserved between pages of a book, pressed flat and unchanging, forever.

“Well...” Riddick drawled the word. “That’s an interesting question. What might entice a sweet Omega like our little Zorah here?”

The hated endearment doused her good humor like a guttered flame.

Little Zorah doesn't know what's best.

Listen to your parents, little Zorah.

Little Zorah isn't ready for that quite yet.

She couldn't blame Riddick. He had no way of knowing the mountain of condescending lectures and admonishments piled on "Little Zorah" over the course of her life. Sometimes she imagined Little Zorah as her evil twin arch nemesis: the sweet, naïve, compliant Omega everyone expected her to be. Up until the moment she rode away from home, her parents and her Pack controlled every aspect of her existence: her dress, her education, her activities, and her interests. It felt like being forced to wear too-small shoes and then being blamed when you couldn't walk.

But Zorah didn't want to hobble through life in too-small shoes. She wanted to throw them off and *run*. The question was: where was she running, and to whom?

Oblivious to her soured mood, Riddick snuck his arm around her waist and threw her a saucy grin. "Let's take a walk and discuss what I might have to offer. What do you say? Care to join me for a moonlit stroll?"

Before she could answer, another unmistakable touch tingled against her nape. More forceful, like a taunt or a warning, it reverberated through her body like the rumble of an earthquake that only she could feel. Zorah took an involuntary step backward and scanned the darkness beyond the fire, seeking the source of the elusive, invisible prickle. Another brush came, this one lighter and more cajoling, a puff of humid breath behind her ear.

It was nothing new. In the weeks since the sensation first wove its way into her awareness, she'd never once laid eyes on her watcher. But she knew him all the same. She knew the way his attention warmed when she laughed. She knew the way it sharpened when she flirted. And most perplexing of all, she knew the way he recoiled when she sought him out.

Shards of orange firelight slashed against the rough-hewn village structures and flickered against the trees in the surrounding forest as Zorah glared into the black night. Some presence hovered in the gathering darkness, teasing her with these fleeting touches that seemed to communicate so much and yet nothing at all. Sudden frustration surged. Her watcher did not want her to go for an evening stroll with Riddick yet

refused to come out into the light and even talk to her. It was beyond maddening.

Zorah drained her cup, letting the strong liquor swirl around her taste buds and fortify her nerves. Enough was enough.

“Not right now, sorry,” she said, handing Riddick her empty cup and inventing a plausible excuse. “I need to ask Grace about Ginny’s rash before she goes to bed. I’ll find you later.”

Riddick opened his mouth to protest, but Zorah didn’t wait to hear it. Feet crunching in the dry August grass, she waved off calls from others as she skirted past Packmates enjoying the party. Their laughs and raised voices chafed her frazzled nerves as she narrowed her eyes and peered into the endless blank spaces between the trees. The touch lingered, a barely-there weight on the curve of her shoulder. Lessened in intensity, but present and *real*.

At the edge of the clearing, she charged into the tree cover, the depth of night folding around her like a blanket. Head swiveling this way and that, she sought to locate the source of the touch but came up empty. He must be hiding here somewhere. But *where*? Who *was* it? Why did she feel him — and she was rather certain it was a him — in a way she felt no one else? Was he special to her in some way, or she to him? Her illusory fated mate?

Her fated mate. As if the phrase was an antidote to the sensation, the touch faded away. No lingering tingle. No alluring caress. Nothing. Gone as if it never existed. A desolate emptiness yawned open behind Zorah’s ribs. An acute aloneness that left her feeling abandoned, neglected, and, strangely, let down.

It couldn’t be her fated mate. At any rate, her mother Ida argued fated mates were a fairy tale. Many Omegas, she alleged, never found a fated mate and were happy enough to make do with another. But, in Zorah’s (perhaps childish) estimation, a non-fated-mating was fine for other Omegas, but surely, she would find *hers*.

Problem was, Prince Charming Alpha was overdue for his long-awaited appearance. All she had to show after two

months here was a cast of suitors, a weird sensation on the back of her neck, and a stomach near constantly knotted with worry.

With one last fruitless inspection of her surroundings, she pivoted back toward the party. She'd find Riddick and take the stupid walk. Even if she didn't have a fated mate and never made that special Alpha-Omega bond, she'd gladly accept him, Matteo, or any number of Morris Hill Alphas before she'd mate with Nelson. Stomping out of the trees, Zorah gritted her teeth. She'd welcome a lifetime of emptiness in place of a lifetime of oppression. No matter what, she had to choose one of these Alphas. And soon.

CHAPTER 2

Zorah

Juggling a fussy baby, Zorah closed the door quietly behind her. Struck by the change of scenery or the slightly cooler air, the baby paused her crying for the first time in hours.

“Oh, is that all it took?” Zorah muttered to her cranky little charge. In answer, six-month-old Ginny resumed her wiggling and whining.

Adjusting her grip on the squirmy handful, Zorah patted the child’s sweaty back as she adopted a brisk pace away from the cabins where lucky members of the settlement slept. “Yeah, I didn’t think so. We’re going for a walk anyway, but let’s try not to wake everyone up, okay?”

She didn’t know the hour, but it was definitely late. The bonfire had gone out, and now only the cold ash peppering the firepit bore witness to the party. After a short walk with Riddick (truncated by some feigned fatigue), Zorah’d returned to the cabin where she boarded with Lars, Grace, and their four children, only to find Grace at her wit’s end with her unhappy youngest child. Since their mother was occupied and their father asleep in his bed (how Alphas could have such keen senses yet be so oblivious to domestic matters never failed to perplex her), Zorah took charge of two-year-old Jace and four-year-old Pixie. Faces washed, teeth brushed, potty visited, she then hustled them off to bed before relieving Grace from her pacing duties with Ginny.

After some time, the baby had drifted off long enough for Zorah to crash, exhausted and fully clothed, onto her own bed before being woken up by yet another ear-splitting howl. In reality, she’d probably slept an hour or two, but in the middle of the night, it felt like none at all.

Yawning, she beat a quick path to the western side of the settlement where a collection of rocks and boulders formed a small, lumpy mountain. The young pups liked to climb and play on it during the long summer days. But in the quiet hours of the night, the rocks sucked up the scant moonlight into an

intimidating black mass. They bulged from the ground like a giant, misshapen figure — a sleeping giant or dinosaur, or a dragon lying in wait for a brave prince to fight. Inspiration for stories she could tell her charges the next time they inevitably demanded entertainment.

The rocks also provided a good spot to hang out until the baby settled. If she didn't, at least it offered a cool seat in the muggy air. Zorah's lips stretched around another yawn as she scanned for a place to sit, shushing and soothing Ginny all the while.

"You shouldn't be out here." The gruff voice sliced through the darkness, and Zorah practically jumped out of her skin, which sent Ginny into a fresh round of angry protest.

Pulse galloping, Zorah swung her glare to the shadowy outline slinking around the edge of the rocks.

"You scared me," she hissed, too tired to be polite or even truly afraid.

She probably ought to be afraid, but even after the attack earlier in the summer, Morris Hill remained a peaceful and safe place. Dangers existed in the larger world of the AfterEnd, but in her small, limited existence, none of that danger came close to interfering in her own life.

A tall, lean figure stepped forward, and instant awareness dumped more adrenaline into Zorah's bloodstream. The faint wash of starlight revealed a pile of loose, messy curls and a slice of stubbled jawline. A strong brow shaded deep-set eyes that blazed a path down her body, and despite the dark, Zorah swore her skin detected every inch of deliberate perusal. If she needed further proof, a familiar tingle erupted on her skin, just as it had every other time she'd felt his mysteriously affecting regard.

Undeniable confirmation coalesced in her gut. In the flesh, and finally in front of her, this was her watcher.

"It's *you*."

"Sorry to startle you" — his voice rasped across her eardrums — "and the baby."

Zorah swayed side to side, trying her best to comfort a now doubly agitated Ginny while simultaneously managing her own erratic pulse. A million questions dangled on her lips, ready to spill out into the silence, but she held back, not at all sure how to act in his strange and awkward presence.

The Alpha scratched at the back of his neck and asked, “Is she sick?”

“Teething,” Zorah explained between shushes and tender coos in the child’s tiny ear. “We came over here so as not to wake the whole village.”

The Alpha jerked a nod but said nothing. Hands on his hips, he rotated his neck this way and that, as if seeking something in the surrounding trees. He shuffled, big feet scuffing the patch of worn-away grass where he stood at the base of the rock mountain, seemingly deciding whether to stay or to go.

“She likes you,” the Alpha said suddenly, the initial roughness of his tone smoothed into something gentler and seasoned with awe. “They all do. The pups, I mean.”

It wasn’t an admission, but the only way he could have known the pups liked her was because he’d watched her. Plenty of Alphas told her how pretty she was and how she’d make some Alpha a very lucky man, but his observation showed a deeper, more personal appreciation that made her feel seen in a way she wasn’t used to.

Zorah let out a soft scoff to offset the vulnerable feeling. “They oughta after I spend all day entertaining them. Between these rocks and the lake, there isn’t much else to do.”

He rubbed at the back of his neck. “Don’t they have toys?”

“Some. But the main play area was in the old mess hall, and all the toys and games were lost in the fire. We’ve been making do with rocks and our imaginations since then. Haven’t we, Ginny?” She nuzzled the baby’s head and gave her a quick kiss.

“They seem like a handful,” he said with a note of respect. “You must be very clever to keep their interest.”

Childcare being one of the few tasks Omegas were assigned in River Bend, Zorah had cared for pups since she was old enough to know not to stick her hand in the fire and to stop any littler ones who tried. No one ever implied it required any kind of cleverness, though, and this second compliment brought warmth to her cheeks.

Zorah opened her mouth to minimize these abilities as the only ones she possessed but then closed it. She didn't want to talk about minding the pups right now. Not one single bit.

“Why do you do it?” she asked instead.

The dark sockets of the Alpha's eyes flinched, and wariness invaded his gruff tone. “Do what?”

“Watch me.”

The Alpha's head jerked as if she'd slapped him.

But instead of fearing his retaliation or ire, the weeks of frustration and confusion welled up and drove her tongue's unruly impulses. “I know it's you. You” — she wet her lips — “*watch me.*”

His body froze. An immobile shadow, Zorah stared him down nonetheless. She deserved an explanation, and by god, this might be her only chance to get one.

The Alpha shook off his inertia and sneered, “Every Alpha here watches you twitch your ass all over the village.”

Now Zorah reared back, prompting a fresh set of whimpering wails from Ginny. She hurried to shush the child while internally reeling from the snide accusation. One that struck her as unfair and also irrelevant.

“And yet, I know what *they* want,” she snapped, “but I'm asking *you*. Your eyes follow me around everywhere I go, and I want to know, why are you creeping around in the dark like a... like... like a creeper!”

His jaw swung in a no, the light hairs of his stubble glinting in the stray moonbeams. “Not supposed to be looking at you,” he said flatly. “Definitely shouldn't be talking to you. Not

allowed.” He muttered the last part more to himself than to her, which only intensified her irritation.

“Why aren’t you allowed? You’re Alpha, aren’t you?”

He snorted. “I’m a fucking Alpha, all right.” His shoulders tipped to the side to lean against a boulder, arms crossed over his chest. “But Packs have hierarchies, and I’m at the bottom of this one.”

None of this made sense. Sure, Alpha Packs had a loose order, but usually, the politics centered on who crowned the top of the Pack, the Alpha of Alphas and his Second and Third and on down. She’d never heard of a Pack deciding who was the bottom and restricting their communication with Omegas as a result. Truth be told, she’d assumed Betas were the default bottom, whether a Pack had any around or not. They certainly were in River Bend.

Careful not to jostle the still-awake but quietly sniffling Ginny, Zorah took a few steps toward the mysterious Alpha. “So, you’re not allowed to talk to an Omega because you’re bottom of the Pack?”

He untucked one of his hands and scratched at his jaw. “Not exactly.”

“Then explain it to me.” Her request came out closer to a plea than she intended, but she couldn’t take it back.

His hand dropped to his side in a helpless gesture that did nothing to quell her frustration. Ginny, half asleep on her shoulder, burred out a fresh complaint. Rolling her eyes at the both of them, Zorah transferred the baby to her other arm, so she could slip her pinkie finger in the infant’s drooly mouth and massage her sore gums.

The Alpha said nothing. Tense silence invaded the peaceful night, and Zorah’s annoyance cranked hotter. This was pointless. He was a weirdo and wasn’t going to tell her anything. He wasn’t going to explain himself or help her understand why his stare affected her the way it did. He hadn’t even offered her his *name*.

Just as quickly, annoyance gave way to resignation. If he didn't know, or couldn't tell her, or *wouldn't*, then what hope did she have of understanding this peculiar experience? Who else could she possibly ask? Any other Alpha would lose his mind with envy, and any other Omega would think she was crazy. Certainly, her own mother would. Zorah could hear the condescending lecture now, "*You and your fanciful ideas, Zorah! I mean, really! One Alpha is as good as the next one, why are you overcomplicating things?*"

With a throaty *harrumph*, Zorah turned and lowered herself to sit, resting her tired back against the same boulder the Alpha leaned on. Facing away from him hurt less than scanning his huge form, waiting for an answer she'd never get.

Long, silent minutes passed as Ginny drifted into light sleep, leaving a soggy wet patch on Zorah's shirt. A single breeze snaked by, and she closed her eyes to appreciate the cool relief on her overtaxed body and mind. She was just so tired. If not for the lingering Alpha, she might fall asleep here and now. At least unconsciousness would grant her some reprieve from the tumult inside her caused by the unspeaking shadow at her back.

"Did he kiss you?" Again, the Alpha shattered the peace with an inflammatory query.

Only this time, Zorah's emotions refused to rouse at the provocation. If he didn't want to explain himself to her, that was fine, but that also meant she didn't owe him any more of her attention or explanations, either.

She glued her lips together.

"Riddick," he pushed. "Did he stick his tongue in your mouth? Or shove his filthy hand up your skirt?"

Zorah sighed at the tasteless accusation. Alphas were uncouth, and this one was no different, yet his intonation hinted at something other than brute crassness. It struck her as more miserable than grossly insulting. Like picking a scab you knew would bleed, he delivered the inquiry as if he expected the worst possible answer but couldn't help asking anyway. Pity had her half turning to look over her shoulder at his

slumped, defeated-looking outline. Suddenly, telling him felt less like revealing a private detail than it did alleviating his worry. Why she cared if he worried, she wouldn't consider; she had enough worries of her own.

"He kissed me," she confessed, her voice as flat as the kiss itself. No spark had crackled when Riddick touched her lips with his own. No exhilaration had lit up her insides or kindled a desire for more. As much as she'd wished it to, the kiss stirred no more reaction from her than a bite of oatmeal. "But that's all."

The Alpha expelled a long, melancholic sigh. "You don't want him, Zorah," he said, his voice low and serious as he nearly purred her name.

An odd sensation rippled in her belly, and by the conclusion of the last breathy syllable, she only wanted him to say her name again and again until she fell asleep to the sound.

He spoke again. "He's all smiles and charm, but you deserve more than that."

Zorah thumped her head gently against the rock and parroted her mother's words with a hefty dose of sarcasm. "One Alpha's as good as the next. I have to choose one of them, don't I?" If she didn't want to be stuck with cousin Nelson she did, but she left that part off.

A low growl bounced off the rocks, and in a brisk reversal, the Alpha crouched in front of her perch. Close enough his hot breath cut through the muggy air and whispered across her cheek. Close enough she caught the first whiff of his unique scent. Its clean, bracing aroma tickled her nose and cleansed her airways from the inside out. Salt and eucalyptus with a hint of musk, it sang in her veins and ejected every other Alpha scent from her memory. Her Omega nature sat up and took notice, alert and intrigued.

Now quite awake, Zorah's brows shot up, pulling her eyes open as if to see every bit of him in the single beam of moonlight. His bumpy, crooked nose looked like it had been broken one too many times. It imparted a wild, dangerous look that contrasted with the loose curls scattered over his forehead.

Those strands provoked a sudden urge to tangle her fingers in and push them off his brow. Below that, fervent eyes, accented by faint age lines, shone out from under lids heavy with crushing fatigue or simmering lust.

She squinted into the dusky sockets of his eyes. Could it be lust? All the other Alphas wanted her, but did *this* one? Madly, for absolutely no good reason, she wanted him too.

But he gave nothing of the sort away. “Don’t settle for any of them.” Taut muscles flexed at his jaw’s hinge. “None of ‘em deserve you.”

Zorah’s heart thumped so hard her breath came short. Something was happening to her, something important and profound, stirred up by this wholly confounding and dissatisfying interaction.

“What do I deserve?” she whispered, canting forward to inhale another gust of his intoxicating scent.

“You deserve *everything*.” His snarled response, immediate and emphatic, raised goose bumps along her flesh. “Everything,” he slowly repeated between his heaving breaths. “And nothing less.” Holding her gaze, he dipped his chin in a single nod like the period at the end of his sentence.

Spellbound, Zorah mirrored the gesture, silently affirming her understanding because it was the only thing she could manage to do.

Their promise sealed to his satisfaction, the Alpha whooshed out a sigh, got to his feet, and spun toward the woods. “The patrol is coming; I can’t be here.”

That was it? They were done talking? He’d thrown her into turmoil, upended her entire plan to choose a Morris Hill mate, and was just going to leave?

“Wait!” Zorah hissed, jumping to her feet and thankfully not waking Ginny.

The Alpha halted; tension etched into every line of his rigid posture.

She hurried to close the distance between them. “What about you?” Her voice softened.

Do you deserve me? was what she wanted to ask, but shyness made her fumble to compose the untoward question.

He spun around, nostrils flaring as he scented the approaching patrol before returning the sensual caress of his attention to her face. It lingered there for a long, taut moment where, and she was so focused on that singular and intoxicating touch, Zorah didn't tempt a single sip of air.

“I've got less than nothing for you, sweetheart.” He shattered the moment, his words thickened with command before adding a hasty, “I'm sorry.” Finality infused every syllable, and conviction underscored the nuance of his tone, posture, and bearing. “I'm sorry about the watching. If that made you uncomfortable, it's... it's not what I wanted,” he added, driving the knife deeper. “But we can't speak again.”

Zorah didn't understand what, exactly, was being taken away, but the sense of impending loss tied her up in hopelessness and heaved her over the edge of a waterfall.

Her voice, thready and hollow, wavered. “I don't even know your name. Can you at least tell me that?”

A rough shudder racked the Alpha's tall, rigid frame. Expression tense and stony, he raised his hand, and Zorah held absolutely still, gulping in his crisp scent, not even able to parse the multitude of reactions it produced in her body.

Touch me, her Omega nature prayed and pleaded. *Just once. Before you go.*

Only, those broad, calloused fingers hesitated one interminable instant before skimming a reverent caress over the crown of Ginny's round baby head.

He exhaled long and slow, as if suffering through intense physical pain. “It's Jake,” he said so softly she almost couldn't make it out before he vanished into the night.

CHAPTER 3

Jake

“You need something, brother?” A sneer twisted the Alpha’s lips, the question intended as an insult as much as an inquiry.

Mick wasn’t the worst of the Pack, but Jake wouldn’t expect decency from any of them.

Thirty minutes hovering on the sidelines of Alphas reviewing plans for the upcoming fall harvest, and Jake had yet to catch Hunter’s eye. A quick conversation with his old friend was all he wanted but talking to Hunt inevitably required getting in queue behind a dozen other Alphas also waiting for their leader’s limited attention.

Reunited after a century of separation courtesy of the world-ending events of TheEnd, Jake marveled at the transformation in his friend. Always the more goal-driven of the two of them, Hunter had been a work-hard-play-hard kind of guy, whereas Jake held to a working-for-the-weekend philosophy. His laid-back approach made less money, but he’d also spent more time on his surfboard than in an office, which counted as a win in his book.

Friends since college fraternity days, Jake never envied Hunter, but these days his mind often retraced the distinctly different paths their lives had taken. Hunter, an Alpha of Alphas, building a strong, safe community with a kind, beautiful Omega at his side, had none of the twisted, ugly scars Jake carried on his skin and inside his soul. If Jake had been more ambitious, could he have avoided all that befell him when the world crashed and burned? Could he have ended up somewhere better than as the barely tolerated charity case of a thriving Pack?

Could he have had any chance at winning a precious Omega like Zorah?

“Don’t you got a work assignment to do?” Mick addressed him again, arching an auburn-colored brow and making the

point clear as if Jake had any doubt: Jake wasn't welcome here.

“Need to talk to Hunt.” Jake kept everything about the response bland so as not to trigger any kind of escalation with the excitable Alpha.

Calling any Alpha excitable was like calling water wet, but Mick had been one of the Alphas traveling with Hunter during their fateful confrontation in Old Tacoma. Which meant Mick heard, and saw, Jake's sorry-ass state when Hunter found him. Or, rather, when Jake's dishonorable attempt to steal Hunter's Omega, Kess, precipitated their unlikely reunion. Few of the Pack “brothers” had much respect for Jake, but those who witnessed his rough first week after joining the Pack had even less.

Shifting, Mick wedged his body between Jake and the rest of the crowd and blocked his view. Arms folded, he peered down his nose. “Give me the message and I'll pass it along.”

Jake fought to maintain his mask of unaffected placidity. “Thanks for the offer, but it's private. I'll wait.”

The Alphas, by and large, loved Hunter and did everything in their power to protect him. Because of what had happened in Old Tacoma, many of them took that to mean keeping Jake away, despite the fact that Hunter himself had insisted Jake join the Pack. Perhaps therein was the problem. Hunter had welcomed him while the others resented and barely tolerated him.

Mick jerked his chin over his shoulder at the deeply enmeshed Hunter. “I doubt the chief's gonna have any time for you today.” He advanced a half step, putting himself squarely in Jake's personal space in an unmistakable attempt at intimidation. “Talk to Colt.”

Jake straightened his spine, not wanting to back down but not wanting to escalate this shit either. The struggle to keep his own tempestuous nature in check wore on nerves already on edge from his late-night encounter with Zorah. He needed to stay the fuck away from her, which meant he had to find a way to leave Morris Hill, which meant he had to talk to Hunter.

Immediately. But that was no one's goddamn business but his own.

He forced his voice into a semblance of calm. "I'm not hurting anyone waiting my turn. None of that has anything to do with you."

Fire simmered in Mick's eyes. "Listen up, you pathetic excuse for an Alpha, *I'll* decide what does and doesn't have anything to do with me. Now get the fuck out of here."

With the quick reflexes of their kind, his hands lashed out, and Jake stumbled to regain balance from the unexpected push.

His temper vaulted to the surface and Jake answered Mick's provocation with an answering shove. "Keep your hands off me."

And that was all it took for the bravado to degenerate into a full-on fight. Mick planted a punch in Jake's stomach, which had him folded in half and wheezing as he lurched forward to gracelessly tackle Mick to the ground. Shouts broke out, but only the white noise of his pent-up frustration roared in his ears. Blows landed on his face and body, but they meant nothing. What were a few bruises on top of the layers of damage his body bore?

With a roar, he flipped Mick on his back and pummeled his face in unleashed aggression. Blood splattered from somewhere — Mick's nose or his own — and the copper penny taste soured his mouth. For decades, he'd been pushed around, overpowered and abused, tortured and controlled, first by the Brethren and then by the various gangs he'd clung to in his darkest days. Maybe he deserved Mick's derision, but that didn't mean he had to take it without a fight. Powered by cynicism and defeat, he had nothing left to lose.

Rough hands seized his arms and shoulders as he fought for one last parting shot to Mick's smug fucking face. But even furious desperation couldn't match the three Alphas who threw his thrashing body onto the dirt. Head ringing, Jake spit a mouthful of blood and wiped his chin. Loud voices battered his ears, but he didn't give a single shit what they had to say

about him. No man possessed infinite patience, not even a damaged and irreparable one like him.

A pair of worn boots stepped into his clearing vision. Jake tracked the boot's owner upward to find Hunter staring down at him, hands on his hips and looking none too pleased. Their respective positions underlined his earlier ruminations about the state of his existence. Hunter lording over him, Jake tossed in the dirt.

Hunter glanced over his shoulder and then back at Jake. "Let's take a walk," he said gruffly, offering a hand up.

Jake took it. Not bothering to acknowledge the group of silenced Alphas to his back, he followed Hunter across the village toward the dense forest without saying a word. With enhanced Alpha hearing, having a quiet conversation in Morris Hill often required going some distance from anyone else. The same reason Zorah walked the fussy baby to the outskirts in the middle of the night.

Zorah.

The simple whisper of her name pained him more than any punch Mick delivered. She wasn't for him, and she never would be, but that didn't fill the hole carved in his chest with her name on it. He asked himself the question he'd been mulling over for weeks: *why her, though?* There were other Omegas in the village now, yet they existed outside of his awareness or concern. He only had eyes for her, and that fact had become a daily, unrelenting agony.

Under a copse of young pines, Hunter stopped and faced him, brows lowered. "So, what was that about?"

"I was minding my own business, waiting to talk to you." Jake rubbed the back of his neck, sticky with sweat, dirt, and the rising day's heat. "Apparently that's offensive to some folks."

Hunter's cheeks puffed as he released an exasperated sigh, like a deflating balloon. "What'd you need to talk about?" He flashed Jake a narrowed, doctorly look. "Cravings?"

“No,” Jake spat, too annoyed to hide his irritation. “I told you I was all right with that stuff.”

“I know you did,” Hunter said with careful patience, “but it hasn’t been that long since...” Without spelling it out, he alluded to the two months since Jake left his life of depravity behind in OT.

The memories of the first few weeks, in particular, smudged through Jake’s mind in a blur of new faces, new places, and re-acclimation to semicivilized life, further complicated by the attack on Morris Hill and the fire shortly after his arrival.

Hunter didn’t know this, but his denial of cravings wasn’t a lie. In truth, Jake had stopped using drugs years prior after a run-in with some dangerous characters and one of the worst beat-downs of his entire life. That one had left him near dead and immobilized for so long that he’d been unable to procure himself scratch to use even to ease his physical pain. He’d retreated to his garbage truck lair to hide and fight the dual-headed dragon of withdrawal sickness complicating his physical recovery. Once he could move around again, he took the blessing of his newfound sobriety and swore off that life.

It had been foisted on him to begin with.

But he hadn’t shared that story with Hunter, or anyone, to be fair. For better or worse, he let the Morris Hill Pack believe what they wanted about him.

Whatever their worst opinions of him, his self-judgment would be far worse.

Jake raised determined eyes to his friend’s. “I need to get out of here.”

The prim doctor expression dropped from Hunter’s face, and his blue eyes turned cold. “You’re leaving?”

“I need a break from living in the village.” The request blurted out, all his preparations for making a nuanced, convincing argument lost in the scuffle with Mick.

Hunter’s expression remained guarded and stoic. “What did you have in mind?”

Jake shoved a hand through his hair, tearing through curly snarls gritty with dust from the fight. “Give me something to do. Away from the village. Something where I can camp out and work on it alone for a few weeks. I just need... a fucking break, okay? I need a break. There’re too many people, I don’t sleep...”

There’s an Omega I can’t get out of my head.

He held that part back. No one needed to know how Zorah affected him, especially not Hunt. Two months later, Hunter’s words still rang loud in his ears: “*You don’t touch an Omega, you don’t look at an Omega... I see you near an Omega, I’ll cut off your balls myself.*”

Jake made a promise when his friend spared his life and offered him a new one as part of the Morris Hill Pack. Omegas were off-limits. Now and forever. Jake understood that; he’d agreed to it. Surviving in the AfterEnd by the skin of his teeth, Omegas were the absolute last thing he’d ever considered for himself anyway. Making the promise was easy; keeping it turned out to be much harder than he’d ever imagined.

Hunter hiked a dubious brow. “You really think that’ll help?”

“I don’t know. But *this*” — Jake jerked a thumb toward the village — “isn’t. I’m trying here, dude, but... you think Mick is the only one giving me shit day in and day out?” Hunter’s lips parted as if to argue the point, but Jake pushed on. “I’m not complaining, and I don’t need you to run interference or be all ‘daddy’s putting his foot down’ about it. I’m not asking for that. I’m just asking for a fucking *break*.”

Chagrin painted Hunter’s face as he scratched at his wild, gray-streaked beard. “Y’know, we came home, and my first priority was to get Kess settled and happy. I know I didn’t make much time for you, and then all that shit with Della went down, then the attack, and the fire, and since then, we’ve been rebuilding like our asses are on fire and trying to get ready to face a winter with a dozen new mouths to feed and wiped-out food stores.” He shot Jake a bewildered look. “I thought an Omega would make my life perfect, but this summer has been

an absolute fucking disaster. I'm not complaining, but *goddamn*, it's been a mess."

Jake's spirits wilted as he leaned against a nearby birch tree. He felt for his old friend. Hunt shouldered the leadership burden like he'd been born to it, or maybe he'd evolved into it when their bodies transformed into the bigger, stronger, Alpha version they became after TheEnd. Jake hated to think of those chaotic years, when modernity crashed and burned in a seemingly never-ending series of nuclear attacks, natural disasters, famine, and disease. People died, nations fell, and some who survived, like he and Hunter, weathered the environmental pressure and mutated into Alphas. Others remained unchanged and became known as Betas. And then there were Omegas, who didn't come to attention until later, when it became clear they'd evolved with their own set of biological adaptations, ones seemingly calibrated for driving Alphas bananas with lust and (likely related) repopulating the earth.

The world had weirded out right in front of his eyes. A great reshuffling, irrespective of class, race, or education, resulted in different flavors of people who now coexisted in this post-modernity dubbed the AfterEnd. He'd lived through all of it, yet Jake often failed to recognize the world he'd known buried beneath the veneer of this new one.

"D'you ever think about it?" Jake asked, the question springing from his lips without a thought. "About... before?"

"Not if I can help it." The corner of Hunt's lip kicked up. "It's easier now, with Kess. She's a good thing, and she's a part of *here*, y'know? She never knew that world. But before her..." His eyes went soft and sad for a moment as his memories wandered somewhere far away, some personal crucible he'd withstood.

In many ways, when they talked, it felt as if no time had passed, and they were the same two dudes drinking cervezas and eating fish tacos by the beach in Mexico. But, at times like these, the years they'd spent apart yawned open like an uncrossable canyon.

Hunter swung his wary gaze to Jake. “Do you?”

“Kind of hard not to.” Jake gave a quick shrug. “Most days, I feel like I landed on an alien planet. Like, I’m wandering around trying to find my way back.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Hunter nudged a rock with the tip of his boot. “I never asked, how long did you stay in Mexico after I left?”

When TheEnd happened, the two of them had been vacationing in Cancun. After college, it had become a yearly tradition they’d adopted — sometimes the two of them, sometimes other friends would tag along — but that ended when the first bomb fell. Hunter, worried for his family, left immediately to find what was left of them in the rubble of Seattle.

But Jake had decided to stay. He figured if the world was ending, he didn’t need to worry about his stupid sales job anymore and would coast on his savings until things calmed down. Except, they never did. Hunter, grim with foreboding about the state of things up north, promised to return to meet up with Jake in Mexico if he couldn’t find his family. Except, he never did, either.

“A couple years.” Hunter’s face fell so completely that Jake rushed to provide reassurance. “I wasn’t waiting for you, dude. I knew shit was falling apart, and I didn’t see the point of trying to go get involved while it sorted itself out. Honestly, I figured you were dead.”

Hunter grunted. “Reasonable assumption in those days.”

Jake kicked out a foot and crossed it at his ankle. Surprising, really, how unemotional he felt talking about his history. At least this part of it. “It took a while, but eventually, things got bad down south. Hurricanes, dead fish on the beaches, food shortages, crop failures, disease, the same shit as everywhere else. But by then, I’d changed into this, y’know?” He swept a careless hand over his stronger, taller frame.

No need to spell it all out; Hunt had gone through the same thing. Strange, though, he’d never talked to anyone about that

surrealist experience. What could you say about going through a growth spurt and becoming a hulked-out version of yourself at the ripe old age of thirty-two? Not much besides, “*Wasn’t that fucking weird?*”

“Once stuff got bad there, I figured I might as well face whatever was going on back in the States. Or what was left of ‘em, I suppose.” Jake met Hunt’s eye’s again, remembering something he hadn’t thought of in decades. “Did you ever find your sister?”

Hunter shook his head. “Looked for a long time, but no. No trace of her or my brother.” He let out a long, resigned sigh. “I’m sorry I never came back, man. I never forgot about you, I just... I let you down.”

Jake absorbed the heartfelt *mea culpa* with rising dismay. “No, dude. Never think that. None of this is your fault.”

It wasn’t lip service or sucking up. He’d had long years to think things over and truly harbored no resentment. Not even for the no Omegas promise Hunter extracted on pain of death. Hunter did what he felt he had to do, for the safety of his woman and his Pack. Jake couldn’t blame him for that.

“Right.” Shaking off the heart-to-heart, Hunter frowned thoughtfully. “You want something to do. Well, the security situation needs to be dealt with. We were too cocky before, too unprepared, and we got hit bad. All these people — Omegas, kids, families — we gotta protect ‘em better.”

“What’re you thinking?”

“Cal suggested we build some watch towers, maybe one in each direction, to monitor from higher up. Set up rotations, spot threats before they get to us.” Hunter shoved his hands deep in his pockets. “If we have Xavi draw up the plans, can you follow them? I know construction isn’t exactly your forte.”

Discomforting memories rumbled, quelling his initial excitement about the project and breaking him out in a cold sweat despite the warm day. Right. Building a watchtower would involve actual building. Since being in Morris Hill, he’d

shied away from any and all construction duties. His reasons for that had nothing to do with ignorance and everything to do with his past. A past that Hunter remained unaware of, and another thing Jake saw no reason to enlighten him about. Hunt was throwing him a bone here, and he was going to take it.

“I can do it,” Jake said quickly. “Where?”

“East. Just past the lake, there’s a small rise that looks like it survived a forest fire at some point. It won’t take too much to get above the canopy line.” He frowned. “That may present a challenge in some other directions, but I’m inclined to start with what’s easy and see how it goes. A tower there would give us a view from the village and all the way to the eastern edge of our territory. How does that sound?”

Jake pulled himself upright, a sudden hopefulness buoying his spirit for the first time in a very long time. He could get away from the village, away from the harassment, keep his promise to Hunt, contribute to the village, but most importantly, stay away from *her*. Win-win-win.

“Sounds perfect.” Jake rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants. “When can I start?”

CHAPTER 4

Zorah

Zorah scooped a palmful of water and dribbled it onto her face and neck. Sitting in the shallow end of the lake with water sloshing around her legs and thighs, she was almost cool enough to relax.

“Hey, come back.” She motioned to Pixie, who had waded knee-deep to float a small wooden boat. “You have to stay close to me or we can’t be by the water.”

“But I want it to go all the way up to here,” Pixie whined, motioning to her neck with her little four-year-old face scrunched up in a foreboding scowl.

For over a week now, the summer sun blasted the village with everything it had. Doomed to days of insufferable heat, humidity, and nights of stilted air, they had little reprieve. None of the children could comfortably nap in their stuffy cabin, and as a result, everyone who lived in Grace and Lars’s abode was over-tired, sweaty, and cranky. Zorah included.

Tendrils of hair clung disgustingly to her sticky skin as she mopped sweat from her forehead. “Absolutely not. We have to be safe, and that means staying by the shore. Now come play next to me or lake time is over.”

Pixie pulled a face but clutched the toy in her hand and sloshed her way back, kicking up as much water as her little feet could. Zorah blinked away the droplets that landed in her eyes and smoothed Jace’s hair back from his forehead. The two-year-old slumped against her side, gnawing on a half-eaten peach that he periodically dropped into the lake water and then picked up and continued eating, sand notwithstanding. She glanced over her right shoulder to the tree line, where a mostly naked Ginny snoozed on an improvised bed in the shade, her thumb in her mouth and her other hand gripping a rough-hewn wooden block. A dozen similar wooden shapes of squares, rectangles, and triangles scattered around Ginny’s sprawled limbs. On the other side of

the blanket sat a small hammer peg toy, complete with a child-sized wooden mallet to pound the pegs through the holes.

Zorah sighed. The toys began appearing a few days after the strange interaction by the rocks. The set of blocks came first. Left under a tree without any fuss, preamble, or explanation. A steady stream of trinkets and small handcrafted amusements followed. Every few days, another one or two would appear, and the kids would squeal with delight at the unexpected discovery. Pixie had begun to anticipate it, questioning Zorah relentlessly as to whether she thought the “toy fairy” would have visited the night before or not. Zorah kept her mouth shut and let the kids speculate about the identity of the mysterious “fairy.” She knew who left the gifts.

Jake.

The toys offered the only evidence he still existed. It had been over two weeks since their perplexing interaction by the rocks, and she'd not felt so much as a single twinge of his presence. True to his word, he'd ceased watching her and somehow melted into the background of Morris Hill. At mealtimes, across the fields, whenever a group of Alphas congregated, she scanned their faces for his crooked nose and loose curls, only to come up empty time and time again. It was like he had one conversation with her and then vanished. In the evenings, she talked and flirted with Riddick, Matteo, Heck, and whoever else, but her mind strayed back to Jake's scintillating, invisible touch. Now that she knew what it was, now that it was gone, she *missed* it. Its presence had become an absence.

Except for the toys. The toys he left for the children, but really, *really*, they were for her. To provide distraction and amusement or inspiration for new games and new activities. To make her days just a little bit easier. Sure, the other Alphas could've done the same thing. Hell, the pups' father, Lars, could've done the same thing. But, in the daily hustle of rebuilding, they hadn't.

Jake had.

“Come on, Pix, sit down, and I’ll tell you a story about mermaids.”

Tentative interest erased the sulk from Pixie’s face, and she plopped down with a soggy squish of her wet pants. “What’s a mermaid?”

Giddy voices and rustling bodies came from the woods to Zorah’s left. Annoyance shot through her as she glared into the trees, twisting again to check on Ginny. If someone woke that baby up before she got in a good nap, Zorah’d wring their necks, no matter who they were.

It didn’t take long for the mystery to solve itself as a giggling Nico and Ty emerged, hauling a hunk of rusted metal between them. Nico, the twelve-year-old older brother of her charges, and Ty, the fourteen-year-old son of Xavi and Marie, weren’t technically under her care. With the adults busy during the day, the two largely occupied themselves, getting into as much mischief as possible.

Zorah scooped up a soggy Jace and hauled Pixie to her feet by the hand before stomping over to where the two boys were dragging a rusted-out canoe.

“Can you two keep it down, please? Ginny is napping over here.” She tossed her head toward the baby, ignoring Ty’s smirking eye roll.

Nico had the good sense to at least appear chagrined when he mumbled, “Sorry.”

“What’s that?” Pixie asked.

Ty straightened and wiped his sweaty brow. Zorah had no idea where the two boys found the canoe, but it appeared they’d hauled it quite some distance to the lake. “It’s a canoe. We’re going to take it out on the lake.”

Pixie jumped up and down. “I wanna go! Can I take my boat on the boat?”

“No.” Zorah tightened her brow, noting the bottom of the canoe was more rust than metal. “And I’m not sure you two should either. This thing doesn’t look watertight. Did one of the Alphas say you could use it?”

Ty lifted his head, defiant. “We found it. It’s ours.”

Zorah cut a glance to Nico. She couldn’t speak to Ty’s parents, but she knew what Nico’s mom, Grace, would say about taking questionable watercraft out on the lake.

“Your mom wouldn’t like this,” she warned. “What if something happens? You can’t swim.”

“I can.” Ty puffed out his chest with all the bravado of a fourteen-year-old Alpha. “Nothing will happen, we’ll stay in the shallows.”

Zorah ignored him and focused on the younger boy. “Nico…”

He looked to the older boy, and the two shared some silent communication. Then, he straightened his scrawny shoulders, lengthened his spine, and adopted his friend’s defiance. “You’re not the boss of me.”

Ty guffawed with approval, louder than Zorah thought necessary, no doubt to needle her further.

“Shut up,” she hissed. “You’ll wake the baby.”

“C’mon.” Ty lifted his end of the canoe, scraping it on the rocks and sand near the water. “Let’s go.”

Little ones in tow, Zorah paced their progress. A few more yards, and they’d have the damn thing in the water. Maybe it would sink on contact. Who knew where they’d found it, but she’d lived long enough in the AfterEnd to develop a healthy wariness for anything left over from the modern world, especially things obviously decrepit and in disrepair. River Bend existed, unsurprisingly, beside a river, and she’d seen enough boats, rafts, and other watercraft in her life to be suspicious of this one, especially as no life vests or other emergency supplies were on hand. It wasn’t unusual to hear of buildings outright collapsing, bridges caving in, or any number of freak accidents that occurred as they reestablished a new world on top of an old one.

“I know I’m not the boss of you two, but that thing doesn’t look safe.” Zorah took a deep breath and released it, trying to think quickly as the boys advanced toward the water. “Listen,

why don't you leave it here and go ask one of your parents if it's safe to take out on the water? Or find one of the Alphas to help you test it? You don't even have life jackets."

"Dad's in the lower fields, and I don't know where Mom is," Nico said through exertional grunts. "They're busy."

"It'll take too long to go all the way back and then get someone to come out here, and no one wants to stop what they're doing anyway," Ty added.

With a final grating shove over the rocky shoreline, Ty launched the canoe into the water.

Zorah held her breath, sternum straining with tension. *Please let it sink. Please let it sink.*

Nothing about this situation made her comfortable. Ty, with his bravado and purported swimming ability, might be able to get himself to safety should something happen, but what about Nico? Zorah gnawed on her lip, wanting to scream at the stark reminder of her inability to offer aid in this area if something happened.

No, not inability. Prohibition. It's not that she *couldn't* swim, it's that she'd never been permitted to learn.

When Zorah was Pixie's age, a young Omega in her village — in the throes of her first Heat — had drowned. She'd never heard the whole story as no one would speak about it, but since then, no Omegas were allowed in the water. Not to swim, not to ride in the fishing boats, nothing. The Morris Hill Omegas didn't hesitate to enjoy the lake at the end of a long, hot workday. But, ashamed of her deficiency and not wanting to explain the backward customs of her village, Zorah shied away from those outings. Even bringing the pups here stressed her out, as she knew if she looked away and one of them wandered too far out, she'd never be able to get to them in time.

Children could drown in one inch of water, a fact that had been drilled into her from the very first time a child had been put under her watch.

Unfortunately, the canoe did not sink, and the boys gave a whoop of delight.

“See? No problem,” Ty triumphantly announced, climbing inside and motioning Nico to join him.

Bouncing, Nico accepted his friend’s outstretched hand and swung his leg over, scraping his shin on the grainy, rusted side wall. *Great*, the damn thing would probably give them tetanus, too.

“I wanna go! I wanna go!” Pixie made a break for it, throwing off Zorah’s hand and charging into the water.

Zorah nearly dropped Jace in her rush to yank the little girl’s arm. “No, Pixie.” She looked up in time to see the boys stick some pilfered wooden boards in the water and begin stroking. “Boys, don’t go too far!” Zorah yelled, her anxiety kicking up as the distance between her and the canoe widened.

Maybe she was overreacting. They might be okay, right?

She didn’t have much time to ponder that as Pixie, who never appreciated being told she couldn’t do something, began wailing and flailing in pure, blubbery four-year-old rage. Which, in turn, disturbed the bleary-eyed Jace, who had been resting sleepily against her shoulder up until then. Twisting and squirming, he pawed at Zorah’s face and neck with his sticky, peach-scented fingers.

“Want down, want down, Zaw-wah,” he whined as Zorah struggled to keep her grip on a still-thrashing Pixie, who most certainly would wake up Ginny any minute.

“Pixie, hush!” Zorah pleaded, somehow lugging both kids away from the water and breaking into a fresh layer of sweat in the process. At this point, her sweat had sweat. “Didn’t you want to hear about the mermaids? Let’s go sit down, and I’ll tell you about the mermaids.”

Pixie screamed, her words indistinguishable shrieks of rage except for the occasional intelligible *boat*. Zorah flashed a glance at Ginny, still blessedly asleep, with her arms and legs splayed like a plump starfish. That child must be truly exhausted to snooze through this spectacular meltdown.

Somehow, above Pixie's crying, Zorah heard a panicked shout from the middle of the lake.

Screaming toddlers forgotten, Zorah snapped her attention to the water, where a terrified-looking Nico stood in a slowly submerging canoe. "Nico!"

"Jump!" Ty yelled before throwing himself off the boat with a splash.

From the middle of the lake, she could see the whites of Nico's eyes. Panicked, his gaze jumped between hers and the disappearing canoe beneath his feet. Blood rushed to Zorah's head, her heart booming in her ears.

Grabbing Pixie and Jace under her arms, she sprinted toward the water, screaming, "Nico get to the dock! Get to the dock!"

Ty's head bobbed in the water as he dog paddled toward the half-submerged floating dock not far away. Another battered remnant from the past, but at least they could hold onto it.

"The dock! The dock!" She deposited a crying Pixie and Jace at her feet and pointed frantically.

Her thoughts spun in a million directions. None of them helpful. She had to get help. But the village was too far. Nearly a mile, and she couldn't leave the three littles here alone. She'd never make it there and back in time. Behind her, Ginny began howling, finally awakened by the chaos.

"Help!" Zorah screamed to no one in particular. "Help us! Help! Please!" Nico's head spun in every direction as the top edge of the boat lowered fast — *so damn fast* — into the water. "Get to the dock! The dock! Help! Anyone! Help!"

With one hand safely anchored to the dock, a horrified-looking Ty stretched out his arm and offered one of the wood boards for Nico to grab onto. But he was too far away. Even if Nico jumped, he would have to somehow swim several yards in order to get to it, which he could never do.

The two littles at her feet bawled, sensing the danger as their caregiver screamed for help while they watched their big

brother drown in slow motion. Zorah clawed at her cheeks, her entire body in a vise grip of impending doom.

Oh God, these kids were about to watch their brother die, and they didn't even know it.

Grace would never forgive her. Lars might kill her.

She'd never forgive herself.

This tragedy was her fault. *Stupid, so stupid, Zorah*. Another decision she'd fumbled in her naivete. How could she not have known this would happen? That boat was an obvious disaster; she should've physically stopped the boys from taking it out. She didn't fight hard enough. Once again, she'd made a decision, and someone was going to get hurt. No, not hurt. Someone (a child!) was going to die.

Zorah's voice broke as Nico's waist and then shoulders disappeared into the water, his terrified eyes bulging as he yelled, "Zorah! Help me, Zorah!"

"Nico! Close your mouth! Take a breath!" Zorah's throat burned. She spared a glance at her feet to ensure the littles weren't in danger, afraid to look away from Nico for more than a split second. "Help! Please! Help! Someone! Anyone! We need help!"

With an ominous *bloop*, she imagined more than heard, Nico's small head disappeared under the water, replaced by a series of sickening bubbles.

"No! Nico!"

Through the roaring white noise that filled her head, the snapping and rushing of something large and heavy crashed through the trees. A body tore across the beach in a wild blur.

Zorah, choking on fear, gasped when an Alpha entered the water with a flurry of splashes and kicks, heading directly for the bubbles popping above Nico's head. Her hands flew to her mouth, unable to look away, not daring to hope as the man cut through the water in a smooth, rapid cadence.

Hands shaking, she knelt and cupped Pixie and Jace's sobbing, sniveling heads to her chest, her eyes glued to the

water. Did the swimmer know where he was going? Could he find Nico in the murky lake water? Would it be too late?

As if in answer, the rescuer dove down, disappearing into the brown murk. Air hardened in her aching chest, and she was sure she'd never take a full breath again. What was taking so long? Was Nico gone? Was the rescuer going to drown, too?

Having pulled himself onto the floating dock, Ty stared intently into the water. Even from the shore, she could see the high-frequency quaking in his muscles, looking much more like a scared little boy than the surly preteen who'd given her so much lip. She should be mad at him, but there was no time for that. Not as the seconds ticked by and hope dangled by a fraying thread.

Finally, *finally*, a head exploded up out of the water, and Zorah whimpered when she caught sight of the second, smaller head in tow. They were on the move, the Alpha's powerful legs kicking faster toward the shore than Zorah thought even possible.

Choking on not-quite relief, Zorah scrambled to her feet. "C'mon, kids, away from the water. *Now.*"

Not waiting for a response, Zorah picked up Jace and tugged on Pixie, dragging them back toward the blanket where a squalling, red-faced Ginny sat. She plopped Jace down on the blanket next to his screaming baby sister, who paused her wailing long enough to smile at her brother.

Zorah turned to Pixie. "I need you to be the big sister right now and *stay here*. You and Jace keep Ginny on the blanket, okay? *Don't* come near the water. Do you understand me? It's important."

Pixie, wide-eyed, nodded solemnly. Zorah whirled on her knees and stumbled as her foot caught in her damp skirt when she raced back to the water's edge. The Alpha carried Nico's limp body up onto the shore, and carefully, but quickly, the man laid him down and bent his ear to the boy's lips.

The Alpha's gaze collided with her own, and Zorah gasped, staring into the mossy-green eyes of none other than Jake.

CHAPTER 5

Jake

Unforgettable in the darkness, but in the bright summer day, Zorah's beauty seared his eyes like sunlight glaring on water.

But he didn't have time for that.

Chest heaving, his mind a crazy mixture of hope and fear, he focused on the inert boy. *This boy could not die. Not like this. Not in front of her.*

Without another thought, training from a different life took over. He blew in the child's mouth and pumped the bony chest, terrified beyond measure that he'd either not revive the boy or crush his ribs in the process. Zorah took care of the kids huddled together farther from the shore, but did that include this boy? Would she feel responsible? Would she be haunted forever by this? He couldn't let that happen. He couldn't let that kind of darkness touch her. He simply *couldn't*. Desperation tainted every pump. He'd done CPR before, but never with Alpha strength and never with the panic-stricken heart of a young woman on the line.

Zorah clutched the boy's hand as Jake delivered two breaths, seeing the chest reassuringly rise as air arrived at its destination. She murmured encouragement, saying the boy's name over and over, her desperate pleas low, while the other children bawled in the background.

With a lurching heave, water burbled from the boy's lips, followed by soggy coughs. He flopped to his stomach, gasping for air as greenish fluid rolled over his lips and neck and onto the sand.

Zorah's voice cracked with relief, but she kept up her steady stream of encouragement, patting and rubbing the boy's back as he expelled lake water in painful hacking coughs.

Jake eased back on his heels, his breaths ragged, his body energized but numb.

Every day he heard Zorah arrive at the lake with her little caravan. While he couldn't make out her words, her sweet voice rose and fell on the wind, sometimes calm, sometimes gently scolding her charges. Every day he confronted the urge to sit and listen, to let her mere presence wash over him. But he couldn't succumb. If he did, he'd think about things that could never happen. So instead, when she brought the children for their daily cool-off, he pounded and sawed like a madman, determined to build a metaphorical wall of noise between his existence and hers by sheer will alone. But today, she'd shrieked, and he hadn't even thought about it. He'd just run.

Down he'd raced, tripping and hurling himself over rocks and brambles, moving at a speed he hadn't known he possessed. Once in view of the lake, the situation declared itself as he saw the boy's last desperate breath before his head disappeared. Jake dove in, pumping his arms and kicking his legs with all his strength. In the weightless exertion, he woke up muscle memories long buried and suppressed. A primitive, remnant part of his mind took over, following protocols drilled into him from over a century ago, when he'd trained as a lifeguard on the California coast. Back when he was a much younger man, lean and cocky, shamelessly flirting with tanned girls in barely visible bikinis, a heartthrob in white zinc sunscreen.

Before the world went to hell. Before his life became one unending nightmare.

With those old reflexes working overtime, it hadn't been hard to reach the boy and bring him to the surface or, thank God, resuscitate him. Jake didn't know the boy's parents personally, but he had no interest in facing down a grief-stricken Omega mother or an enraged Alpha father, thus forever solidifying his worthlessness in the Pack's eyes. That would be bad enough, but even worse, to leave Zorah open to the grief and guilt her involvement in this episode would surely cause. That, he did not think he could bear.

"Zorah," the boy croaked, in a half sob, half cough, turning to throw himself into her waiting arms.

”*Shh*. It’s okay, buddy, it’s okay,” she whispered into his sopping wet head, rubbing his back in long, peaceful strokes.

Jake caught his breath, coveting the loving strokes she applied to the boy’s back. How long had it been since he’d felt the comforting touch of a caring woman? A very, very long time.

Not since Ava.

Amid a flutter of activity, the younger children thrust themselves into the scene, piling on top of the revived boy with the pure-hearted affection only children possessed. They ought to give the boy some space so he could continue to catch his breath in peace, but none of them seemed to be worried about that. The revived boy flashed Zorah a wan smile, his color improving with every minute out of the water.

Zorah affectionately tousled his head before rising to grab the crawling baby, indignant at being left behind. She plopped the child near the other three, grinning affectionately when the baby grabbed onto the older boy’s arm, demanding her share of his attention.

Did the young ones understand the boy had nearly died? Did they know how close he’d come? How easy it was for a life to disappear, as if it never existed? No, they probably didn’t. Why would they? They were children, protected and cared for by their community, the way children were meant to be.

Jake turned away, discomfort crawling up his neck at the poignant display, and his attention snagged on the other boy stranded on the broken-down swimming platform. Another loose thread to tie up before he could close this chapter and return to his worksite.

With a guttural grunt, he caught Zorah’s eye, shocked by the jolt that went through him as their gazes met.

Now, in the relative calm, nothing stopped him from staring as sunlight gilded her like an earth-stranded angel. Her eyes, deep amber flecked with gold, were shaped like lazy water drops napping on their sides, fat in the middle and softly

angled up at the outer edges. Full, dark eyebrows arched across her forehead, thick and pronounced against the warm tan of her skin. The luxurious brows added gravitas to her youthful face, imparting a seriousness that offset dozens and dozens of adorable russet-colored freckles. The small dots frolicked in wild abandon over her forehead and nose, cascading down her cheeks as if on a quest to reach her bountiful lips.

And who could blame them? She had the most heavenly pair. Two pillows of rosy delight as full and luscious as her brows but infinitely more seductive. He wanted to sample them, to test their texture and firmness, to flick his tongue against the dainty seam and entice a soft sigh to emerge. A craving for her taste possessed him, making him clamp his fists to hold it in check. Much like her scent, he knew she'd taste sweet — sugary oranges and tart tangerines, with a touch of pink peppercorns for a warming, zesty spice.

Saliva flooded his mouth, and a low rumble rolled up from his chest, an animalistic eruption from some deep, primal place.

Her big eyes widened, and her lips parted a hair's breadth, exactly the way he'd imagined seconds before. As she knelt on the rocks and sand, her scent mingled with the grimy, musty smell of sweaty children and the sandy scent of the lake, irritating him with contamination. He wanted to breathe a pure lungful, wanted to suck it in and rub it into his pores, wanted to immerse himself in a pool of pure Zorah. The worst combination of alluring and dangerous, this girl flipped him upside down and scrambled his brains. It wasn't her fault, but he couldn't handle this unbearable proximity.

Shaking it off, Jake cocked his head toward the water. "Can that one get himself back to shore?"

Zorah's perfect lips formed a disdainful purse. "I wouldn't count on it."

"I'll get him." Relieved to have another task, Jake edged toward the water.

For the second time, he dove. Stretching his limbs, he glided into smooth, assured strokes, his pace relaxed after the race for speed earlier. His muscles worked while the water streamed over his skin, and the old feeling of peace settled his spirit. Strangely, he couldn't recall the last time he'd indulged in a swim, and it felt odd to have been so long away from one of his favorite activities. Another example of something he'd lost in the AfterEnd.

He'd loved swimming as a child, as a teen, as a young man. Hell, he'd spent the first two years of TheEnd playing in the Gulf of Mexico, thinking things would improve if he sat tight and waited it out. Such foolhardy innocence bit him in the ass in the end, but was it innocence or arrogance? Whatever it was, the next hundred years beat both out of him in spades.

He reached the dilapidated swimming platform in no time. Due to a defective support leg, one side slumped into the water like a ship paused midway through sinking. On the other side, the waiting boy sat with his legs dangling over the edge, toes morosely skimming the water. He looked older than the other one, but his averted eyes made it hard to tell his exact age. Not that Jake had a good gauge on kids' ages anyway, that seemed much more like Zorah's department.

Jake put a hand on the platform while his feet trod water. "You good to swim back?"

"Is Nico okay?" The kid chewed on his thumbnail. "I-I didn't know the boat was going to break."

"A boat?"

"Found a canoe," the boy mumbled, eyes downcast. "It was rusted, but it seemed to work okay... until I put my foot through the bottom."

Jake filled in the rest of the story from there. "Did you get cut?"

The boy's head swung from side to miserable side in answer.

Jake scratched at the back of his neck, unsure of what to do with this obviously distraught youngster. He wasn't any kind

of parent or... *shit*... crisis counselor or whatever. God knew, he wasn't fit to be counseling anyone on anything.

A peal of babyish laughter skated over the water. Jake turned toward the happy noise, only to find Zorah's eyes intent upon him. In an instant, all thoughts evacuated from his head, and his entire being became hungry, aching with *want*.

God dammit. He'd fought so hard these past weeks to expel her from his thoughts. The night by the rocks had been too much. Too much exposure to her scent and her kindness and her curiosity. Curiosity about *him*, for fuck's sake, which he absolutely did not deserve, but, curse him, loved anyway. Without even trying, she'd elbowed into his psyche, and now he couldn't escape. He suspected that no distance away from her could change that, but in his feeble defense, he'd left her alone.

Except for the toys. The toys were his one concession. The one connection to her he allowed. Because they weren't for *her*, right? They were for the kids. Kids needed toys. Even he knew that. At night, when he couldn't sleep for fear of memories and nightmares, he'd fashion the blocks and boats and hammers from scraps of wood, sanding them down so no little fingers would get splinters. They weren't fancy; hell, they weren't even brightly painted the way toys ought to be. But what did these kids know about toys? They'd never played with electric scooters or video games. A pile of rocks was their damn jungle gym.

Jake refocused on the boy on the dock picking at his cuticles, sullen and ashamed. His heart went out to the kid. Small wooden playthings wouldn't interest these older boys. With nothing else to do, they'd find mischief, which is likely how this whole scenario played out.

"Look, kid." He sighed. "I'm here to get you back, so do you need help or not?"

Commotion broke through the gentle watery background noise. Footsteps pounded on the trail leading back to the village, and adult voices wafted over the lake, panic and worry in every nearly audible syllable.

A sick feeling wormed in Jake's gut. Adults were coming, and he had no way of knowing how they'd react to finding out what had just transpired. One would assume relief and gratitude, but he knew better than to bank on assumptions. Most parents in the village probably wanted the likes of him nowhere near their pups.

A protective drive reared up inside him. He could withstand their disdain and rejection, no problem. What he couldn't tolerate was any criticism that might be hurled at Zorah in an emotional moment. He needed to get back to shore.

"Come on, buddy," he said as gently as he could, "time to face the music. Do you need help or not?"

His expression full of dread, the kid stopped gnawing on his fingernail and made eye contact for a fleeting second. "I think I can manage, but maybe you could... uh..."

Planting his foot on a slimy post, Jake kicked back a few feet from the dock and motioned for the kid to get in the water. "I'll stay close. You get into trouble, give a wave."

CHAPTER 6

Zorah

Grace sobbed with her whole body. Clutching Nico's sopping wet head against her breast, she baptized him in maternal tears. She grabbed at her children — Jace's arm, Pixie's cheek, Nico's leg — her hands pawing from one to the next, as if trying to reassure her distraught mind they were still in one piece. Pixie and Jace clung to their mother as Lars lifted a struggling, never-wanting-to-miss-out Ginny from Zorah's arms.

A small group of Alphas and Omegas had burst from the woods, racing toward where Zorah and the children huddled on the beach. Lars and Grace, Xavi and Marie, and Colt, all of them breathless, looking to Zorah for answers. The Alphas had heard her screaming back at the village, and everyone had come running, fearing the absolute worst. They weren't far off.

"Nico was drowning and Jake saved him," Zorah explained as the Alpha hero sloshed to shore beside a terrified-looking Ty.

Marie rushed forward to embrace her son, and the boy's shoulders quaked with silent tears, reminding Zorah that, despite his bravado, Ty was still young.

"I don't understand." Lars's eyes narrowed. "How did Nico get stranded in the middle of the lake?"

Quickly, Zorah described the rickety boat and the boys' insistence on taking it out. The Alphas and Omegas tensed with each added detail, and the air grew thick with reproach. She tried to catch Jake's eye, but he seemed to be deliberately ignoring her, squeezing water from his shirttail. It stung, until she noticed that he'd moved several feet away from the group and appeared to be avoiding eye contact with everyone else, too.

"What were you thinking?" Xavi demanded when Ty lifted his head from his mother's bosom. "Where did you even find a fucking canoe?"

“Xavi,” Marie pleaded, her hand smoothing Ty’s hair. “Now isn’t the time.”

Having none of it, Xavi glared daggers at his mate and his son. “He could’ve died, Marie. They both could’ve died.” Seething, the big Alpha whirled, his accusing eyes landing on Zorah’s face. “You saw the whole thing happen, why didn’t you stop them?”

All the moisture dried in Zorah’s mouth as the accusation hit home. A thousand second guesses ran roughshod through her mind, and an uneasy tremor vibrated in her gut.

“Zorah.” Colt’s voice was gentler, but his eyes held hers with dominant expectation. “Did you try to stop them?”

“I... I...” Heated anxiety flamed up her chest and neck as seconds ticked by, as explanations and justifications floundered in her thoughts and refused to form into words.

Three pairs of harsh, judging Alpha eyes stared at her, sapping her of any ability to think or retrace her decisions from only minutes before. Zorah fisted her skirt in her damp palm, as if physically holding herself to the spot when every instinct compelled her to turn and flee their ire and condemnation.

“Or did you just stand there?” Xavi demanded.

Zorah’s chest caved in at the insult, her shoulders rolling forward as she shrunk under the weight of the shame. He was right; she *had* just stood there, paralyzed like a statue, making a dozen decisions and all the wrong ones. She’d made a decision not to run for help. Could she have made it back to the village before the boat broke? Maybe if she’d carried Ginny and taken Jace and Pixie far enough down the path to be out of danger...

Or if she’d ever learned how to swim.

“She didn’t do anything wrong.” A low, hoarse voice broke the tension like the crack of a whip.

Every head jerked toward the speaker.

Jake, his face a cool, indifferent mask, slid inscrutable eyes to Xavi. Rusty voice full of certainty, he added, “If she hadn’t been here and yelled for help, that boy would’ve died. She kept the little ones safe and out of the way when I brought him to shore. She did well.”

Zorah’s heart gave a jarring thump, and breath whisked back into her lungs. Jake was... *defending* her? Her inner Omega stupidly preened, basking in this unexpected praise. Astonished, Zorah searched his face, trying to glean some connection as he spoke up for her without acknowledging her presence.

Xavi’s chest inflated, and his fists tightened at the obvious challenge. He wasn’t the largest Alpha in the Pack by any means, but he was a terrified father, and that had to count for something. On her right, Colt shifted his weight, Lars got to his feet, and all the Alphas stilled like they tasted impending violence.

Zorah’s inner Omega snarled in response to the threat, sparking an absolutely insane need to protect *him*, a full-grown Alpha! Quelling the urge to hurl herself between Jake and the other Alphas, Zorah dug her toes in the sand and squeezed her skirt till her knuckles hurt.

Grace stood; a scowl painted on top of her puffy, tear-soaked face. “Zorah isn’t responsible for those two boys, and she had the three little ones to look after. How was she supposed to run back to the village with them in tow? What was she going to do, Xavi, leave them here unsupervised so they could drown while she went for help? We’d have four dead kids instead of none.”

Lars placed a supportive hand on her shoulder, silently but resolutely, backing up his mate. The Omega’s chest heaved with a decisive sigh, effectively putting an end to the conversation, and Zorah released her death grip on her skirt. Thank goodness for Grace.

As if to punctuate the point, Grace turned her back on Xavi and threw her arms around a startled Jake’s neck, nearly knocking him over as he stumbled for purchase in the loose

mix of sand and stone. “*Thank you.* Thank you for saving my boy.”

Jake’s posture stiffened, and his eyes skittered around like his world had flipped upside down and he didn’t know where he was. Elbows hovering awkwardly away from his body, he faltered to handle the unexpected affection.

Lars went to his mate’s side and grasped one of Jake’s dangling hands for a heartfelt shake. “Thank you. We owe you a debt too great to ever repay, but we’re happy to try.”

The sincere gratitude unlocked something in the group, and suddenly everyone stepped forward to give Jake their thanks, including a much-subdued Xavi under the glare of his mate. Zorah sidled back, nerves still jangling from Xavi’s indictment, Jake’s defense, and her own instinct to defend him in return. He wouldn’t look at her, hadn’t said a word to her other than to ask about Ty’s swimming ability. And yet, he’d defended her.

After the thanks had been dispensed, Colt excused himself back to the village proper, followed by Marie and Xavi escorting a sullen-looking Ty. Zorah would never say it, but with all the construction and food replenishment this summer, the boys had been left to their own devices much of the time. Maybe this would remind their Alpha fathers to spend more time with them. Or, at the very least, include them in the projects to keep them out of trouble.

“Zorah.” Grace’s voice drew her from her thoughts. Tears stained her honey-brown skin as she turned the soft light of her motherly Omega temperament on Zorah’s face. She cupped a hand on Zorah’s sweaty cheek. “Thank you, my dear. You’ve been such a help to our family, but this... well...” Grace’s lower lip trembled. “We’re so lucky you came to us this summer.”

Now Zorah understood Jake’s discomfort with the outpouring of gratitude. Never hesitant to bestow a hug, Grace threw her arms around Zorah in a tight, emotion-laden squeeze. It wasn’t the first time Grace had embraced her, but it

was undoubtedly the most unlike Zorah's mother's quick, cool attempts at motherly comfort.

Despite being an Omega, Ida never discomfited herself with outward shows of affection. Instead, she opted for a shoulder squeeze or a brisk approving nod on the uncommon occasion Zorah earned such a rarity. Zorah'd never given much thought to her mother's cool and withholding approach to motherhood, but since taking care of Grace and Lars's children, she'd seen a wholly different type of parenting up close and personal. It's not that she'd grown up completely absent affection, but mostly that came in the form of periodic visits from her Beta grandmother, Nana.

"You don't have to thank me," Zorah mumbled into Grace's shoulder. "I wish I could've done more."

"No. You did everything you could have." Grace forced a watery smile. "And you've probably had enough of my children for today. Take the rest of the day off and —"

"Oh, no, I couldn't," Zorah protested. "You'll need help with dinner and bedtime —"

"We can manage," Lars cut in, giving her a stern but kind look. "The pups need their parents, and I imagine you could use some time to yourself." Lars, holding Ginny one-handed, hoisted Nico to his feet, while Pixie and Jace chased each other in a circle around their father.

Zorah opened her mouth to argue but closed it when Lars arched a pointed brow. He was the kindest and gentlest of the Alphas, but an Alpha, nonetheless. Defying him would take more energy than she possibly possessed after the afternoon's ordeal.

Grace's arms enveloped Zorah in a second quick hug, and she whispered in her ear, "Should I tell Riddick you have some free time?"

"No." Zorah spat the word like a bite of too-hot food. Adrenaline from the rescue was wearing off, and twinges of an impending meltdown strummed through her nervous system. Having to entertain Riddick would not help her in the slightest.

Backing away from the hug, she glanced around the empty beach, taking in the strewn-about blankets, cups, and all the other detritus of the afternoon they'd spent by the water. "I'll clean up here and then find something else to do. Thank you."

With one last arm squeeze, Grace threw herself back into her parental duties. In a practiced movement, she had Pixie propped on one hip and her other arm wrapped protectively around Nico's shoulder. Lars, carting both Ginny and Jace, led his family back toward the path. They moved as one frenetic, vibrating mass, leaving Zorah behind in the relative stillness of the now-abandoned lakefront.

Any other day, she'd bless her lucky stars for a moment of kid-free peace, but only hollow disappointment occupied her chest. Grace had absolved her, Jake had supported her, yet Zorah couldn't shake the feeling that she'd somehow failed. The frailty chewing at her insides deepened. Scanning the beach, Jake was nowhere to be found, and her spirits sunk even lower. She stifled the reaction as nothing more than her childish silliness. Why would Jake stick around, anyway? Nico was back safe with his parents, they'd all thanked him, and he clearly had no interest in any further interaction with her. He'd made that abundantly clear the first time they'd met in the darkness.

Apparently, living through a near tragedy didn't alter anything.

CHAPTER 7

Jake

He made the trek halfway back to the cabin when the first whimper rattled his eardrums. Like the screams from earlier, the noise stopped him in his tracks, and the dread in his chest made him certain of the source. Another broken cry reached his ears, this one overfull with suppressed and smothered anguish. With a sigh, Jake spun and retraced his footsteps, cursing himself. It wasn't any of his business. None of this was any of his business. *She* was none of his business, but he sped his pace nonetheless.

He'd check in with her, make sure she was okay, and then head back up the hill. No fuss. No muss. *God dammit*, what was he doing? He'd done his good deed for the day; wasn't that enough? Not that saving a child's life would make any difference in his status in the Pack at large. He'd be the hero until dinnertime, but an Omega mother's tears and gratitude only went so far. Tomorrow morning, he'd be back to the bottom. Where he belonged.

Jake slapped a branch out of the path of his face, hustling so as not to get struck in the back of the head on the recoil. Why couldn't he have a path to redemption? That motherfucker Silas, who'd sold the Pack out to a group of rogue Alphas, got to leave with his weaselly hide intact. Cal straight-up abducted Della for over a week, and no one gave him shit about it day in and day out. Although, warning them about the attack and losing his foot in the process probably helped grease the wheels for that reparation.

Cal also didn't abduct *Hunter's* Omega.

Shit. Why was he even engaging in this stupid, self-pitying thought exercise? Who was he to demand redemption for any-fucking-thing? Had he already forgotten his life in Old Tacoma? He should count himself lucky he lived somewhere that wasn't a cleaned-out garbage truck and spent his days working in the fresh air rather than evading criminals and

dealers. No, he was *lucky* Hunter took pity on him and let him come live here.

By the time the lake came into view, Zorah's sobs had quieted, but some sad sniveling gave away her location. Huddled on a crumpled blanket with her knees bent and her back braced against a cedar tree, she tucked her face into her folded arms. Dark brown hair frizzed out in all directions, half of it draped over her slumped shoulders and the other half hanging on for dear life in a disintegrating, broken-down braid. It was messy and unselfconscious and so fucking precious, it shredded his resolve to keep this brief and perfunctory.

That raw vulnerability did him in; the glimpse of fragility beneath the competent exterior he'd seen earlier, when she'd taken charge of the children, safeguarding them while keeping them out of his way while he tried to resuscitate the boy. She'd known exactly what to do, exactly what her priorities were, and exactly the best way to help in the highly fraught situation. That's why he'd almost blown a gasket when Xavi peppered her with insinuating questions, implying she'd made some faulty choice. She hadn't. She'd done well, and anyone with half a brain could see that. He certainly could.

He didn't rejoice in her misery by any means, but this unpracticed and unguarded vulnerability pulled him like a magnet. Whether or not she sensed his presence, she never looked up. Jake crossed the beach till his toes touched the edge of the blanket.

"Hey." His voice cracked on the single syllable greeting. "Are... are you all right?"

One caramel eye poked up from the crook of her elbow. "I'm fine."

Absent were her flirtatious, coy smiles, the ones she flashed at the other Alphas that probably fueled dozens of boners around the settlement. Strangely, it filled him with a warm sense of intimacy. They all saw her smiles, but how many had seen her tears?

“You don’t look fine.” He edged closer and crouched next to an upturned picnic basket, righting it and setting it off to the side. “Don’t sound fine, either.”

She lifted her head, revealing the precious freckles that dotted her golden, tan forehead down to her upturned snub nose. Swollen and pink-tinged around the nostrils from crying, but a perfectly pert little nose nonetheless, like someone modeled it right off a china doll and onto her youthful face.

Youthful. That was putting it mildly. She was practically a girl, and he was nearly a century and a half old. What kind of a degenerate pervert did that make him?

“I wasn’t crying to get attention” — she wiped angrily at her cheek — “if that’s what you’re accusing me of.”

Jake’s chin jerked back. Not the response he’d anticipated. “Not accusing you of anything,” he mumbled, rubbing at the back of his neck as he cast around his disjointed thoughts for something helpful to say. “Thought you might... need something.”

Fuck, he was bad at this. Before TheEnd, back when his life made some amount of sense, he’d been the good-time-party guy, the hot, one-night-stand guy, not the steady, emotionally-supportive-boyfriend guy. He didn’t have the first fucking clue about comforting a woman in distress. And it showed.

“Bein’ as you’re alone out here and whatnot,” he added stupidly.

Zorah’s head tipped back till it rested against the tree trunk, and she closed her eyes with an exhausted, ratty-sounding sigh. “I’m not a young pup with a scraped knee. I don’t need to run to my mama for every problem.”

Her tone registered as neither combative nor petulant. She spoke bluntly, as if stating a simple, informative fact.

“Don’t think you’re a child,” he said, feeling like he was dancing around a bed of hot coals. He pried a pebble from the ground and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. “But you did see a boy almost drown today.”

“So did you. Do *you* need something?” Only her eyelids moved, peeling open like the slow raising of a curtain.

The look pierced into him, a gentle slip of the knife between his ribs, so fast and sharp he didn't feel it until it was too late. In that one look, he could've sworn she saw all the way down to his ugly, scarred soul because, *fuck*, he needed a lot of things. All of them and none of them starting and ending with her.

Jake tossed the rock and brushed the sand from his fingers. “Not especially.”

Cautiously, still not knowing what *the fuck* he was doing, Jake transitioned to his knees and scooted close. Close enough to detect the salty drying tears blended with her sweat and uniquely sweet Omega scent. His nostrils flared at the citrusy fragrance, seeking even more to fill his lungs.

She pushed back a lock of untidy hair, eyeing him suspiciously. “Even if I needed something, you have less than nothing to offer me. Isn't that what you said?”

He fumbled for more words. “You... you were crying.”

She held his gaze, unwavering. “I'm upset.”

“Right.” God, he was an idiot. He looked around, as if he'd discover a manual for how to manage this situation.

Maybe once, he was good with people, but not now. The rules changed when the world did, and he didn't understand anymore.

But her distress splintered up his insides, shredding him apart with a frustrated need to *do* something, to comfort, to protect. His eyes fell on the scattered foodstuffs: a bruised peach, a jar of water, a half-eaten sandwich. He flicked a finger at the items. “Is this food for you? Have you eaten today?”

Her lips contorted in a gentle sneer. “Not hungry.”

“Okay, maybe you need to —”

“Why do people insist they know what I need better than I do?” In an instant, her disaffected misery transitioned to

righteous indignation. A fireball lit in her eyes, her plump lips drawn tight and pale. “Do I look so stupid and helpless that I can’t even feed myself?”

Jake shook his head in a series of quick, backpedaling jerks. “Course not.”

“I don’t need to eat,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Okay... well...” Jake rubbed at his brow, failing with every floundering, inept attempt to provide a modicum of comfort. Not only had he failed to comfort her, but now she’d gone from sad in general to angry with him, which seemed worse. He retraced her words. What exactly had she said? Something about people insisting they knew what she needed better than she did. He inhaled a steadying breath. “I obviously don’t know what to do here, so why don’t you tell me?”

Eyes filled with amber-colored flame snapped to his. “I need to learn to swim.” She leaned toward him, intent and unblinking. “And you’re going to teach me.”

Jake’s mouth fell open. “Wh-What?”

Energized, Zorah rolled to her knees, encroaching on him, a woman on a mission. “Xavi was right. Nico was drowning, and I stood there like an idiot. What if it had been one of the littles?” Her voice thickened with emotion on the word *littles*, and she paused to choke it down. She slid forward on her hands and knees, invading the periphery of his personal bubble but stopping there. “Every time we come here, any of them could wander out too far, and then what would I do?”

“I... I don’t know.” His mind raced to catch up with the turning tables as her argument built up steam. “Maybe you shouldn’t bring them here.”

She scoffed like that was the stupidest thing she’d ever heard. “Not bring them to cool off when it’s a million degrees and the only activity that sounds halfway appealing is to commit a murder? Have you ever tried keeping three hot, cranky, sleep-deprived toddlers entertained for an entire day?”

“I —”

“You asked what I need, and the answer is swim lessons. From you.” She gave one decisive nod, triumphant in her declaration. “*That’s* what I need.”

Jake crab walked backward and scrambled upright, panic zipping up and down his spine. *Swim* lessons? In the water with Zorah? Near her wet body? Breathing her in? Feeling her heat? His hands on her? Was she crazy?

“No.” Hell no. *Fuck* no. He couldn’t withstand that. “Absolutely not.”

Zorah flinched at his tone but continued undeterred, jumping to her feet to close the distance he’d put between them. Her defiant chin tilted toward his face. “*Yes.*”

He tried again. “*No.*”

She scowled like *he* was being ridiculous. “You’re not getting this. Not only will it be safer for me, but you saw what happened today.” She thrust a condemning finger toward the lake. “If I know, I can teach Nico and Ty and any others, too. It’ll be safer for everyone.”

Jake looked to the lake, the fading sunlight turning the water from a murky man-made lake to a pool of molten gold. So beautiful but so deadly. Zorah was right. The kids did need to learn to swim, Zorah included.

But he couldn’t be the one to do it.

“It’s a good idea,” Jake conceded, warily meeting her eyes. “But I can’t teach you. Ask someone else.”

Her chin firmed. “*No.*”

”*Yes.*”

Zorah studied him with pursed lips like he was an exasperating child. Slowly, she sidled a half step closer, till the tips of her bare toes nudged his. A small thing, too minuscule to comment on or even scoot away from, but alone on this deserted beach, it felt significant. Chest to chest, her head reached just above his chin, and despite the generous curves of her body below her neck, next to his hulking size, she was a tiny thing. Her actions, though, were bold and confident,

prompting no small amount of respect to bloom in his estimation of her.

Voice steady, she peered up at him and said, “I don’t know who you are or where you came from. I don’t know why you’re an outcast in this Pack. I don’t know why you watch me or why I always know when you do. But here’s what I do know: you make toys for pups that aren’t yours, which makes you at least a little bit good.”

Jake opened his mouth to protest and then shut it again when she continued, obviously on a roll.

“And you saved a boy from drowning today, which makes you a full-on hero. But instead of riding that wave of gratitude back to the village to rub it in the other Alphas’ faces, you skulked back up this mountain to hide. You’re an *Alpha*.” She widened her eyes in exasperation. “But you act like a beaten Beta dog. I don’t understand it, and quite frankly, I hate it.”

Wretchedness lanced into his chest. Had he thought she’d peered into his scarred, twisted soul and seen him for the mess he was? That would’ve been preferable. This... this allegation that he was a fucking *hero*? That she looked at him and saw something other than a withered husk of a human being? It was so far from the truth as to be laughable, yet a small, sick part of him burned for it to be true. To be the sort of man who deserved her grace and esteem, he would’ve given anything.

“When you saved Nico today,” she continued softly, “I’d never seen anything like that. My village, where I’m from, it’s next to a river. I’ve lived there my whole life, but I’ve never seen anyone swim like you, so smooth and confident. I’ll never be as strong as an Alpha, but I want that kind of confidence in the water, and only you can teach me that.”

Jake had been controlled and manipulated by many people in the course of his overly long life. Threatened, coaxed, harassed, beaten, tortured... so many evil techniques deployed to get what they wanted out of him. But never had guileless earnestness been weaponized so effectively. Did she even know what power she held over him? She’d never be as strong

as him? Hell, she had ten times his strength in one unguarded, expectant tilt of her brow.

“I’m busy building the watchtower.” He scrubbed his palms over his face, the argument souring his stomach even as he forced the words through clenched teeth. “Another Alpha —”

“If I ask one of them,” she interrupted, her voice taking on fervency, “they’ll all get jealous, and it’ll become some whole stupid knot-measuring thing. They’ll take it as a chance to flirt with me and feel me up, not to seriously teach me what I need to know.”

Jake’s jaw tightened to the point of pain. She wasn’t wrong. He could predict exactly how another Alpha would conduct “lessons,” and it made him want to throw things.

Maybe sensing his concession within her grasp, Zorah continued in a calm, rational tone, “I need to be able to protect the pups around water. Not just the ones here, but the ones at my village, too, when I go back home.”

Jake’s heart skipped a beat. Or twelve. “You’re leaving?”

A cloud settled on Zorah’s face, the first waver of insecurity in her impassioned lobbying. Her eyes slid away, and she rolled her lips inwards. “That’s the plan, yes.”

“When?”

“Before the equinox.”

A month from now, maybe less. Not much time, all things considered. The ticking clock simultaneously reassured and distressed him. She’d leave, and he wouldn’t have to endure this unbearable attraction any longer. It’s what he’d wanted when he asked Hunter for a break, after all; when Zorah left, he’d have one less thing making him miserable in the village. On the other hand, she’d be gone, and the thought of that gouged a pit of emptiness right through his core.

Jake stared over her shoulder and considered. Could he do it? Could he break his promise to Hunter and spend time with her? Could he teach her to swim and hold himself in check when every second in her presence made his skin vibrate? A

few weeks only. Could he hang on for a few weeks and teach her something in the process?

A month was enough time to teach her some beginner strokes, some basic water safety, maybe CPR while they were at it. She might not be as fearless in the water as she imagined, but if she worked hard, she could be proficient, which would be a vast improvement. Her altruistic arguments about teaching others carried weight, they did, but he'd be lying to himself if he said that convinced him. Truth was, Jake needed *Zorah* to be safe. She'd return home to live by a river, and he'd sleep a lot easier at night knowing she had one less weak spot in her existence.

She was young, but she wasn't stupid. He'd asked what she needed, and swimming had been her answer. Why would he doubt her in that? This was protection. This was safety. A skill she could take with her and carry through her entire life, a life he would never be a part of. This was what she needed, and he could give it to her.

He'd focus on the lessons and ignore the rest of it. For a few weeks, he'd turn his back on the thrum in his blood that whispered her name. He'd teach her this and then send her on her way. One more good deed to throw on the pile, a self-appointed Sisyphean task to outweigh all the bad.

Hands on his hips, Jake shifted his gaze to her wide, trusting eyes. "That's not much time." Lightness radiated from *Zorah's* face, and he held up a finger to stop her forthcoming exuberance. "No one can know. It has to be a secret." He cut off her automatic nodding with a slash of his hand. "I'm deadly serious. You can't whisper to your friends. If anyone finds out, if there's even a hint of suspicion..."

Her chin firmed in solemnity. "I can keep my mouth shut."

"Okay." He gusted out a breath. "Then there's the matter of when."

"It'll have to be night," she said. Jake grunted a disbelieving noise, and she gave him an admonishing look. "We can barely keep it a secret right out in the daylight. Besides, I'm busy with the kids during the day, and you're doing —" She

gestured vaguely in the direction of the watchtower. “After the kids are asleep, I can slip away and meet you here.”

“How?” He folded his arms over his chest, not believing this complication was as simple as she made it out to be. “You’ll have to avoid the patrol, which won’t be easy. Someone will see you.”

Her plump lips twitched into a smirk. “Believe it or not, I have practice sneaking around. You be here, I’ll take care of the rest.” She lifted her eyebrows in a hesitant question. “So... you’ll be here?”

“Yeah.” He sighed, resigning himself to his doom. “I’ll be here.”

Zorah beamed. “Good. Tonight then.”

Jake blinked twice in surprise, thinking maybe he ought to stop being startled by every single word that passed her lips. “Tonight?”

Zorah cocked a playful hip. “I’m leaving in a few weeks, remember?”

He scraped his palm along his bristled jawline. Couldn’t he take a few nights to prepare himself, at least? Apparently not. “Right.”

She grinned. “There’s no time to lose.”

No time to lose. No, maybe not time, but a heck of a lot else.

He was so fucked.

CHAPTER 8

Zorah

“Where did they find that canoe?” Matteo asked.

Across the dinner table, he and Heck hunched forward, their gazes intent on her face.

Zorah swallowed a small bite of buttered bread. “I don’t know. They dragged it to the beach. It was all rusted out, and I told them not to put it in the water, but they didn’t listen.”

Riddick, sitting to her right, leaned in closer. His face looked shiny today, like he’d scrubbed it especially hard before dinner, complimented by his luxurious pile of dark brown curls gathered in a jaunty, but freshly assembled, man-bun. He’d clearly gone to some effort to look presentable tonight. Oh god, was he going to insist on spending time with her after supper? No way would her nerves handle that tonight.

“I think they’re both plenty sorry.” His gold tooth winked as he spoke. “I know Ty got his ass whooped by Xavi.”

“He did?” Zorah’s voice rose in surprise and then disappointment. She’d hoped the boys’ parents wouldn’t be overly hard on them. They were growing Alphas, after all. Didn’t that make them prone to some youthful stupidity? “It was a stupid mistake; they didn’t know what would happen.”

Riddick lifted his cup to his lips and gave her a knowing look over the rim as if to say he agreed with Xavi’s parental justice. Zorah’s spirits sunk lower. She was so tired of talking about the lake incident, and for whatever reason, as angry as she’d been at Ty and Nico when they ignored her, she felt oddly protective of them, too.

“They should’ve listened to you.” Matteo pointed at her with a forkful of meat and gravy. “The whole thing could’ve been avoided. It’s a good thing you were there, Zorah.”

He shoveled the food in his mouth, and Zorah racked her brain for something — *anything* — she could change the subject to.

“Here’s what I don’t understand,” Heck, sitting to Matteo’s left, piped up, “why was Jake so close by? What was he doing?”

At the mention of Jake, Zorah’s spine tensed, and all concerns about Nico and Ty evaporated. In all her conversations about the incident, she’d endeavored to avoid discussions of the day’s unlikely hero. Given her swim lesson subterfuge, she figured the less anyone associated the two of them, the better.

Riddick set his cup down and wiped his lip with his thumb. “Hunter sent him up to the ridge above the lake. He’s camping out up there and building a watchtower.”

“No shit.” Matteo stabbed at a chunk of potato. “I hadn’t even noticed he was gone.” He gave a loose, unconcerned shrug and popped the bite into his mouth.

Zorah kept quiet. Jake had mentioned the watchtower, and it made sense. It also explained why she hadn’t seen him around the settlement or felt the presence of his mysterious, invisible touch on the back of her neck.

With one hand flat on the table and one hand on the bench seat behind her, Riddick encroached further into Zorah’s space. “I don’t like it,” he said with a growl. “He shouldn’t be that close to you.”

He was too close. This conversation was too close.

Zorah subtly angled her body back, seeking air not tinged with Riddick’s pungent cedar and smoke tang. “Jake? Why?”

Riddick tapped an agitated finger on the table. “He’s not right in the head. Unstable. Dangerous.”

Zorah bristled; that strange urge to defend Jake bubbled up for the second time today. “He wasn’t dangerous today. He rescued Nico. He’s... he’s a hero.”

“Riddick’s right,” Matteo said, for once not disagreeing with Riddick as a matter of competition. “After what happened in OT, you should stay away from him.”

Pushing her plate away, Zorah folded her hands in her lap, her appetite replaced by leery foreboding. “What happened in OT?”

“He kidnapped Miz Kess,” Heck said, his usually sweet, open face tight with hostility. “She and Hunt were having a drink, Miz Kess went out to relieve herself, and he just grabbed her.”

“It was worse than that,” Matteo added. “You didn’t see where he took her. *I* did.”

Zorah rubbed her thumbs together, her feelings about Jake growing more confused by the second. No question he had a vague and shadowy past, but... abduction? Was she defending a kidnapper? Or, worse, had she inadvertently finagled to be alone with one in a secluded area?

She swallowed around the lump in her throat. “Where did he take her?”

“A bad place.” Matteo’s expression darkened. “A cleaned-out garbage truck. A big, hulking vehicle from before TheEnd. Old and rusted, reeking and filthy. He took her inside, tried to hold her there. Even roughed her up a bit.”

“He hurt her?” Zorah asked in a small, timid voice.

She’d never been afraid of Jake, not the night by the rocks or during their conversation today alone on the beach. But *should* she have been? Was there some sinister aspect of him she’d overlooked in her naivete?

Matteo nodded grimly. “We ran into Hunt — Cal, Simon, and me — and helped him track her to a bad part of town. We got her back, and she had a split lip, twisted ankle, scared to death.” He picked at a piece of dried food on the table with his fingernail. “I’ve been all over OT, in quite a few shady places, but even I never ventured that far. Only the lowest of the low set foot in that area, you know what I mean?” He gave Riddick a look that sent chills down Zorah’s spine. “He was a mess, too. Filthy, hair matted, sores all over him, smelled terrible. Lived like an animal.”

“That’s giving animals too much credit,” Heck said with obvious disgust.

“You need to stay away from him, Zorah,” Riddick warned, his hot breath blasting her cheek like a brand. “Maybe he did a good thing today, but he’s not safe, especially for unmated Omegas.”

“We should talk to Hunt, have him send the fucker farther away to build a watchtower.” Heck’s posture straightened, puffed up with his own idea. “He doesn’t need to be anywhere near the lake, where you and the pups are.”

But if Jake hadn’t been there, Nico would’ve died.

Zorah’s stomach lurched with the sickening memory of standing on the side of the lake as Nico’s head dipped out of sight. These Alphas could talk all day about Jake and his deficiencies, but they hadn’t been there. They hadn’t come to the rescue. Jake had. Zorah glanced from face to face. Riddick, Matteo, Heck all knew what happened. They knew that Jake saved Nico’s life, but they still hated him, still feared him, still looked at him as an object of disdain.

And that made her... angry. She’d chewed Jake out for acting like a beaten Beta dog, but here were his “brothers” going out of their way to treat him as such. Was she correct in wanting to defend him, or was she misguided knowing what he’d done to Kess?

“I don’t understand,” Zorah said carefully. “Why let him join the Pack if he’s so dangerous and... unwell?”

The Alphas grimaced almost in unison. “He’s a friend of Hunter’s, from before TheEnd,” Matteo explained. “Hunt felt he owed him a second chance or something. By rights, he could’ve killed the guy for stealing his Omega, but instead, he made him a deal: get cleaned up and join the Pack or get beat to death in the dirty streets of OT.”

“Doesn’t seem like much of a deal,” Zorah said under her breath.

“That’s not all,” Matteo said. “He’s banned from all contact with Omegas.”

“Better’n he deserved,” Heck said, muttering into his cup, “for scaring Miz Kess like that.”

Some puzzle pieces fell into place. Jake had mumbled as much that night by the rocks. Yet, despite the story about OT, the idea irritated her. For a Pack so liberal in their treatment of Omegas, what right did they have restricting him like that? Shouldn’t Omegas have a choice about who they did or didn’t talk to?

“Jake talked to Marie and Grace today,” Zorah said to Matteo. “Grace even gave him a hug. Lars, Xavi, Colt were all there, it didn’t seem like anyone had a problem with it.”

“I think,” Matteo said, “that was a pretty unique circumstance.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that he shouldn’t be anywhere near you,” Riddick said, so close his chest bumped into her shoulder. “If he so much as *looks* at you, you come tell me. I’ll take care of him.”

Zorah scooted down the bench, irritation simmering. He was being so pushy tonight. Why couldn’t he give her some space? Jake wasn’t here, so Riddick didn’t need to lord over her like a starving dog over a piece of meat.

“No need to worry.” Zorah grabbed the Alphas’ empty plates and started stacking them with practiced efficiency, ignoring eye contact as she lied through her teeth. “He hardly even looked at me and went right back up the ridge as soon as he could. It was like he couldn’t get out of there fast enough.” That part was true, at least. She stood and swung her leg over the bench, ready to hightail it out of the mess hall to be alone with her thoughts and all this new information. She flashed Riddick a tight smile. “Anyway, don’t say anything to Hunt; Jake can’t hurt anyone working by himself up on the ridge.”

Matteo snatched the remaining roll off Zorah’s plate and stuffed it in his mouth, saying, “All the same, make sure you stay away from him, Z.”

“Yeah, sure.” She nodded to each of the Alphas and grabbed the set of dishes to take to the bus bucket. “I plan to.”

CHAPTER 9

Zorah

Her stomach quivered so hard that she could've sworn she'd eaten a swarm of butterflies for dinner. That would be weird. And gross. But she couldn't shake the feeling. Nerves? Excitement? Fear? Maybe all three, but the feeling swelled every minute she'd lain in bed waiting for the entire settlement to slowly — so damn slowly — settle down for bed. Morris Hill had no electricity, so it had no clocks. No way of knowing if an hour ticked by or only a minute. A few times, she pinched herself awake, not wanting to miss this chance. Jake agreed to teach her, but only barely, and if she flubbed this first lesson, there wouldn't be another.

In truth, the proposal popped out of her mouth before she'd had a chance to fully consider all the implications and complications. She needed to learn to swim; he could teach her. It made too much sense to pass up. But, after the dinner conversation with Matteo, Riddick, and Heck, the second guesses began to pile up.

Given Jake's cowed and awkward manner, it was hard to believe he had boldly abducted Kess right from under her Alpha's nose. Yet, they'd all told the same story, and it left little room for doubt. Then there was his *watching* to consider. If she tallied all the times she circulated between different groups in the village to try to get away from the touch, it made her head spin. It had never worked because the touch — *his* touch, his *eyes* on her — followed wherever she went.

Zorah had to admit, it was straight-up creepy. And now, here she was, tromping through the woods to spend time alone, in the dark, with her bizarro stalker. Maybe that explained the tacky moisture that coated her palms. Should she ask him what happened with Kess? Get his side of the story? Or would he become annoyed and call off the lessons before they even began?

She wiped her hands on her long skirt. Did he even *want* to teach her? Or had she bullied and shamed him into it?

As she had lain awake in the dark, her words rattled around her head. “*You’re an Alpha. But you act like a beaten Beta dog.*” Never in her life had such bold words — to an *Alpha*, no less — flown from her lips. She chalked up her brazenness to the accumulated stress of the day; otherwise, she would’ve bit her tongue like a good, compliant Omega.

She’d been lucky, though. A more volatile Alpha might’ve been thrown into a rage at such an insult. The fact that Jake hadn’t taken the bait only added to the tangled esteem she held him in. Most astonishingly, he’d looked... stricken. Hurt, even. But how could she, an inexperienced Omega, hurt a rugged, unnerving, transformed Alpha like him?

Counting Hunter and her grandfather, Jake was only the third transformed Alpha she’d ever met. Mystery surrounded these odd creatures who had lived through TheEnd and kept on living. Her father’s father had been one of them, but she’d only met him once as a small child and recalled him being a wild, terrifying creature. Nana said he was “troubled, like they all are.” But went on to add, with a salacious wink, that it hadn’t stopped her from lying with him as a much younger Beta woman because “he had a nice singing voice.” Alpha-Beta pairings randomly produced Alpha children, and, as fate would have it, that brief union created Zimmer, Zorah’s father. But that had been where his sire’s involvement ended. Zimmer, for his part, had nothing positive to say about him or any of the transformed Alphas.

The shimmering lake peeked between the trees, and Zorah laid a palm on her trembling tummy. The quarter moon gleamed dull and hazy. In another week, it would be full, giving them plenty of brightness for their lessons. That is, as long as Jake showed. Was she nervous that he would come? Or that he wouldn’t?

Her gaze snagged on his moonlit form, sitting by the shore as still as a statue. Leaning back on his palms, he stretched his long, pale legs so his heels dipped in the water, and his eyes bored into hers with an unnerving gleam. Of course, he’d known she approached; he could probably hear her galloping

pulse from a half mile away. The distinctive prickle on the back of her neck stirred to life.

Zorah instinctively touched her nape, greeting the sensation like an old acquaintance she couldn't remember if she liked or not.

Quickly, gripping her towel to her chest, Zorah followed the water's edge to where he sat. "Have you been waiting long?" she asked, her voice hushed and embarrassingly breathless.

"Not long." He got to his feet, already stripped down to a loose undergarment and nothing else.

Oh. She had not anticipated... that.

Biting her lip to stifle her awe at the abundance of male flesh on display, Zorah demurely lowered her lids. But in the process, her averting gaze lingered on his naked chest. Pale hair scattered over his pecs and nestled in delicate tufts around his tender, dusky nipples. This small glimpse of vulnerability captivated her. She pressed her tongue against her teeth, wanting to lick the alluring nubs and explore the texture with the flat of her tongue. The fantasy hijacked her attention and grabbed her low, *very low*, in her belly. A sensation not butterfly related at all.

Bad, bad, Zorah. She wasn't here to ogle this potentially dangerous Alpha; she was here to learn from him.

She'd seen plenty of Alphas shirtless, but this was a first, seeing one pantless, and no amount of silent scolding tore her gaze from the perfect taper of his narrow waist. Deep, carved grooves angled to his groin, and the outline of *him* bulged against his thin undergarment. It left nothing, and somehow everything, to her careening imagination. Zorah clenched her towel tighter to her chest, curbing her inappropriate impulse to reach out and trace his seductive contours with a fingertip — or perhaps free them from their fabric restraint entirely.

"You ready?" he said with a gruffness she hadn't heard since that night by the rocks.

Had he caught her staring? Could he scent the lust coursing through her veins? She could hardly help it; the combined

sight, scent, and heat of him made her dizzy.

“Yes,” she said with compensatory exuberance that probably sounded more insane than enthusiastic.

“Is” — he pushed a palm into his hair, irritation rolling off him in waves — “that what you’re wearing?”

In anticipation of the lesson, she’d removed her bra and stuffed it under her pillow back in the cabin, but she’d left on the clothes she’d worn that day. Zorah looked down at her T-shirt and homely, mid-length skirt. Probably not ideal for swimming, but she had precious little else to wear for this activity. As Omegas in River Bend didn’t wear pants or shorts like the ones in Morris Hill, her wardrobe consisted of calf- and ankle-length skirts and long shirts or sweaters. Grace had offered to sew her a pair of shorts for the summer, but she’d declined, not sure how she’d feel running around the village so exposed after a lifetime of covering up.

Even bras were unusual here. In Morris Hill, the Omegas felt free to be a bit more... well... *freer* with their bosoms. However, given the size of her chest and the amount of *au naturale* movement that caused, going without left her feeling naked. That being said, she had precious few support garments in her possession and didn’t want to dirty one in the lake unnecessarily. Another reason she clutched her towel to her torso like a child’s stuffed animal, it obscured the swaying heaviness of her chest.

“This is all I have,” Zorah explained hesitantly.

A breath whooshed out of him like he’d been kicked in the gut. Impatience stormed across his face. “You need to freely move your legs in the water to swim. They’ll get all tangled up in a long skirt like that.”

Zorah shifted miserably from one foot to the other, feeling silly she’d not considered this in her preparation. “Oh. Well. I’ll figure something out for next time. I’m sorry, I should’ve —”

“It’s fine. Come on.” Turning on his heel, he strode into the water, not looking back.

Well, they were certainly off to a good start.

Zorah tossed the towel a few feet from the water and, not giving herself time to dwell on her insecurities, hurried to wade in after him. The temperature had dropped, but she welcomed the cool touch of water. It gave her something to think about other than how disconcerting it felt to be with him, alone, in the quiet of the night, now that she knew what he'd done to Kess and what promise he'd made as a result.

Zorah was too preoccupied with these considerations, so she didn't notice when a steep drop-off took the water level from hip height to chest height with a single, slippery step.

“Oh!”

Jake whirled, erasing the space between them to cup her elbow in stabilizing support. Her entire attention reoriented to this new sensation. The searing grip, bare skin meeting bare skin, at once so nominal yet so profound. It was like she'd never been touched before, or that every touch that preceded this one was in preparation for this single, earth-quaking caress.

She stood stock-still in the water, the feeling reverberating through all her cells at once.

Jake dropped her elbow and backed away like she had a contagious skin condition. A blank expression blanketed his face, not giving her any clues. Had he felt that as well? The shocking and strange enormity of the incidental touch?

“You okay?” he asked in his impatient voice, as if his entire world hadn't been turned on its axis.

Maybe it hadn't.

“I'm fine.” She added as much confidence as she could while flailing in the confusion of the moment. Determined to get her lessons, Zorah awkwardly stuck her arms out to her sides. “So, do I start with the arms or...?”

“No. Start with breathing.”

“I'm already breathing.”

“Breathing *in* the water.” He scowled. “Or, no, not breathing it *in*, don’t do that.” He sounded as flustered as she felt, and that made her shoulders drop an inch or so from her earlobes. Maybe the touch had affected him.

“Learning to take breaths while you’re swimming,” he explained with deliberate patience. “Let’s start by blowing bubbles.”

Zorah focused on the task at hand. She was here to learn to swim, not act like a silly Omega tittering about the barest of Alpha attention. Plenty of Alphas would touch her elbow anytime she wanted, but only this one could teach her to swim.

She firmed her chin, looked him square in the eye, and said, “Show me.”

CHAPTER 10

Jake

The early-morning creatures waking up to start their day serenaded them on their return walk to the village. The entire way, Jake strained his senses for any sounds or smells of an Alpha on patrol or anyone else who might be out and about. The sooner he got her back, the better. He was more than ready to get Zorah on her way and out of his sight.

Jake stared at the curling tips of her dark hair and the growing wet spot where they rested against the towel she'd slung over her soaking wet clothes. His anxiety refreshed anew. How would she explain her wet head? Or her soggy clothes? Or her absence? Or her fatigue from lack of sleep?

Just swim lessons, she'd argued. Simple enough, in theory, yet he'd failed to appreciate how much of his participation the subversion required. Only one lesson and he was already so fucking deep in this; it was absurd to tell himself otherwise.

On the other hand, he welcomed this highly practical problem to solve. It distracted him from the rest of the problems stampeding through his mind, especially the one walking right in front of him.

At the sight of the buildings peeking between the trees, Jake cleared his throat. "You okay from here?"

Zorah faced him, her lips turned down. "I told you I didn't need an escort," she said, reiterating their brief, but somewhat heated, discussion about whether or not she could walk herself back to the village alone.

The thing was, he'd sat waiting by the lake, guilt over letting her walk through the dark by herself flailing in his chest, and swore he'd remedy his mistake on the return trip. So, *hell no* was he letting her walk home on her own.

Jake lifted a palm toward her head. "How're you gonna explain the wet hair?"

She gave the slightest of eye rolls, and the irreverent gesture charmed him. Despite the exasperated attitude it conveyed, he loved how it showed her comfort with him and the absence of the timidity she'd arrived with. "I'm going to say that I woke up early and felt sweaty from the heat, so I popped over for a morning dip."

Jake paused a too-long moment in alarm, all musings about comfort and irreverence disappearing. Her excuse sounded ridiculous, and he wasn't even a concerned surrogate parent. "With your clothes on? You honestly think that'll work?"

Her full brows speared down. "Why wouldn't it?"

He chuffed in protest. "It sounds like obvious bullshit, for one." He rubbed at his chin, thinking it through. "Next time, bring a change of dry clothes. You can change and wear the dry set home; I'll take the wet ones, dry 'em at my place, and bring 'em back for the next lesson. How's that sound?"

The corners of her lips curled upward. "That's a great idea." Her face fell as she fingered a fold in her damp skirt. "I'm sorry about this, but you have to understand Omegas in my Pack aren't allowed to wear pants." She tucked a piece of hair behind the perfect curve of her ear. "The reason I can't swim is that Omegas aren't allowed to do that, either."

"That's stupid."

"Yes." She nodded emphatically, seemingly energized like no one had ever agreed with her before. "It is stupid, and dangerous. But they don't see it that way."

Molars grinding, Jake gave a terse nod at the reminder of this stark, immutable difference between them: Zorah came from this world. She'd never known any other. She'd never played peewee soccer or eaten an ice cream bar or gone to prom. She'd never gone dancing with her friends and drank too much or backpacked around Europe or dyed her hair purple because she felt like it.

A sudden swell of outrage flooded his mouth with bitterness. Why shouldn't Zorah have those things? Why shouldn't she get to make all her own dumb decisions like

every other girl he'd grown up with or dated? So what if she lived in this stupid world where Alphas took control of everything, whether or not they had any right to? Why did she have to cover her body in ugly long skirts and be told she couldn't swim? Why did she have to be kept helpless in the face of a harsh, unforgiving world?

She was more than an asset, more than chattel, more than a place for some half-rate Alpha to bury his knot.

Jake strove for calm. He had to do better. Had to be better than any of those pricks who sought to control her. Deep inside, he knew what it was like to be treated like property, to be moved from place to place with no explanation or consideration, to give one's labor with no compensation; she wouldn't get any of that from him.

Swim lessons he could do, the most basic survival skill he could teach her, and if that's all he ever gave her, it would be something. "Don't know what to do about your wet hair though."

Zorah tossed the locks in question with an air of belligerence. "Let me worry about it." She shuffled closer. "Don't worry. I told you, I'm an excellent sneaker."

Zorah's full lips twitched with good humor, and the muscles around Jake's mouth answered. The long-unused fibers creaked, folding into position like sculpting hardened cement. Strange, really, that a thing that once came so easily to him — a smile — would feel so fucking momentous. But, then again, everything with Zorah was momentous.

Watching her from the shadows, he was mesmerized by her beauty and gentle nature. But it went far beyond that now. Without even trying, with sheer determination and moxie, this tiny girl somehow chased away the shadows on his heart.

Swept up, Jake dropped his voice low, the teeniest, tiniest bit flirtatious. "How did you acquire those skills?"

Zorah considered him a guarded glance, as if gauging his reaction while mischief blatantly twinkled in her eyes. "Like I said, there were lots of things I wasn't allowed to do."

Jake's lips stretched from cheek to cheek. There it was again, his long-dormant smile, fighting to be freed. "Maybe something worse than swimming," he said softly. Coyly, like a seasoned flirt, she bit her bottom lip, saying but not saying a great deal. Jake lifted a teasing brow and tipped forward. "Or maybe better."

A decidedly un-girlish knowing lit her eyes, and her voice shifted into a husky register he felt in his balls. "Maybe *much* better."

This flash of this hidden vixen transformed his urge to grin into another, much less chaste need. Knowing her innocence only went so deep lit him up like a dry Christmas tree. A dangerous, dangerous situation, indeed.

Reeling it back in, Jake squared his shoulders and jerked his chin toward the settlement. "You should get back."

As if on cue, her mouth composed a giant yawn, and she rubbed the heel of her hand against an eye. Jake cursed himself for keeping her out so late. He wanted to scoop her up and tuck her into a soft, cozy bed. Then, crawl in behind and make it even cozier.

"You'll be there tonight?" she asked. "For another lesson?"

Jake rocked back on his heels. "You've been awake all night. When are you going to sleep?"

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "When are you going to sleep?"

"I told you before, I don't." He lifted one shoulder. "I can nap during the day if I need to. You need rest. I won't teach you if you're exhausted."

"Yeah, but —"

"No." The rebuttal reverberated up from deep in his chest, rich with command. His voice but with something added to it, something *more*.

Where the fuck had that come from?

Zorah's lips clamped shut, her tired eyes taking on a hooded sultriness that registered as anything but innocence, and for once, she didn't argue.

In his next breath, a new musky sweetness mingled with her citrusy smell, and the complex *mélange* stirred him like a palm cupped to his groin; his dick gave an unsubtle nudge of interest.

“It’s not safe,” he added, reining himself in from whatever the hell was activating below his waist.

Jake fixed his gaze over her shoulder as his cock thickened with a determination wholly unrelated to the situation at hand. Yet he couldn’t ignore the intoxicating scent in the air, the one that seemed to speak directly to his disobedient dick. Confined in his pants, it pressed against his damp shorts, chafing and bending at a weird, unfortunate angle. *God-fucking-dammit.*

He clenched his molars to keep from adjusting himself. Trying not to pop a boner in front of a girl. What was he? Fucking fifteen, again?

Zorah’s eyes drifted away, and fresh color rose on her cheeks. Good lord, did she see him struggling to control his stupid dick? Could she scent his arousal?

Wait. Was he scenting hers? Was that what —?

Oh, *shit.*

“I’ve gotta go,” he grumbled, not moving an inch.

“Okay,” she said simply. And then she did the absolute worst thing she could’ve possibly done; slipped her little pink tongue out of her mouth and *wet* her fucking lips.

Jake chomped down on his cheek, imprisoning a groan behind clenched teeth.

“Two nights.” The words scraped over his parched tongue like nails on a chalkboard. “Two nights of sleep before our next lesson. Get some rest.”

He turned on his heel and stalked back into the woods. Hopefully the reprieve would be long enough to calm his overly interested dick. If not, he didn’t know what he was going to do.

CHAPTER 11

Jake

Hands on his hips, Colt paced the perimeter of the foundation, cleared and leveled and filled in with giant rocks. The Pack's Second had appeared midmorning, hauling a load of lumber and other supplies to the worksite, and none too soon. After all Jake's furious work on the structure — fueled in no small part by his resolve to keep his filthy mind off Zorah — the building materials were needed, even if the Alpha's presence wasn't. Not that Jake had a problem with Colt, in particular, he just wanted to thank him for the replenishments and get the guy moving so he could resume his brooding solitude.

“Thought we might see you at dinner the last few nights,” Colt slid a questioning glance in his direction. “What with being the hero of the week and all.”

“Not my scene.” Jake paused in stacking some of the fresh lumber off to the side and wiped sweat from his upper lip.

“No, no problem.” Colt cocked his head toward the cabin's framing. “Really impressive what you've done up here.”

Jake scratched at the back of his neck, not sure how to respond to the unexpected compliment. “Yeah, well, you can get a lot done when you don't sleep.”

Colt gave a noncommittal grunt and stooped to inspect the foundational logs Jake had cut down, debarked, and leveled into place. Compared to rebuilding the mess hall, this combination watchtower/dwelling was a small project. The plans entailed constructing a small, one-room dwelling and then building up from the roof to construct a crow's nest. If things kept moving along, Jake expected to have the exterior finished within a week. As he'd said, not sleeping freed up a lot of time, and up here all alone, he wouldn't disturb anyone with construction noise, no matter the time of the day.

Anyone like a fussy baby and her sweet nanny.

No other woman, Omega or Beta, or hell, even no *human* woman before TheEnd, had ever preoccupied his mind the way Zorah did. No amount of physical labor could shake the hold she had on him merely by existing in the world. The whole thing made no sense. It was like someone took a piece of paper and sought to create the exact opposite of him in every way: she was young, he was old; she was beautiful, he was scarred; she was pure, he was damaged; she deserved everything, and he had nothing to give.

And yet. He wanted things from her. *Lots* of things.

Jake picked through the new tools Colt delivered. “Did Hunt send you to check on me?”

“Naw.” Colt tramped back to the empty horse cart and produced a knapsack. Sitting on a pile of freshly planed cedar boards, he opened it up and started unpacking sandwiches. “Volunteered. You hungry?”

The oddly succinct reply gave him pause. Colt, to his credit, never joined in some of the more egregious bullying, but he’d never been particularly friendly, either. Jake assumed the Second resented the incident with Kess as much as anyone in the Pack, so this sudden upswell of friendliness surprised him.

“I could eat.” Taking a seat opposite, Jake accepted the meat and cheese sandwich. “Thanks.”

“Here.” Colt reached back into the pack and produced two perfectly ripe peaches, handing them off with a wry tilt to his lips. “Don’t forget your vitamins.”

Jake plucked the fuzzy fruit from Colt’s outstretched palm. “I think they’re called peaches.”

Colt lifted a shoulder. “Hunt’s been on a kick lately, walking around muttering about vitamins and scurvy.”

Despite himself, Jake chuckled at the entirely on-brand image of his old friend grouching about a rare vitamin deficiency. Replenishing the Pack’s food supplies was top priority for Hunter and the entire Pack, but he didn’t expect Hunter’s worry to extend to balanced diets. Avoiding starvation satisfied a much lower bar.

Jake unwrapped the sandwich. “Is that a real concern? Or is he just getting himself exercised about something?”

They shared a conspiratorial “you know what he’s like” look, and Colt shrugged. “How the fuck should I know?”

“Well, your teeth aren’t falling out, so you’re probably okay.” Setting the ripe peaches aside, Jake chewed his sandwich, answering a few more questions from Colt about plans for the siding, waterproofing, water supply, and other details of the project. The poignant normalcy of the exchange lulled him into a premature sense of safety because, the next thing he knew, he was asking Colt, “You were born an Alpha, right? Born in the AfterEnd?”

“Yeah. I mean, I didn’t know I was an Alpha until I turned sixteen and shot up a foot and a half. It was a bit of a surprise. Why do you ask?”

“I... uh...” Jake fiddled with the cloth wrapping around his half-eaten sandwich, filled with embarrassment about the questions he wanted to ask. “Can you explain the Alpha-Omega thing to me? Like, the bond or whatever.”

Jake glanced up in time to see Colt’s bewildered expression. “What d’you mean?”

“Well,” — Jake knuckled a stray curl from his sticky forehead — “it’s like this thing that everyone seems to know about and understand, but I just... don’t, I guess.”

Colt gave him a long, inscrutable look and then fished another sandwich out of his knapsack. “It’s pretty simple,” he said between bites. “Alphas and Omegas are drawn to each other, in some kinda way. Probably mostly for the purposes of reproduction, but no one knows for sure. I mean, you know Alpha-Omega pairs only make Alpha and Omega babies, right? Alphas can make Alpha babies with Beta women, although it’s random, hit-or-miss; but Beta women can’t birth Omega babies.”

Jake chewed the inside of his cheek, feigning patience as Colt unscrewed the cap from his canteen and took several long pulls.

“So that’s the bond, then?” he asked. “An Alpha-Omega pair who has a baby?”

“No.” Colt wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, chuckling like Jake was a confused schoolboy. “How do you not know this? It’s pretty basic stuff.”

“I, uh...” Jake cast about for a ready excuse for his ignorance. He couldn’t exactly pop out with, “*Well, see, I was in a forced labor camp for thirty years after TheEnd, and by the time I escaped, everyone had all this shit worked out, but no one bothered to explain it to me. Also, I was too gorked out on whatever substances I could get my hands on to understand even if they did.*”

“I’ve just heard different, conflicting things over the years,” he hedged, “and figured you would know the truth of it, being as you were born in the AfterEnd and all. I’ve never lived around Om — in a Pack before.”

With a halfhearted shrug, Colt said, “Any Alpha-Omega pair can get together, but for some, there’s a special connection, some invisible force pulling them together, something they can’t ignore. I’ve heard that sometimes an Alpha feels it first, sometimes the Omega, but eventually, it becomes obvious that they’re meant to be together. Like, fate or something.”

Jake’s pulse pounded behind his eyes like a hammer on an anvil. Within a day of his arrival in Morris Hill, he’d caught Zorah’s scent on the wind, and his knees nearly gave out. In that moment, something sparked to life inside him. He’d been wrestling it back into submission ever since. She wasn’t his. She never would be.

But then when he touched her the other night... *shit*. The instant his skin contacted hers, no one else on earth existed. Time froze. The planet stopped turning. Even the breeze seemed to hold its breath. Jake could’ve straight-up died in that moment. A fatal heart attack to wipe him out in one fell swoop and he would’ve died happy, with his fingertips buzzing from the warmth of her skin.

If that wasn't the pull Colt described, he didn't have any other explanation.

The bread and meat in his mouth turned tasteless. Forcing the mass down felt like swallowing a wadded-up sock. "And then what?" he croaked.

"Then, they exchange mating bites, and the connection gets even stronger, I guess." Colt looked off into the woods, a speculative look on his face before adding, "Like, they sense each other, pick up on each other's emotions. I've even heard some say they can hear their mate's thoughts."

"And" — Jake cleared the frog in his throat — "if they can't be together? Or the bond is refused? Or broken?"

He suspected he already knew. The night of the attack, he'd been posted to guard Della, to keep her in her cabin while Hunt and the others tried to figure out what the hell to do, given her sudden reappearance after Cal abducted, mated, and claimed her. Jake didn't know the woman, hadn't even formally been introduced to her, but the force of her hysteria that night blew his hair back from his face. The cause? Separation from her Alpha mate.

"I don't know." Colt rubbed at his chin, eyeing Jake carefully. "Why do you ask?"

Mechanically, Jake re-wrapped a second, half-eaten sandwich and set it aside with the peaches. He'd eat them later, when his appetite returned, if it ever did. Jumping to his feet, Jake stalked to the cabin's footprint, examining his work with unseeing eyes. "I mean, it can't always work out, can it? This is the AfterEnd. People get sick and die. They get injured and die. Every single day. What if an Alpha has an Omega who's meant for them, but they never meet? What if there's some other reason they can't be together? What happens then?" The words blasted from his lips like a busted water pipe, presenting every conceivable nightmare scenario except the one pounding against his temples.

What if an Alpha swore upon pain of death to never touch an Omega ever again? What if the Alpha is a wretched piece of shit? What then? *What then?*

Wiping his damp palms on his pants, he shot a quick glance at Colt, who sat unmoving despite Jake's sudden outburst.

"I dunno, man," Colt said cautiously. Too fucking cautiously, like Jake was a land mine he stepped around.

Fuck. He shouldn't have said anything. Should've kept his god damn mouth shut. He'd given too much away and made the Second skeptical. Colt wasn't stupid. Clearly, Jake revealed more investment in the topic than he'd initially let on, and it didn't take Sherlock fucking Holmes to deduce why.

With sheer will, Jake picked up a pickaxe and mustered a false cheerfulness that fooled exactly no one. "Well, I'm gonna get back to it. Thanks for bringing all this stuff up here."

Without waiting for a reply, Jake snagged the sled he'd constructed for hauling rocks and marched back into the tree cover, needing to do anything but converse with Colt and pretend he wasn't rocked down to his absolute core. He needed to be alone with his thoughts, to figure out how he would exist in a world where he was beginning to suspect Zorah was meant to be his.

But wasn't.

CHAPTER 12

Zorah

“Pixie, you hold Jace’s hand and follow me, okay?” Zorah hefted Ginny higher on her hip with one hand and hoisted her heavy basket with the other.

Scorching August heat, plus holding a wiggling, child-sized furnace did not make for a comfortable carry. Doing one last head count, Zorah set off, her small charges toddling along behind.

“Zorah!” a deep voice called, and she turned to see Riddick jogging toward her with a raised hand. “Wait up!”

“Hang on a minute, kids,” she said, breathing through her irritation at his ill-timed interruption.

Couldn’t he see she had her hands full? She placed the basket back on the ground and shifted a squirming, damp Ginny to the other hip.

“I want to go to the lake,” Pixie complained.

“I know,” Zorah said, feeling a deep kinship with Pixie’s pique. She’d gotten some rest since her swim lessons, but the heat plus fatigue strained her patience. “We *are* going to the lake. Just hang on one more minute so we can see what Riddick needs, okay?”

“Zaw-wah,” Jace whined, following his sister’s lead but ramping it up into a stage-one tantrum. “I wanna go to the wake now!”

“Hey.” Riddick jogged the last few feet to where she’d paused their sweaty, mutinous caravan, a wide grin showing off his golden tooth. “What’re you doing?”

“What’s it look like I’m doing?” Zorah snapped, immediately regretting her tone at his crestfallen expression.

Riddick raised his hands in surrender. “Sorry, sorry. Here, I can help. Why don’t I carry” — he looked helplessly at the child in her arms and the two glowering at her side — “something.”

Zorah's shoulders softened. If he wanted to help her rather than just flirt and waste her time, she wouldn't say no. "Take the basket and hold Pixie's hand. We're going to the lake. Are you sure you have time?"

"Sure." He stooped and plucked the overloaded basket from the ground as if it weighed nothing, tucking the woven handles into the crook of his elbow. "Okay, Pixie dust, are you ready?"

"Yes," the four-year-old declared, reaching up to grasp the tips of Riddick's long fingers.

And then they were off. Not wanting to slow momentum a second time, Zorah charged ahead. At her own pace, she could cover the mile-long journey in not much time. But with cranky kids in tow, the time and distance stretched much longer.

"I'm surprised Grace and Lars let you bring the kids here, after what happened with Nico and everything. Aren't they worried?" Riddick asked once they were under the blessed shade of the dense forest.

Zorah rolled her eyes. Was he *trying* to annoy her with that question? Of course they worried, but they also trusted her. Maybe not Riddick, though. Maybe he was more like the Alphas in River Bend than she'd realized, assuming she was too inept to be trusted with responsibility. Or perhaps the heat was getting to her, making her as cranky and ill-tempered as the kids.

She half turned her head to answer as calmly as she could. "None of them have had a decent nap this week, so they're all walking baby disasters. The water is the only thing that keeps them semi-calm."

Riddick gave a low grumble of discontent. "Grace and Lars shouldn't work you so hard. They don't give you any time to relax."

An incredulous laugh bubbled out of Zorah's throat in place of the scream she wanted to release. First, he implied Grace and Lars didn't trust her, and now he insinuated that they trusted her too much?

Someone would have to pry her fingernails off before she'd say a single negative word about her hosts. When convincing Zorah's wary parents to let her spend the summer in Morris Hill, Lars had done the heavy lifting. He'd lamented the struggles of his overwhelmed mate and expressed confidence in how appreciative she'd be for Zorah's expert help. Zorah sat quietly during the pitch, her fingers blanched white as she folded them calmly in her lap, silently begging any god she could think of to please let her parents agree, please give her one chance at freedom from her proscribed future.

Lars and Grace were good people, and the reminder reinforced her guilt for lying about the swim lessons. Two nights ago, the entire family had been too exhausted to notice she'd gone, but for her second lesson, she'd concocted a fictitious story to explain her absence. She hated lying to them when they'd treated her with nothing but kindness, but she couldn't see an alternative.

"Why don't they give you some time off?" Riddick continued to grouse behind her.

Hoping to divert his attention away from how she spent her time, she tossed the light tease over her shoulder. "Well, maybe if I was a big, strong Alpha, I could run off my work assignment whenever I pleased."

"Come *on*," Pixie said, and Zorah turned in time to see the girl give her two-year-old brother's arm a harsh yank. "You're too slow."

"Ow! My wegs hurt," Jace whined. "Zaw-wah. I don't wanna walk."

Without further discussion, Jace promptly plopped himself in the middle of the path, his chubby knees and dirty feet sticking straight out in front of him.

The troop halted, and Zorah shot Riddick a pleading look. "Can you carry him, please?"

"Carry me too! Piggyback!" Pixie chirped, bouncing on her toes.

“Zaw-wah, I want *you* to carry me,” Jace said, banging his heels to kick up dust.

Riddick shook his head in wide-eyed amazement. “How do you manage this every single day?” he asked under his breath.

“One step at a time.” Zorah sighed, crouching to talk to Jace. “Listen, buddy, do you see how tall Riddick is? He’s going to carry you up so big and high; don’t you think that sounds like fun?” Jace slid a suspicious glance to Riddick, not at all convinced. “I think he’s even taller than your daddy,” Zorah said, using her best two-year-old wrangling magic. “Do you think you could go up there and see if you can see farther than when Daddy carries you? Can you do that for me so I know?”

“He’s not bigger than Daddy,” Pixie said, chewing her lip. “But I wanna see, too.”

“Of course, you can see, too. Riddick can carry both of you. Can’t he?” Zorah grinned, ready to turn her charm on Riddick to seal the deal.

But when her chin tilted up, she found herself face-to-crotch with the handsome Alpha, who’d apparently come quite close while she’d been talking to Jace. Heat, having nothing to do with the weather, scalded her cheeks, getting even worse when her eyes flew upward to collide with his. His sooty lashes drooped in a look of pure lust, and the pronounced bulge near her cheek gave a definite twitch. Alpha scent washed over her; his distinctive mix of cedar and smoke and sultry masculine tang enveloped her instantly.

After spending time with Riddick all summer and exchanging a few chaste kisses with him in hidden corners, she knew his scent well. She didn’t hate it. Yet, something had changed. Under the weight of the heat, fatigue, and the endless monotony of childcare, the potent odor blanketed her like an oily residue she’d need to scrub off with soap. It wasn’t bad, but it... wasn’t good either.

Not your Alpha, her inner Omega whispered. *Not this one.*

All the heat in Zorah's cheeks went clammy. Never had that quiet voice from deep inside her psyche uttered anything with such certitude. As if adding insult to injury, a longing for a different scent — salty, biting, fresh — reared its unsubtle head. Clean and brisk, one whiff of Jake's distinctive scent would dispel Riddick's oppressive contamination. Of that, she had no doubt, and Zorah despaired of not being able to conjure it up out of thin air from the strength of her memory and will alone. Maybe at her lesson tonight, she could steal a shirt of his or a towel he'd used to wipe his brow, then she could carry it with her for times like these.

Wait. *What?* Crouched on the dirty ground, surrounded by three ticking tantrum time bombs, fantasizing about stealing a shirt from the Pack's outcast, was this a sign of an impending heat stroke?

Swallowing, Zorah popped to her feet, not looking at Riddick as she said, "Come on, kids, let's be quick about this. Riddick has to get back to work, so hang on tight and no fighting. We'll be at the lake in no time at all."

She hustled back onto the trail and plowed ahead, not daring to look behind with all her thoughts and emotions jumbled. *Not your Alpha, not your Alpha*, the phrase ricocheted around her head. Like a swimmer breaking the water's surface, Jake's face materialized in the back of her mind, and that petulant inner voice quieted immediately.

No, Zorah insisted to her inner Omega, *not him. He's not for us.*

Jake couldn't be her Alpha. After all, if he were, she would know, wouldn't she? She would've known weeks ago when she first came here. Isn't that how it was supposed to work? Not only that, but her Prince Charming would never reside in a garbage truck. He also wouldn't skulk around the village, lurking and leering at her from the shadows.

The leaden weight of cold, bitter reality pooled in her stomach. Maybe she didn't have a Prince Charming. Maybe fated mates *were* a fairy tale. Maybe her mother was right, and one Alpha was as good as another. Except, if that were the

case — and increasingly it looked like it was — then Zorah had to choose. And what if she chose wrong?

For whatever reason, her inner Omega liked Jake. But what did *she* know? What reason did Zorah have to value her opinion? It's not like she ever helpfully counseled Zorah before. No, she'd been silent when Zorah snuck around with the Beta boy and ruined his family's life. She'd done nothing to dissuade Zorah when she ran away from home and nearly got herself *and* her father killed. Where was her oh-so-helpful inner Omega then?

Zorah nuzzled Ginny's head, trying in vain to bury her nose in the infant's soft, fine hair to calm herself and displace Riddick's Alpha attar that clung to her nasal passages. She drew it into her lungs, finding comfort in the sour reek of dried spit up and the acidic tang of pee alongside her sweet baby smell. Ginny giggled as Zorah's nose nudged against the child's humid neck rolls, and Zorah did it again, eliciting a fit of giggles that broke through her anxiety.

She had to stay focused. She only had a few more weeks to figure this out, and this time, she couldn't afford to make a mistake.

CHAPTER 13

Jake

“You have to arch your back more.”

Teaching Zorah to float had been a terrible idea. A good, sensible idea as far as swimming and water safety, but as far as minimizing his contact with her and keeping things purely teacher-student, a fucking nightmare.

His fingers skimmed her lower back, bumping over the dainty knobs of her spine as he gently supported her stretched-out body. Memories of his former life wafted through his mind. Laying a gentle, supportive hand on the small of his date's back, a protective, gentlemanly touch to guide them through a crowded bar. His body buzzing with the anticipation of getting them back to his place so that same hand could explore the divots and dimples under their clothes. Savoring the tease of a barely-there touch in a public area, knowing what would come later. He'd been that guy once, the guy with easy charm and a quick joke. Never a mysterious brooder like Hunter. *Shit*. When had he become the brooding one who couldn't make small talk with a pretty woman?

Probably around the time he became a captive laborer for those worthless pieces of shit, the Righteous Brethren. Or had it been later? When they took away the only thing keeping him somewhat attached to his humanity? His angel, his Ava.

His heart panged with sad resignation, as it always did when Ava drifted into his thoughts. He'd never forget her, but over the years, the lines and contours of her face blurred. Even in his dreams, her once-beloved features dimmed and diffused. Yet some things about her never faded. The important things. The softness of her hands when she'd tend his wounds. The kindness of her voice whispering soothing words in his ear. The warmth of her body in the frigid desert nights.

“I'm sinking.” Zorah's bare legs flailed and splashed, jerking his attention back to the struggling woman in front of him.

At least she'd finagled a pair of shorts to swim in tonight, even though all that bare skin on display tested his ability to stay focused on swimming.

He firmed his touch against her back and wiggled his fingers. "I'm right here; you're not going to sink. Feel my hand. I've got you."

Water sloshed over her face, her body not quite finding the right buoyant arch. Her fingertips grappled for stability, raking over his chest in a quest for a handhold. Jake's skin rippled and shivered in unexpected pleasure at the touch. It made his mind go places it had no business going.

With a splash, Zorah righted herself in the water, standing and sputtering as she took a few steps toward the shore. "I can't do this."

He snorted. Fearless and more than capable, only her impatience held her back.

"Not with that attitude," he said in mild reproach, his lips twitching in indulgent amusement.

Zorah huffed and rolled her eyes, and without a second's hesitation, Jake tossed a playful splash of water at her scowling face. Zorah yelped with surprise, or outrage, or both and indignantly wiped the water from her cheeks. Jake hid a self-satisfied snicker behind his palm, pretending to scratch at his stubble.

Face cleared, Zorah's eyes flashed in the silvery moonlight with defiance and mischief for one-half second before she walloped a wall of water back at him. Stupidly, he hadn't expected or prepared for the retaliation. He only managed to throw his hands up in time to catch the whopping second splash she added for good measure, accompanied by a truly audacious cackle. His meager defense did absolutely nothing, and the water mercilessly pelted his face, shooting in his eyes, mouth, and somehow up his nose. His sinuses burned, his eyes watered, and his mouth tasted like lake, but none of that hampered the easy mirth bubbling through him.

Floating practice disbanded, he glided in her direction. “Is this the game you want to play?” he taunted, still smiling.

“You started it,” she said impishly, flinging water at him in small, provocative flicks.

He prowled closer, inhibitions washing away with every step. “And I’ll end it.”

The smirk on her lips belied the serious glare she attempted to level at him. “We’ll see about that.”

And then it was on.

The water erupted in a geyser of chaotic splashes and squeals. Zorah hopped and skipped through the water, trying in vain to dodge his assaults, but she couldn’t match him in either offense or defense. She whirled in a circle trying to anticipate his movements, at times holding her nose and dunking her head to avoid an onslaught, only to meet a face-full when she re-emerged. Chuckling, he dove under, circling to pop up and splash her from some new vantage. In return, she flung great handfuls of water at his face and fiendishly giggled. Drops shot into his mouth and down his throat, turning his laughs into half-choking chortles. After a few minutes, his cheeks ached, muscles used for happiness atrophied after long neglect.

In the heated midst of the water fight, a thought struck him: he was having *fun*. Like, actual, innocent, glorious fun.

“Ugh!” Zorah spluttered and held up a palm, giggling while inelegantly spitting out a mouthful from a particularly good shot. “That was uncalled for!”

“Oh, believe me, it was *very* called for,” Jake said. He swam closer, planting his feet near hers in the water. They’d wandered into a depth far from where they’d started, leaving only her head bobbing above the undulating ripples. “You want to move closer to shore?”

Zorah’s mouth opened and then shut, and she tilted her head back to look up at him, a peculiar twist to her lips. She stared like she’d never seen him before. He felt like an insect under a

magnifying glass, not sure if he was being studied or about to be fried.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” He wiped at his nose. “Do I have snot on my face or something?”

Her cheeks rounded, highlighting the cute, heart shape of her face. “I’ve never seen you smile before,” she finally said. Her eyes darted down to his chest and then lifted again. “You’re very handsome.”

He wanted to scoff. She had no idea the ravages his skin revealed in the harsh light of day, ravages which paled in comparison to those she could never see. But he held the dismissal back, not wanting to imply she’d done a single thing wrong with her compliment. Misguided, perhaps, but she was so *fucking* sweet that he didn’t have it in him to dismiss anything she said.

He swallowed audibly, choking down the sudden lump in his throat. “Thank you.”

Still smiling and panting softly from the exertion, Zorah tilted forward and wafted her nose over his naked chest. Close enough to gust a hot breath on the cool stretch of his skin. Close enough to brush her breasts against his torso.

Pleasure licked down his spine, and Jake suppressed a violent shudder, not at all sure what *the fuck* was happening.

“I like your scent,” she whispered, and — in a move that threatened to completely wreck his precarious control — her nipples puckered beneath the worn cotton T-shirt that separated his skin from hers.

Tight and hard, they poked into his abdomen in silent demand. His dick roared unfailingly to life, ready and all too willing to get involved.

“It’s clean, but with a sharpness, a bite,” she mused, oblivious to his distress as she huffed another breath like he was some kind of human hookah pipe. “Like herbs washed in the ocean.”

Jake watched her olfactory exploration, immobilized by the dazed, dreamy expression on her face. She seemed to have

drifted into some kind of altered state by their mere proximity, like just being close to him was an intoxicant. With his last ditch of sense, Jake stepped back, knowing beyond a doubt that if he didn't get some distance from her *right fucking now*, he would lose it completely.

She blinked up at him, not alarmed but relaxed and open. With the moon's gentle, sanctifying silver glow shining down, they were the only two people in the forest, or maybe even the world. It made him want to tell her things, more things, all the things. But to do so was dangerous. The more she knew, and the more she understood of him, the worse it would be when she went away. For him, but also for her.

If he bared his soul and allowed a closeness to grow, they'd foster an attachment doomed from the start. Yet, the need for it — that *pull* Colt had spoken of — circled beneath the surface like a hungry shark. The connection *wanted* to be forged; he only had to let it happen. She could be his. All he had to do was let go.

Jake cleared the gravel shards from his throat. "You've seen the ocean?"

"Once. I loved it." Her face composed a pretty, wistful expression. "I think I'd like to live by the ocean someday. Swim in it during the day and listen to the waves in my bed at night." She smiled dreamily, pleased at whatever mental picture she'd created.

Jake's own fantasy birthed itself into the world in that instant. The two of them, side by side, frolicking in the pounding surf, the blindingly bright sun shining down as they laughed and played without shame or subterfuge, reveling in the purest of carefree enjoyment. Zorah's hair, frizzed out and wild, lifting in the breeze, and a smile as wide as the ocean itself plastered across her face. He could see it all so clearly; he burned with the wanting of it.

"Sounds really nice," he said. And then, because he was a fucking masochistic moron and couldn't stop himself, he added, "Tell me some more things you'd like to do someday."

Pure astonishment touched her face, and he cursed himself for prodding her for more than maybe she wanted to give. But he couldn't take it back now. Maybe if he had some ideas, some other fantasies of her life he could sketch out, fantasies that did not involve him, maybe that would help. Maybe, years from now, he could think about and imagine the better life she had out there in the world without him. Maybe it would help remind him of all the things she deserved that he couldn't give her.

Biting her lip, Zorah looked away, a new pensiveness taking hold. "No one's ever asked me that before."

"It's okay." He massaged the back of his neck, trying to erase the sudden tension caused by considering the long future without her. "I didn't mean to put you on the spot."

She pressed her lips together. "I'm sure you've seen so much more than I could ever imagine." The knob of her shoulder lifted out of the water. "I feel like anything I say will sound childish and silly to you."

Jake nearly choked in disbelief. As if there was any possibility in any universe that he would find her silly. As if every syllable that danced off her lips didn't entice him to an insane, and frankly probably unhealthy, degree. That this conversation, this furtive, intimate, simple but profound exchange, meant more to him than any other interaction he'd had in years. That he wanted to drown in the way her eyes took him in, like he wasn't a washed-up, broken-down disgrace of an Alpha but a wholly different type of creature altogether, one that — despite all sense and reason — interested her.

He didn't say any of that. Could barely let himself think it, let alone feel the truth of it or say it out loud.

Instead, he said quietly, "So be silly. There's nothing wrong with being young and hopeful. That's exactly what you should be. Er —" He cut himself off, not liking the way that last sentence sounded. Brow furrowed, he tried again. "No, that's not quite right. If you want to be silly, be silly. But don't worry

about how it sounds to me, or anyone else, for that matter. Be any way you want to be because it's what *you* want."

Her eyes slid toward the shore. "I'd like to live by the ocean and work in a tavern, maybe," she said with shy tentativeness. "Or a general store. Something where I get to talk to people who aren't under the age of five. I'd like to see how Omegas live in other places and what the bigger settlements look like. I'd like to see an entire town lit up at night with electricity." She returned her gaze to his, her modest dreams sparkling in her eyes. "I'd like to wear whatever I want and swim whenever I want and live without anyone telling me what I ought to do or all the things I can't do because I'm an Omega."

Jake's throat tightened. She hadn't said it in so many words, but Zorah dreamed of freedom. True freedom, not the kind of self-important nonsense spouted by idiot, wannabe demagogues who'd taken his away in the name of "defending" their own. But the very basic ability to chart a course of one's own life, unimpeded by outside forces that sought to coerce, control, and dictate all the things you "had" to be. His low-level outrage reignited for all the things Zorah had been deprived of simply by being born in the AfterEnd, with a designation that turned her into an object to be possessed rather than a person with wants, needs, and dreams of her own.

He cleared the emotion from his throat. "None of that sounds silly."

The light in her face dimmed. "I try not to dwell on it. It doesn't help to wish for what I can't have." Her pitiful resignation made him want to burn the world down, but before he could utter a single syllable, she said, "But I do need *you* to tell me what to do. For the swim lessons?"

Jake nodded, pushing everything that was wrong about the situation out of his mind. She was right. As much as he might want to, he couldn't rearrange the entire world for her, but he could do this.

"You ready to try floating again?"

Then, Zorah forced a sad, brave smile and broke his heart all over again. “Yeah. Let’s do it.”

CHAPTER 14

Zorah

With a completely natural, nothing-to-see-here glance around the mess hall, Zorah scooted closer to the slight Omega hunched at the very end of the table. Keeping her eyes up and face blank, Zorah pitched her voice low, “I need a favor.”

Rue startled on the bench, knocking their shoulders together with the force of her jump. They’d been talking all through dinner, but it had been a whole three minutes since their last exchange. Long enough for Rue to retreat into her own mind, long enough for her to jump when Zorah surprised her out of it. Not an uncommon experience when interacting with Rue, and one Zorah had grown used to during the months of their friendship.

Rue looked up, disoriented. “What?”

Zorah sipped from her water cup and eyed the entirety of the Morris Hill population as they tucked into their dinners. Noise from boisterous Omegas, Alphas, and pups drowned out most conversations in the open, echoey room, thankfully protecting their conversation from prying ears. She’d been putting it off, but she was due for another swim lesson tonight, and she desperately needed a new cover story. The heat wave had broken, and Grace had grown suspicious of Zorah’s early-morning returns sporting wet hair; it was only a matter of time before she confronted Zorah outright. Deceiving the maternal Omega who’d been so kind to her didn’t feel great, but she also chafed against the way Lars and Grace not-so-subtly monitored her activities. Being an unmated Omega made her everyone’s business, which she hated, but also, the secret rebelliousness added an illicit sweetness to her swimming escapades.

But only by a little. Jake accounted for the rest. After four nights spent in his company, she could admit a certain *fascination* with her aloof Alpha instructor. Zorah slipped a hand into her skirt pocket and fingered the toy she’d swiped from the children’s growing stash — a small carved fish. The

latest addition to the toy collection, a small school of wooden fish, appeared the day prior, carved and inscribed with each of the children's initials, P, J, G, and Z. No bigger than her palm, Zorah rubbed her thumb along the grooved ridges of scales, her fingernail tracing the three lines of the Z.

His behavior perplexed her. She couldn't reconcile the sweetness of the toy deliveries with his tortured, almost painful, restraint during their lessons. He talked to her, instructed her, encouraged her, but never tried to flirt. His touches numbered few, perfunctory, and strictly utilitarian. Overt overtures, uncouth jokes, or sly innuendos never passed his lips. He never showed frustration or impatience with her progress, and he exhibited no hint of violence or danger. His presence, while awkward and difficult to decipher, filled her with an inexplicable sense of calm and safety, completely at odds with what had happened in OT. It confused and niggled at her; she wanted to ask him, to hear his side of those events, but she held back. The lessons were going so well that Zorah couldn't risk endangering their careful working relationship before she'd learned everything he could teach her.

In the background of all of that, her acute, unnatural awareness of him never abated. As soon as his eyes found her in the darkness, that familiar effervescence popped and sizzled along her nerve pathways. The sensation no longer frustrated; she took comfort in it and looked forward to it. From that first prickle on the back of her neck, resentment about her designation, worry about her mate situation, or anxiety about discovery dissipated as if it never existed. And then there was the way her body went completely rogue in his presence.

The night of the splash fight, arousal had blown through her like a summer storm. So entranced, she'd assaulted his chest with her nipples and blurted out silly, swooning compliments about his smile, his handsomeness, his scent. The memory scandalized her and turned her on in equal parts. Since that night, she'd followed his lead and kept careful physical distance between them. But the rare moments when their eyes clashed in long, meaningful, inscrutable looks, her bones went liquid and her skin taut. Slick dripped between her thighs,

thankfully washed away in the gentle undulations of the lake. If he made note of it, he never let on.

“Rue.” Zorah turned back to her friend. “You’ve moved into the Omega bunkhouse, right?” Rue dipped her chin in a wary nod. “I need a favor. I want to move into your tent before they take it down.”

Rue shifted uncomfortably. “Why?”

“That’s not important.” Rue flashed her a cross glance, and Zorah leaned in closer. “If anyone asks you, tell them I asked if I could use your tent since you’ve moved into the Omega bunkhouse, and you said yes. Just tell the truth, that’s all you have to do.”

Rue chewed her lower lip, her eyes sinking to her entirely cleaned plate. “You’re moving out of Lars and Grace’s cabin? They said it was okay?”

“Yes,” Zorah said in absolute truth.

Using every last scrap of the positive goodwill Zorah earned from Nico’s incident, she’d pitched a change in her sleeping arrangement to Grace. Her proposal was simple: Zorah wanted to spend more time with Rue in her remaining few weeks in Morris Hill, and since she was busy with the kids during the day, it would be a lot easier to see her friend if she went to bunk with Rue in her tent. That way, they could spend time together and Zorah wouldn’t risk waking the children when she returned from socializing late into the night. If she failed to mention that Rue had already moved into the Omega bunkhouse and vacated her tent, well, that must’ve slipped her mind. Since Omegas were trickling into the bunkhouse as the beds were assembled, a busy mom like Grace would never keep track of who slept where on any given night.

Permission to sleep in Rue’s tent afforded her freedom to come and go as she pleased as well as a plausible explanation for her daytime fatigue. A perfect, elegant, simple solution.

That required Rue’s cooperation.

“I don’t want to get into trouble,” Rue whispered, “*with the Alphas*. If someone asks —”

“You tell them it was all my idea,” Zorah said, emphatic. “I’ll take all the blame.”

A bead of bright red blood appeared on the plump center of Rue’s lower lip, the inevitable result of her near-constant gnawing. “But... but *why?*”

Zorah gave Rue a speaking look and hid her response in a quick sip of water. “It’s probably better if you don’t know.”

Rue’s face folded in on itself, and her teeth assaulted her poor lip some more. “You know I’m going to worry,” she admitted, with a wry hitch in her abused mouth.

Zorah nudged Rue with a friendly elbow. “You’re always worried.”

“Well, that’s true.” Rue clutched Zorah’s arm; her grip surprisingly strong for such a slight Omega. “I hope you know what you’re doing,” she whispered.

“Hey, Zorah.” Her name, called in a rich Alpha baritone, broke the moment, and Zorah turned to see a smiling Duncan squatting at her side. His eyes flicked over her shoulder toward Rue. “Rue.”

Rue muttered something that might be construed as a greeting before turning her attention to worrying a hangnail on her thumb. Automatically, Zorah grabbed her friend’s hand, holding it tight to keep Rue from shredding her skin and bleeding all over her pants. Alphas made Rue exceedingly nervous, and the blood stains streaked on her pants from prior cuticle massacres testified to that fact. Zorah couldn’t stand any more bloodshed over dinner.

“Did you just get back?” Zorah asked.

Duncan and Alek had left on a supply run a few weeks back, a fact Zorah knew but hadn’t much considered. No one seemed particularly stressed about it, at any rate.

Duncan’s fathomless brown eyes hopped back to hers, his rich brown skin burnished red and gold by the setting sun streaming in through a window. Another handsome, unmated Alpha. She took in his broad, barrel chest, his long arms with thickly corded forearms, and his enormous hands. A fleeting

fantasy of those big hands on her body formed, but in the next breath, she caught a whiff of his scent, as strong and musky as Riddick's and reading to her sensitive nose as wrong, wrong, *wrong*. Her inner Omega silently affirmed it with a dismissive *humph*, not even bothered to put her distaste into words, the unhelpful brat.

"Yeah." He grinned and snagged a carrot off her plate to munch on. "Right after lunch. I didn't have a chance this afternoon to give you the news."

Alarm stiffened her spine. "News? What news?"

He finished chewing. "We came back by River Bend, and your parents said to tell you they're right behind. They should be here within two weeks, and they're bringing Nelson with them."

Zorah's ears rang, as if wanting to drown out the bad news. Two weeks? Her parents would be here in *two weeks*? With *Nelson*? Her chest seized up, choking off her breath. Two weeks and she'd be submitting to Nelson's slimy touch. Two weeks and she'd be trapped in her home village, forever nit-picked by her mother and Nelson in unrelenting tandem.

She stupidly stared at Duncan's placid face, unsure what her face was doing while her mind stuttered on the fact that after three months in a village full of unmated males, she *still* couldn't find a suitable mate. Another whiff of Duncan's scent crossed her nose, and her dinner curdled in her stomach, supercharging her panic.

What was wrong with *him*? Or Riddick? Or any of them? Why wasn't it more obvious to her which one she should choose?

Two weeks, two weeks. The words tolled in her brain like a death knell.

Maybe, underneath all her bravado and gumption, all her fanciful plans, she *was* Little Zorah, stumbling around and making a mess of her whole life. This was running away all over again: good intentions come to naught. Cold sweat broke out on her forehead.

She was going to be sick. She looked from Duncan's pleasant face to Rue's concerned one. "I'm sorry, I'm not feeling well."

Duncan's brow gathered tight, and he leaned toward her, dousing her in another wave of olfactory unpleasantness. Zorah held her breath, not wanting to allow any more of it inside her body.

"Do you need me to walk you home? Should I get Grace —"

"No." Zorah held up a palm. "I'm fine, thank you. Just need some air." She pushed herself away from the table, her knees wobbling like jelly.

"I'll go with you." Rue looped a proprietary arm through Zorah's trembling one. "C'mon." She guided a stunned Zorah through the mess hall, whispering, "Let's get your stuff moved into my tent."

CHAPTER 15

Jake

Something was off. He felt it like a physical presence, a barrier that had been erected sometime between their last lesson and tonight. He couldn't explain it, but it chafed against him all the same, taunting him with the absence of the careful rapport they'd worked so hard to establish throughout their lessons. He hadn't known how much the dynamic between them had evolved, until it changed again. And not for the better.

Zorah's body glided through the water, arms and head and legs moving in an easy, natural rhythm. She'd taken to the lessons like, well, a fish to water, and he couldn't help but be a little bit proud. At the same time, a fat stripe of guilt harangued him. They could likely cease the lessons after tonight. She floated, treaded water, and did the forward crawl well enough to keep herself safe. He'd pondered teaching her the backstroke or even using the rickety platform for diving, not yet willing to admit that, even if being around her pained him, he'd rather not end it.

But all that took an immediate backseat to whatever was going on with her tonight.

At the end of her lap, she emerged where he waited, treading water with one hand gripping the edges of the floating dock. Surfacing and wiping her hair from her face, she panted, only slightly out of breath.

"That was good," he said, examining her face in the meager light. The full moon had passed two days prior, but clouds had since rolled in, obscuring its bright, gibbous glow. "How do you feel?"

A hardness settled around her eyes. "About what?"

No attitude or petulance accompanied her question but more of a world-weary fatigue that deepened his concern.

"I was asking about that last lap." He cleared his throat. "Unless... uh... there's something else that's bothering you?"

“Fine.” Her lips flattened to a thin line. Anxiety stretched over every delicate freckle. “The lap felt fine.”

A sigh hissed from his nose, and they lapsed into uncomfortable silence. Water splish-splashed against the post, and an owl hooted in the distance, night sounds providing a mocking musical accompaniment to his emotional incompetence. He was fucking this up.

Jake racked his brain. When had things been easier? The splash fight had been fun. How could they get back to that?

“Hey,” he ventured, gratified when her eyes dragged to his, “d’you want to play a game?”

Her chin lifted with tentative interest. “What kind of game?”

“Marco Polo,” he said lightly. He kept his face pleasantly casual, not wanting to overplay something she perhaps didn’t even realize about herself: Zorah had a competitive streak. “It’s like hide and seek, only in the water. I close my eyes and say ‘Marco,’ and then you have to say ‘Polo,’ and then I have to try to find you by your voice alone.”

“But it’s dark,” she said, suspicious. “I can’t tell if you’re cheating.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Are *you* going to cheat?”

“No!” Her affront was apparent.

Jake suppressed a satisfied smirk. “Then I won’t either. You ready?”

Some of the tightness eased from her lips as her head bobbed. “Are your eyes closed?”

“Not yet. One more thing.” He treaded a few inches closer. “If you get into trouble, get tired or whatever, game’s off, and you yell for help. Got it?”

With a wicked grin, she launched off the post with a confident kick. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

Pleasure fizzing in his chest, Jake closed his eyes and listened to the night sounds, trying not to track her strokes

through the water too closely. With his enhanced Alpha hearing and his faster swimming, he could probably catch her with little effort, but where was the fun in that? The point was to take her mind off whatever vexed her, not to frustrate her with obnoxious Alpha showboating.

Separating from the dock, Jake rolled to his back, kicking lazily to stay afloat. “Marco.”

A giggle coming from his left preceded her answer. “Polo,” she called, followed by a blooming splash as she dipped under water.

Jake grinned. His girl understood the game just fine.

“Marco,” he said when he heard her emerge.

“Polo,” came the answer even farther away, widening the area of play.

Feeling confident, was she? Good.

Jake sunk under the waterline, striving to stay as silent as possible. With some stealth, he could pop up and surprise her.

But the little minx had the same idea, and his next round of Marcos were met with Polos scattered all over the lake as she darted from spot to spot, her giggles coming easier and easier with each volley.

“Do you want to give up?” she taunted from behind him, slightly breathless from the endeavor.

He could hear the smile in her voice. It widened his own, the muscles no longer creaking and stiff when he went to use it. *She* did that — with her smiles and her laughter and her determination to do whatever she needed to do to learn. Unbelievably, she’d thawed his icy cocoon.

“Not giving up,” he said, gliding a bit closer and trying to keep her talking. “Are you going to give up?”

“Never! Come and get me.” She laughed, a deep, sultry, husky laugh that hit him right in his balls.

Yeah, he’d love nothing more.

Jake's hands twitched with the need to grab hold of her, picturing her wet, luscious body all warm and squirmy against his. The vision was painted so viscerally bright that he questioned if he could restrain himself when he finally caught her. He'd fought so hard, so *fucking* hard, to rein himself in, to dispel those types of thoughts and impulses. Banished them from his mind again and again and again, hoping each time would be the last, that eventually, with enough effort, he could deny this clawing, biting need to possess. He'd yet to succeed.

Fuck, she was just so damn *cute*. Jake swam backward in a lazy, elementary backstroke, imagining the feel of Zorah's slick skin under his exploring fingertips. Arousal percolated in his groin as he weighed which handful he wanted first, deciding a firm grasp of a sizable breast sounded just about perfect.

Adjusting his dick as it sprang awake, he called out, "Marco."

Steady, gurgling water sounds answered. Jake listened harder, sharpening his hearing for the sound of a small head rising from the water. Maybe she was taking a pass underwater.

He counted to ten and tried again, a bit louder. "Marco."

No answer. Jake opened his eyes and scanned the placid surface of the now-familiar lake.

"Zorah?" He tried for calm. "Zorah, where are you?"

His head flew from one direction to the next, eyes and ears acute and attuned to every ripple or disturbance. Terror clamored up his throat.

Oh shit, oh no. No. No. No, this couldn't be happening. She was a good swimmer. A solid, capable swimmer, she wouldn't simply... disappear. This was a man-made pleasure lake, for god's sake, not a mercurial ocean with undercurrents and rip tides and sharks.

"Zorah!" he yelled as loud as he dared, not wanting to attract the notice of the Morris Hill patrol.

Arms pumping, he swam to the other side of the lake, trying to view all sides of the lumbering, shadowy dock. Even as he pushed his body, his lungs seized up, air stagnant and frozen, replaced by millions of molecules of dread. Fuck, what had he *done*?

“Zorah! This isn’t funny.”

He spun in a circle, frantically scanning the shoreline as his life flashed before his eyes.

They’d kill him. No question. And he’d deserve it. Stupid and selfish enough to think he could look after an Omega like that and not endanger both of their lives in doing so. Why had he proposed this stupid game? He should’ve known better! Everything he touched turned to shit, and now he’d brought his curse to the most precious thing of all.

“Zorah!” his voice broke. “Zorah, *please*.”

A soft giggle skimmed across the water and slammed into him like an arrow to the back. Was he hallucinating? He spun toward the sound, his heart tripping over itself when another smothered laugh crashed through his fear. The dock.

He took off at a dead sprint, pounding the water maybe even harder than he had when he saved the drowning boy. When he reached where the aging structure disappeared into the water, he surged up onto the platform and glared down at the wiggling mass of girl, clutching her stomach in peals of laughter. Alive and whole and cackling, like the joke she’d just played was some innocent practical jest and hadn’t scared the fucking life out of him.

“Your face!” she chortled, pointing. “Oh my god, you should see your face!”

The accumulated turmoil of the last few minutes and the last few weeks and, indeed, maybe every minute since he’d arrived in Morris Hill, shattered every remaining scrap of his control. Chest heaving, Jake crashed to his knees. His hands slammed the wood on either side of her head, heedless of the decaying, splintering boards grinding into his palms. Arms and legs, knees and hands caged her in, their faces only inches apart, the

water sluicing off his brow and splattering onto her face like an angry, one-man thunderstorm. The laughter died on her lips, alarm extinguishing her joy in an instant.

“You thought that was *funny*?” he snarled. “I thought you were *dead*.”

Without a scrap of fear, Zorah stared wide-eyed, beautiful, and so fucking infuriating in her trust. What sense did she have, trusting someone like him? Didn't she know better? She ought to know better!

With each breath, her chest heaved, drawing his eyes to the rounded mounds of her breasts, encased in a soaking wet T-shirt, nipples proudly pointed toward the sky. He'd labored to ignore them. The temptation pulled at him like gravity, yet he'd kept his eyes above her neck. He'd resisted and resisted, but, in this moment, that resistance imploded, and he looked his fill.

He shouldn't have. *Fuck*, they were beautiful. Heavy and full, with wide, succulent areolas he wanted to wrap his lips around. What color were they in the full light of day? A light cinnamon or a darker caramel? And the tips? Holy hell, he wanted to suck each one between his teeth and roll them around in his mouth, to feel the gentle give of her sensitive flesh against his tongue, see how hard she liked it, and what sort of small bites made her cry out or pull his hair.

Rapidly thickening, he stopped questioning and let his body do what his cock demanded. One hand left the deck boards to wrap around her jaw, the pad of his thumb tugging on her bottom lip to display a flash of her white teeth in the darkness.

She gasped, and her eyes lowered in a slow, languid blink.

“I'm sorry.” Her warm, panted breaths fanned over his clenched jaw, doing nothing at all to cool the twisted mix of anger and lust coursing through him.

Jake shifted weight to his other forearm, lowering his body several inches, feeling her humid heat blasting against his bare chest. “You're *sorry*?”

Not nearly fucking sorry enough. Not for this little stunt and certainly not for the misery he lived with, having to be near her, think about her, smell her, all the while knowing she could never be his. That those breasts would never bounce while he fucked her and he'd never taste the sweet cream of her pussy on his tongue.

Her throat bobbed, the muscles undulating under his hold. "I didn't mean to scare you."

As if to emphasize her point, her small hand, warm and damp, curled around his inner thigh. Near his knee, below where his shorts ended, fingertips brushed the spot where his hair thinned, and his skin was most exposed. The barely-there touch set him *fucking* ablaze. Every nerve ending in the small patch of flesh came alive, blasting shards of pleasure outward from that meager point of contact. It was nothing, and it was everything.

Jake groaned.

Even in the darkness, Zorah's eyes burned with awareness that *she'd* done that, she'd caused that reaction in him, and that, right now, he was as much at her mercy as she was at his.

"Let me," she started, then paused to *wet her goddamn perfect lips*. "Let me make it up to you."

CHAPTER 16

Jake

The span of possibilities arrayed in front of him, each one more pornographic and lurid than the last. Mirroring her, he moistened his own lips, dry from the heavy breathing that had overtaken his lungs.

Swiping his thumb along the contour of her pert lower lip, he asked, “How’re you gonna do that?”

Without moving a single other muscle, Zorah’s tongue shoved past her lower lip and *licked* his thumb with a petulant flick, a move so erotically charged he lost the battle with his last vestiges of control.

Jake descended.

His lips crashed into hers with days, weeks, months of pent-up want unleashed into a single, searing kiss. A kiss that, bless her, she *welcomed*.

Whimpering, Zorah nipped and kissed and sucked at his lips, her hands coming up to cup his face as he did hers, drawing him closer and even closer, as if she wanted to consume him as much as he ached to consume her.

The world spun. His entire stupidly long life was a funnel, twirling and whirling above his head and tapered down to this singular moment. Skin electrified, he collapsed on top of her, his bare chest compressing her impossibly perfect breasts and his thick length grinding into the cushion of her belly. Shit, she was so fucking perfect, he couldn’t stop, *wouldn’t* stop, hips flexing and rubbing, shameless in his need. But he didn’t care, he really didn’t. Not when she felt this fucking good, and especially not when her body arched to meet his, her hard, beaded nipples dragging along his skin, seeking their own stimulation as they continued to ravage each other’s mouths.

Jake tangled a hand in her hair and fisted a damp handful, savoring her small grunt of pain and thrilled by the way she redoubled her ardor in response. He should’ve guessed: his Omega was a lusty little thing.

His Omega. His.

Some dark, unspeakable part of his soul announced his claim, so loud he wondered if he'd growled it out loud. It was hard to tell. The elation of touching and tasting her wove together with the bone-deep realization pounding in his bloodstream.

She's yours, she's yours.

Jake pulled away, his mouth charging across her cheeks, licking her skin, inhaling her scent, mapping the terrain of her face like an explorer on the world's greatest conquest. Her skin tasted fresh and clean and delicious from the lake and perspiration and her own Omega aroma. He closed his teeth around the angle of her jaw, scraping the line with his incisors but falling short of breaking through. Zorah gasped into his hair, her fingernails clawing at his neck and shoulders and back.

Nuzzling behind her ear, he groaned a guttural *fuck* against her skin as he reached for her breast. It overfilled his palm in his greedy, sloppy, unsophisticated hold. Not able to restrain himself in the interest of finesse, he plumped the tender flesh as the hard nub of her nipple prodded his palm. He pinched one tip and then the other, not hard, just enough, just testing, rubbing his thumb over the crest as they reacted to the pressure. She arched off the dock, the movement accompanied by a needy, feminine whine.

Jake growled, loving everything about this moment, loving that if he never did another single thing but play with these beautiful tits till he died, he would die a happy man.

Bending, he sucked one taut tip into his mouth, laving and rubbing it with the flat of his tongue, tasting the lake water soaked into her shirt that mingled with the heat of her skin, driving him even crazier. He sucked harder, pinching and tugging on the other. The wet T-shirt barrier, which wasn't a barrier, turned his already straining cock rock-hard. He wanted to see that in the daylight, too. Next time, next time they'd do this in the light. He'd spread her out on the shore and dribble water from his canteen over her breasts until she was soaked,

allowing him to see through the thin material. Zorah whimpered and cooed and writhed and wiggled; each sound arrowed into his dick and spurred him on.

“Yes,” she moaned, extending her neck in a submissive offering that made something inside him open its glimmering eyes.

Pure possession roared in his veins. Power and strength he hadn't known in nearly a century. She was *his* woman, *his* Omega, just as *this* was his true form. Not the drugged-out captive he'd been for decades, not the whipped dog he played for the Pack. *This* was his Alpha nature the way it was meant to be lived.

Jake lifted his head to gaze down at her. At her darkened lips and puffy nipples. At her sultry, lust-drunk eyes and heaving breaths.

“You want this?” he teased, noticing the small thrusts of her pelvis against his abdomen.

Her legs, imprisoned between his knees, were fused together, her plump thighs rubbing one against the other as her pelvis jerked in a needy, seeking rhythm.

“Yes,” she whined, squirming on the deck boards. “Don't stop.”

With a rough curse, he knocked her legs apart with his knees. First one and then the other, he spread her fleshy thighs wide. Only the sodden scrap of shorts she wore covered her, damp and glued to her body, the swollen contours of her sex plump and rounded with the tantalizing slit in the middle. *Jesus god*. For a man who hadn't been with a woman in decades, this was too much all at once. Maybe they needed to reverse back into kissing and necking until he could get control of himself. As it was, he'd be jerking off to this juicy imprint of her pussy for the rest of his life.

A burst of her Omega bouquet released into the air, her familiar citrusy essence infused with the sweet scent of slick. He knew it now, recognized it, and it charged up his nose, igniting his lust like an accelerant. He inhaled deeply, drew it

into his lungs as deep as it could go, needing to chase away every molecule in his nose that didn't belong to her.

Except another scent interfered with this plan. His body went rigid with alarm. Along the edges, faint but noticeable and stronger still on a panicked second sample, an intruding and unwelcome note appeared: another Alpha on the breeze. Close, far too close.

Zorah wiggled up to her elbows. "What is it? Why did you stop?"

"Hush." He laid a stabilizing palm on her belly. "Someone's coming."

He acted fast, his brain running a half second ahead of his body. Looped an arm under Zorah's hips and dragged her the few feet toward the sunken end of the platform. She released a surprised squeak, and he shushed her again as their bodies slid into the cold water as quietly as he could manage. With one hand cradling Zorah to his side and the other on the platform, he maneuvered them underneath the creaking boards to the darkest corner, his breaths coming fast and heavy with fear and exertion.

Someone was coming, and they were trapped.

CHAPTER 17

Jake

A throbbing noise assailed his ears, like the whomp-whomp of air when riding in an open-topped car. An experience he hadn't considered in years, but there it was, excavated up from some crevasse of his unconscious, hauled to the surface on the heels of the other mental detritus sludging up his brain. Memories of another time of subterfuge and hiding, another illicit love affair, another vulnerable girl, another catastrophe in the long line that made up his life.

His body locked up as it all came rushing back at once: the dark of night in his prison, the inescapable desert cold, the quaking girl in his arms, the bottomless pit of fear. How many nights had Ava come to him like that? How many moments, just like this, had they stolen right under the Brethren's nose? Always skating the edge of discovery... until that final time.

"Who is it?" Zorah whispered, her legs wrapped around his middle and arms holding onto his neck.

"Don't know."

An Alpha emerged from the same pathway that took Zorah to and from the lake, his torch lifted as he examined the tree line, the beach, and the water. Its orange glow illuminated his dark, straight hair that hung loose and dragged over his shoulders as his neck turned this way and that.

Colt.

Jake's worry deepened. The regular patrol route did not bring anyone as far as the lake, and if Colt was, indeed, on patrol, then had something alerted him to investigate the area? Had he heard them playing Marco Polo? Had he heard Jake shouting for Zorah? If Colt had heard Zorah's name from Jake's lips, they were both fucked. *So fucked.*

Horrible visions marched before his eyes. Zorah being ripped away from him, just as they'd ripped Ava away, from his arms and his life. Instinctively, he cinched his hold on her

tighter, no longer with passion or lust but with pure, unmitigated fear.

She gave a small grunt and misinterpreted his intent as her hips began a slow, deliberate grind against his abdomen. With her steaming her breath against his neck, Zorah's hot core scorched his skin and spoke directly to his still-very-interested dick. Both of them unaware or unconcerned with the raging turmoil that boiled his guts.

“Zorah.” He spoke softly as possible, a warning wrapped in a groan. “Stop.”

For the moment, he couldn't do anything. Well, that wasn't exactly true. He could push her away and leave her here, tucked safely in the shadow of the dock, and swim ashore, pretending he was taking a moonlit dip in the lake, like that was a totally normal thing to do. Only then, he'd have to explain the last three minutes of furtive hiding from the Pack's Second. He wasn't a good liar in the best of circumstances. Colt would see right through him. Christ, he'd probably reek of guilt before his feet even hit the sand. Not to mention, the thought of leaving Zorah made his arm clench tighter. No, he wasn't letting her go.

You should never have let Ava go, either.

Shame reared its head like a haunting specter and stared at him with accusatory, fearful eyes. Ava's eyes, ringed with white and fear as they'd yanked her away. He could feel the agonized squeak of her skin against his palm as that final tether failed. The tight sting in his throat was a harsh reminder of how he'd bellowed her name for hours and rendered himself voiceless. Brutalized his vocal cords with screams and vomit as he'd poured out his stomach contents until nothing remained but bile and agony.

“What's wrong?” Zorah's head rose from his neck, obstructing his view of the beach, but he was so far gone in his panic that he hardly noticed.

Past blended with present and encased his lungs in a prison of ice. Breaths short and shallow, he fumbled for whatever sensation might keep him from plunging headfirst into the

past. Fisted Zorah's shirt in his clammy palm. Felt the brush of her thighs against his sides. Stared into the dark shadow of her face. Breathed in her sweet summer scent. Repeated the phrases he'd long returned to. He was clear of scratch; this wasn't his hole; he didn't belong to them anymore; he'd lost Ava long, long ago.

"Are you okay?" Zorah repeated, the worry in her tone plainly directed at him rather than the situation.

"Fine," he grunted, his insides one giant quivering exposed nerve.

She scoffed, a loud, harsh crackle of disgust in his ear, and pulled away from him. Her head reared back, hands pushing against his hold.

"What the hell?" He firmed his grip against her slippery, wriggling body, but she only struggled harder, disturbing the water around them and making far too much noise. "Stop it."

"No." Her nails dug into his chest. "You think I'm old enough to feel up but not old enough to talk to? You can get bent, you dick."

What. The. *Hell?*

Stunned, Jake let her go, cringing as she moved a few feet away to grab another support beam. Worried about the fuss, he checked on Colt, who casually perched on the shore, lighting up. Probably some of the open-secret cannabis Dev grew, confirmed a second later when the acrid trail of smoke tinged his nostrils. *God dammit.* That inconvenient asshole planned to hang out and get high. Was this his devious plan to sniff them out? They couldn't stay in the lake all night. Day would eventually arrive and then what?

Cold closed in around him, and he felt the loss of Zorah's warmth like a physical exorcism. Her agitated pants echoed in the space beneath the dock, and he turned his thoughts to this new distance between them. They shouldn't be talking under the circumstances, but he couldn't let her comment go. "*You think I'm old enough to feel up but not old enough to talk to?*" What the fuck did that mean?

He faced the black blob of her outline and pitched his voice as low as he could. “If you think I was taking advantage of you, I’m sorry. I thought you were into it.”

She huffed again but said nothing, letting the silence fight with the tinkling drips of water. A fresh blast of Colt’s cannabis smoke stung the back of Jake’s throat, adding to the myriad of discomforts.

“Something happened to you,” she explained, enunciating slowly and quietly. “We got in the water, and then you went somewhere else. You were trembling like you’d seen a monster.” Blood drained from his face, the exposure too acute and overwhelming. “I asked because I wanted to know where you’d gone.” Her tone, which had softened, turned hard and bitter again. “I thought that we’re friends, at least.”

Her voice cracked on the word *friends*, the word dripping with so much longing that it jabbed a jagged shard of guilt into his chest. Friends? How could they ever be something as banal as friends? The guilty knife twisted. He’d confused this girl and, in doing so, hurt her. Hurt her when she’d done nothing but witness his pain in a way no one else had. Maybe ever.

“We can’t be friends.” The words lurched off his lips, sounding hollow and paltry compared to the depth of his obsession or the infinite span of his intentions.

He wanted to be many things to her. Her protector. Her provider. Her worshipper. Her confidant. Her supporter. Her cheerleader. Her defender. Her lover. Her Alpha. Her *mate*.

Not her friend.

“Right.” She gave one of her little dismissive snorts, no doubt accented with a pointed eye roll. “A big, strong Alpha would never be friends with *Little Zorah*.” She spit the eponymous moniker with a whopping dose of venom, yet the pain she hid behind it captured all his attention.

“Who calls you that? Your parents?”

“Not just them. Everyone.”

“Everyone in River Bend?”

Her arm trembled with the effort to hold herself aloft. She shifted position, swapping the gripping hand that kept her head out of the water. The command to get back in his arms dangled on his tongue, but he held it back. She wouldn't want to be told what to do right now, that much he could tell.

“And here,” she replied after her position settled.

He didn't know how to tactfully tell her that, of all the Alpha conversations he'd overheard regarding Zorah, exactly zero of them indicated anyone thought of her as a child. Then again, those conversations revolved around her availability as an Omega mate, her looks, her scent, her considerable fuckability, and not much else. Which was patronizing and objectifying as well.

He cut a glance to Colt — still smoking contentedly on the beach with no indication he'd be leaving anytime soon, *the dick* — and cleared his throat as quietly as he could. “You don't feel like people consider you an adult.”

“No.” Her words swelled like they were spoken through a bubble in her throat.

“Grace and Lars trust you with their children,” he argued gently, “they wouldn't do that if they didn't trust you.”

“I've been watching children since I was a child. It's hardly an endorsement of anything.” Her arm quivered with fatigue, and she moved to swap them again.

Jake reached out his free hand and tipped his head toward the shore. “He's not leaving anytime soon; let me hold you.” The hushed command sounded overly intimate, and he stammered to add, “Up. Let me hold you up and out of the water.”

She didn't respond, but he let the offer hang, feeling her resistance wane as her fatigue grew.

Fatigue won out, and she swam to him, confidently but quietly gliding the few strokes like it was nothing. Pride bloomed under all the messiness of the last few minutes. The sleek softness of her body slid back against him; her arms

circled his neck, and their torsos aligned. Tension unlocked in Jake's shoulders. This felt better, this felt *right*.

She didn't wrap her thighs around him, but her feet brushed his legs, and he welcomed every touch. He smoothed up and down her back, bumping his fingertips along her delicate spine. She let out a soft sigh and relaxed further into his hold.

My Omega. Mine.

His momentary contentment plummeted. Now that he'd had this, how could he ever let her go?

A problem for later.

Jake nosed into her hair with the special kind of reverence one has for a fleeting experience, allowing it to sooth him into the conversation. "I don't think you're a child; I don't talk about this with anyone."

Her breath puffed a delicate breeze on his damp skin. "Maybe you should."

He hated to admit how much her mere presence comforted him. All the uneasiness and paranoia that tainted his daily life lifted under the spell of her gentle inquiry. The world became a less scary place with her in it, less wholly evil and harsh, and Jake felt he owed her for this. Owed her this story, owed her everything he had.

"I loved a woman once. Her name was Ava." His voice was calm, his gaze steady as he stared at the small bead of red that marked Colt's burning roach.

Zorah stilled.

"After TheEnd," Jake pushed the words forward, "I was captured and imprisoned by some real bad Betas. Called themselves the Righteous Brethren; they convinced themselves that Alphas were mutant creatures who required subjugation. I was traveling on my own — probably my first mistake — trying to make my way back to Seattle, or what was left of it. They ambushed me and turned me into forced labor."

Her gasp rasped over his eardrums. “But how? You’re Alpha, you’re bigger and stronger.”

“One Alpha against one Beta? Yes. One unsuspecting Alpha who’d never fought anyone against a gang of ruthless, violent Betas? No.” He gave a weak shrug. “I wasn’t their first captive, and over time, they’d learned how to keep us in check. Chains, hard labor, beatings, starvation, isolation, and then later, drug dependence. It was more than enough to incapacitate.”

Jake shuddered at the memories. All the tortures, big and small, he’d endured. Water beat against his skin in cool, gentle waves, and a soft, warm girl pressed against him, but the chill in his body came from long ago.

“My god,” she breathed. “There was more than just you?”

“Yeah, but they kept us separate. They knew that together we’d be harder to control.” Pain danced on the edges of his memories, survivor’s guilt for the Alphas who’d died from the harsh treatment, for the ones who’d not made it away when he did.

Dread jammed itself down his throat, so thick he could choke on it. They were getting close to it now, close to the unhealing wound. But he had to continue, to soldier through it, so Zorah would understand. “Ava” — his voice cracked on her name — “was the sister of one of the ringleaders. She wasn’t a captive, but her life wasn’t easy, either. She cooked and cleaned for them, sunup to sundown. She delivered what little food I got. That’s how we met.” He forced his fist to unclench from Zorah’s shirt, realizing he’d seized it without intending to. “She started visiting me at night, when I was in my hole, to sneak extra food or tend my wounds when the injuries were especially bad. We grew close, and then we...we became lovers. I didn’t want to, I knew it was a bad idea, I knew it was selfish and put her in unnecessary danger, but...”

“You needed comfort.” Zorah hugged closer, offering what he so desperately needed, now as well as then.

“Yeah, maybe I did.” He dusted a kiss over her temple, accepting what she gave in the dark, watery confessional. “I

don't know how long it went on with Ava. Maybe a year? Maybe two? Time was meaningless, then. But, as these things go, eventually, she got pregnant. She tried to hide it, but that only worked for so long. Then, one night they followed her and barged in." Memory hazed his vision. He could see it all arrayed in front of him like a horror film on the old silver screens, the chaos and confusion and cruelty of it all. His throat ached and his chest burned in visceral remembrance. "They took her away, and I never saw her again. It was like she never existed. No gossip, no rumors, no one even uttered her name. Things got worse after that. More beatings, less food, sleep deprivation, round-the-clock labor. Anything they could think of to break me. Thing was, I was already broken."

He grew quiet then. Closed his eyes as the long-sequestered memories continued their savage parade. Trembling began from deep inside — his heart or his bones or his guts, he couldn't tell which, maybe his very soul — but it quaked through him, fierce enough to upset the lapping water. Ripples juddered out from his body, rings spreading outward like messengers on some important errand. *Take it away*, he thought. *Take this pain with you.*

Delicate fingertips stroked along his cheek and temple. He leaned into it, pressing his face into Zorah's cupped palm.

"Jake..." she whispered.

Not a plea to stop. Not a demand to continue. A simple acknowledgment. The simplest of all, the name given on the day he'd been born. Unlike Hunter, whom he'd first known as Paul in the before times, his name never changed, never evolved, never reinvented. Always simply Jake, who dragged his same name through space and time along with his scarred body and lacerated spirit, to come to this moment, in this lake, with this girl.

Hearing it whispered in Zorah's voice, with a note of affection and awe, there was something potent about it. An unflinching confrontation of the truth of his story. After all these years, maybe he wasn't someone wholly different, maybe he was simply himself.

“There were times,” he began again, “I thought maybe I’d conjured her up in my mind, that she’d been a figment of my imagination. I used to hope they’d killed her and that she’d been spared any of the other horrible fates that could’ve befallen her. Then, I’d feel guilty about wishing for her death. Hers, and the baby.” His sinuses burned with unshed tears; they scalded the back of his throat and hoarsened his voice. “Only, I wasn’t really wishing for her death, for *their* deaths, I was wishing for mercy. She was so kindhearted and so fearless. She took pity on me and paid the price.”

Zorah brushed her lips against his jaw. “So did you.”

Jake closed his eyes and soaked up her scent and solace. He’d never told anyone this story. Never, except for the ugly night with Kess, uttered Ava’s name. But that too, he realized now, was another wound. A self-inflicted one. One that maybe, just maybe, might heal.

“That night was dark, and we’d heard them coming, huddled together in the blackest corner of my hole. Being here with you, hiding like this, it all came back. I didn’t want it to touch you, to contaminate you with ugliness. That’s why I didn’t tell you when you asked. Not because I think you’re a child.” He craned his neck back till he could see her face, or at least the darkened pits of her eyes. “I don’t think that. Never have.”

With a quiet hum, Zorah rested her cheek on his shoulder, and, by some tacit understanding, neither of them spoke. Or maybe there wasn’t anything else to say. For his part, Jake had run off the edge of confessions. He wasn’t stupid or naïve enough to believe he could’ve done anything to save Ava that night. By that time, the mistake had gone too far to be corrected. His failure happened much earlier, at the point where she’d shown an attachment to him. If he’d put her off, discouraged her affection, treated her with coldness rather than entertaining her interest, things might’ve gone differently. The rejection would’ve hurt her, and he would’ve existed in that wretched place without the small parcels of solace she provided, but it would’ve been better. For both of them.

One hand gripping the dock and the other holding Zorah, Jake breathed deep and savored this moment. Here, with this beautiful star of a woman, he had a chance to fix his mistake. The past remained unchangeable, but the future — *Zorah's future*, in particular — was wide open. Kissing or not, he could not in clear conscience bind her to him. If any grace could be found for his actions with Ava, it was in the weakened and terrorized state he'd existed in at that time. But now? Living in Morris Hill, he had no excuse to subject this woman to the consequences of a life with him.

He hadn't been strong enough to push Ava away when he needed to, but he wouldn't make the same mistake twice. Zorah might feel like his down to the marrow in his bones, but Omega or not, she could never truly be.

CHAPTER 18

Zorah

They'd huddled under the dock for what seemed like hours. Eventually, probably as high as a cloud, Colt left. But they waited some more, not wanting to be lured into complacency and walk straight into a trap. Jake swam ashore first, to make sure Colt had truly gone, and then insisted on coming back and escorting Zorah to land. Swimming side by side, Jake throttled his speed to match hers. The unspoken consideration touched her, her emotions still disturbed from the poignancy of his whispered confessions.

He'd alluded to a tragic history more than once, yet even her wildest imaginings came nowhere near the truth of it. On some level, she couldn't conceive the depth of his suffering. Her own petty hassles and struggles paled in comparison. She didn't find any of the Morris Hill Alphas to her liking? *Boo hoo*. She didn't want to take Nelson as a mate? *Poor her*. At least she wasn't conscripted into hard labor and torn apart from her lover and child.

Poor Jake. Poor, poor Ava. Her heart broke and then broke again every time her brain filled in some imaginary detail of their ill-fated romance. The desolate unknowing of it messed with her head. Was Ava living somewhere else? Had the child survived? Her soul hungered for any crumb of consolation, but, as he'd pointed out, there was no comfort to be found in resolution.

Zorah rubbed at her arms to chase away the morning chill. Dawn would arrive in short order, and she'd been awake the entire night. Behind her, Jake's feet gently padded on the dirt path. The normalcy of silently walking back to the settlement, after the upheavals of the night, soothed her. She shivered again and was caught off guard by a drape of cozy fabric that fluttered over her shoulders. The worn flannel, redolent with his scent and body heat, curled around her and chased away the gooseflesh. Zorah gathered it closed in the front, nearly overcome with the small, caring gesture.

He hadn't said much since the water, which she chalked up to the emotional toll. But other than the flannel, he hadn't reached for her hand or even brushed against her. Maybe the memories preoccupied him too much. Or maybe he regretted their spontaneous make-out on the dock.

Problem was, she didn't.

She'd *loved* it. Every heart-soaring touch of his hand, every toe-curling scrape of his stubble, every breath-taking taste of his lips, she wanted the moment to last until the end of time. Soaking wet with a half-rotted-out dock jamming splinters into her butt, she couldn't care less. She had an Alpha — one who smelled right, tasted right, felt perfect. The world could've combusted, and she wouldn't have cared.

"You should be good from here." His rumbly voice broke through her thoughts.

Zorah stopped and faced him. The lines in his face read differently in this light. Deep crow's feet bracketed his eyes, a tense pinch at their corners that never totally relaxed. Scars marred his skin, rounded and crooked in shades of white, pink, and tan, hiding countless abrasions and sores. Deep furrows sliced into his cheeks; a corporeal canyon eroded by eons of tears. What she'd attributed to ruggedness and harsh, masculine beauty, she now saw for what it was: physical testaments to sorrow and strife. Dull fury coiled in her belly, a stale and impotent need to reap vengeance on whoever caused this torment, whoever burdened him with this grief.

Yet she could do nothing. Nothing but appreciate all he'd sacrificed to stay alive and bring him to this place, so he could save a little boy's life, teach her to swim, and make her dizzy with a single kiss.

Emotions welling, she moved in close, the tips of her toes bumping into his. Impulsively, she grabbed his hand and sandwiched it between her own. "Thank you for trusting me with your story. Thank you for surviving, for not giving up."

His face folded, the pained lines etching deeper. "Don't thank me."

She jostled his hand in aggravation. “Why not?” His eyes searched hers, an unreadable question in his gaze. His silence only worsened her impatience. “What? What is it?”

The muscles in his throat rippled, and his mouth opened and closed and opened again. “You’re a good swimmer now,” he said hoarsely. He lifted a hand to her cheek, stroking across her cheekbone with a calloused thumb, its gritty whisper she felt as acute as a knife blade. “So this is our last lesson.”

Zorah’s stomach bottomed out, her entire body aligning in unified protest. “What? No!”

”*Shhh.*” His palm smoothed back from her cheek, threading into the messy tendrils of her hair. “You’ve worked hard, and I’m so proud of you. But it’s too dangerous. We almost got caught tonight. That would’ve been bad for me but disastrous for you.”

“I don’t care about getting caught,” she snapped. “My parents are coming in two weeks anyway.” His eyebrows rose in silent admonishment, as if she’d just made his point for him. “You *kissed me* tonight. Remember that? You’ll kiss me and then send me off on my way like nothing happened?”

The wall of his torso expanded in a beleaguered sigh. “That was my fault. I thought you had drowned, and I got carried away...” The end of the sentence withered, like he couldn’t bring himself to sell the lie.

“No.” Zorah flung his hand away. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to pretend like it was an accident or that you didn’t want it because *you did.*” She poked a finger in his chest, and not nicely, either. “Everything you’ve been holding back, I felt it. I felt *all of it*, so you don’t get to stand here and tell me it was *nothing.*”

Jake’s lips curled into a snarl. He leaned closer, large and looming as he glared down from his greater height. “And so what if I did want it? So what if I’ve thought of little else since the moment I first saw you? What does it *matter*, Zorah?”

Aggravation ripped through her, accompanied by a broad stripe of unwelcome arousal at his show of dominance. Her

palms itched to slap him across the face so her lips could kiss it better. “It *matters*.”

“Why?” His voice turned to ice. “You’re going to go home, you’re going to find a mate, and you’re going to pop out little Alpha or Omega babies, and that’ll be the end of it. I told you before, I have nothing to give you. That hasn’t changed, and it *won’t*.”

On some level, he spoke the truth. Terrible, hated, infuriating truth, but truth, nonetheless. In the quiet, eerie darkness, hidden under the half-sunken dock, anything seemed possible. She could kiss a mysterious Alpha and drink up his intoxicating scent and love every second of it. Her mind could paint a thousand fantasies to wash away her worries. But in the stark, unforgiving dawning day, her parents were coming to fetch her home and give her to Nelson, and the walls of her future closed in around her, no matter how many breathless kisses she stole in the moonlight.

Was he her fated mate? She had no idea. Beyond her body’s response to him, he didn’t have much to recommend him, yet she couldn’t — *wouldn’t* — let this go.

Lips peeled back from her teeth, Zorah demanded, “Then why did you kiss me?”

Jake’s nostrils gave an angry, frustrated flare, and his eyes darted away. “I already told you; I got carried away.”

“Fine, you got carried away. But I *liked* it, you stubborn ass.” Her chest heaved as her conviction crashed through her. “I liked it more than any other kiss I’ve ever had, and that matters to *me*.”

Sighing, Jake cupped her cheeks in his large hands. His thumbs mapped the lines of her jaw, and he laid his forehead against her own. “It does matter,” he said, rough and gravelly. “Just not enough. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m not who you need me to be. If I gave you another impression, forgive me.”

A cool breeze slipped into the scant space between them, contrasting with all the warm places where Jake’s skin met hers. Like nature itself was agreeing with this one-sided

withdrawal. Zorah's heart gave a single, sullen thump before it dropped to the ground, leaden and dead.

“Jake —”

“It's almost day,” he said.

Zorah feared she'd slipped into a dream turned nightmare and would wake in an instant, confused and disoriented. Only no dream she'd ever dreamt approached the heart-rendering sear of the impassioned kiss he pressed against her unmoving lips.

His hands fell away from her face to grip her shoulders, and, with a gentle shove, he pointed her in the direction of the village. “You have to go.”

The shock of defeat held her immobile, her mouth hanging open like a landed fish, her thoughts nothing more than scattered fragments of inchoate protest.

With one lingering, indecipherable look, Jake turned on his heel and strode away. Angry, stinging tears burned Zorah's eyes, unexpected and unwelcome, commemorating the end of something never began. Fantasies she hadn't allowed herself to even entertain hemorrhaged out in a spurting mess. Everything hurt, everything ached, everything inside her scratched raw and peeled back and skinned.

Zorah wiped her eyes with violent swipes and paced toward her tent with stomping feet. Why was she crying? She didn't want him. She *didn't*. He was an outcast, a loner, a damaged Alpha shunned and bullied and barely a member of this Pack. He was about as far from a Prince Charming as she could imagine. He had nothing: no position, no home, no trade or future. He had nothing to entice her family, nothing at all that would satisfy them even in the slightest.

Then again, Zorah didn't care about any of that.

Position and status were her mother's preoccupation. Her father's. Zorah never cared. Why did every decision require strategy and political maneuvering? Why couldn't she simply have something because she wanted it?

Did she even *want* Jake as her mate? She didn't have an answer to that question, but she did want to kiss him again, feel his hands on her naked body, enjoy his weight anchoring hers to the earth. Was that too much to ask? To have one satisfying fling before being mated to someone her family found suitable?

It didn't seem like an unreasonable demand.

Lips quivering, she threw back the flaps on her empty tent and crawled onto bedding lacking all traces of human warmth. Zorah tore at the forgotten flannel and yanked it off her body. She wished she'd balled it up and hurled it at his head. Or shoved it at him with a suggestion to stick it up his ass. Instead, she crammed it under a jumbled pile of blankets to get it out of her sight. Then she turned her back on the whole mess and buried her head in a pillow, breathing into the suffocating cotton, waiting for her stupid tears to run dry.

CHAPTER 19

Jake

The touch sketched a meandering path over his brow, down his cheekbone, and along the curve of his upper lip. It seduced him out of sleep with a gentle tug of invitation so unlike his usual terrorized lurch into wakefulness. Jake glided into consciousness, embraced by the accepting amber eyes, ready to meet his own with open arms.

“Zor —”

A firm, slim fingertip shushed his lips from uttering the second syllable, and before he could react, she replaced it with the tentative touch of her lips. Smooth, delicate, and inquisitive, the kiss rocketed into him like a heat-guided missile. She was here. *Zorah* was here, and he didn't know why, but he also didn't much care about the reason.

Jake, wasting no time, cupped her cheeks and redoubled his efforts. Her citrusy taste flooded his mouth and propelled him to seek more and more and *more*. Levering up, he flipped her on her back and kissed her again with his whole body, closing his eyes and narrowing everything down to that singular touch. He flicked his tongue over the curl of her lower lip, the one that gave her the natural pout that drove him wild. Squirming with pleasure, *Zorah's* hands clutched at his shoulders and raked through his hair, making him crazy with each demanding touch. She wanted more of him, and he needed more of her. They could go slow the second time. She was here giving herself to him, and this time, he wouldn't discard her holiest of offerings.

“Jake.” She gasped and pulled his hair and moaned his name, and Jake thought he might explode right there in his jeans.

He mouthed over her jaw, down her throat, and lapped at the trilling flutter of her pulse.

“Jake,” she repeated, her hands stilling in his hair and a different tone contaminating his name, one absent any of the

pleasure-drunk agony. “Jake!”

He startled up onto his hands and locked his focus on Ava’s deep brown, terrified eyes. Her mouth gaped, fear writ large on her face as she stared over his shoulder. They were here, they were back, to take her again, and he’d never see her again.

“Jake!”

He jolted upright, fists cocked and teeth bared, into blinding sunlight. His chest worked like a bellows, pumping air into his resistant, wheezing lungs to prime him for the fight he’d surely awakened to. His cock throbbed in his pants, angry and unsatisfied, unhelpful for the impending battle. Where was she? Where was Ava? Where was Zorah? *Zorah and Ava*? Why was Ava here in his cabin? Nothing made sense except the panic pounding through every single cell in his body.

“Yo, Jake!” A loud voice penetrated his confusion. “You in there?”

His groggy mind snapped to order, several things registering at once. He knew that voice. Colt. *Colt* was here. Zorah wasn’t. Ava was still lost. No longer asleep and dreaming, he flashed back to the stolen moments in the lake, the consummate high and abject low of the entire night rolling out before him like a filthy red carpet. The reality rent him in two. He could almost sense the hot blood gushing from his chest.

“Yeah, hang on,” he called out, the words scratching his parched throat.

Scrubbing a palm over his face, he stood and tangled his face in the last batch of Zorah’s drying clothes, still perfumed with her scent as they slapped at his cheeks. Much like she’d wanted to slap him herself, no doubt, after that final send-off.

She should’ve. He’d deserved it. But even if she had, he wouldn’t feel any better.

Cursing under his breath, he whipped the clothes off the haphazardly strung clothesline, compressing them into a messy ball that he hid under his bedclothes. The last thing he needed today was to explain the incriminating presence of

Zorah's clothes in his cabin. After he dealt with whatever Colt wanted, he'd think of a way to get them back to her. Or not. Maybe he'd burn them and be done with it. They were done, after all. Done with the lessons, done with the sneaking, just... done.

Outside, Colt stood at the southwest side of the cabin, canting his head this way and that at the construction. Late afternoon sun blared through the breaks in the trees, stabbing into Jake's still-adjusting eyes and making it impossible for him to read the other Alpha's expression. He grunted in greeting and then rolled out his neck and shoulders, squaring himself up for the ambush he could be walking into. Colt chose *today* of all fucking days to show up here? That couldn't be good.

"I see you got the walls up," Colt said, easy enough. "Looks good. What's the plan with the roof?"

Was the Second fucking with him? Was he *not* here to interrogate Jake about what happened at the lake last night and simply wanted to check on the progress of the cabin? Granted, Colt came up here a few times a week to do that but showing up the morning (or afternoon) after almost catching Jake and Zorah together struck him as beyond coincidence.

But maybe not.

"Dunno." Jake's throat scratched, and he cast around for where he'd last dropped his canteen. "You got ideas?"

Colt tossed him a container that sailed through the air and into his hands with a loud slosh. He needed this. When had he last had something to drink? Or to eat? Like the big bang or some other event of similar magnitude, everything that had happened before he kissed Zorah was erased from his mind. Nothing existed before he touched his flesh to hers. A world gone dark came to life in shining, blazing array. *Fuck.*

He was a mess.

"Probably more'n a one-man job."

Jake drank deeply, then dragged his bewildered attention back to where Colt kicked at some logs. "Huh?"

Colt met his gaze for the first time, a quizzical lean in his brow. “You okay, man?”

Jake tipped the canteen up to his lips again and used the few moments of silence to try to arrange his thoughts. It was okay. It was all... okay. At least as far as their potential discovery went last night. Otherwise, it was all shit, but at least Colt hadn't come today to drag him back to camp to confess before Hunter and the rest of the Pack.

Their secret was safe.

“Yeah, sure,” Jake mumbled, not entirely sure what he was agreeing with.

Ignoring Colt's pointed eye contact, he squinted at the yawning void where a door needed to be fit into the frame; he needed to hurry up and get that done before the rains started. That, and about a thousand other things.

Whatever, it was fine. He'd take all these stupid, inconvenient feelings from Zorah and Ava and the Pack and whatever else, and he'd hammer them into the fucking walls of this place. He'd pound them up in every chink and joint and be rid of them. What was that story they made him read in high school? About the guy who bricked up his enemy in a wine cellar or some shit? Yeah, like that. Just like that.

Jake tossed the canteen back over and wiped his damp hands on his jeans. “You wanna get to work?”

With a final searching look, Colt turned to unpack the horse he'd led up the ridge. “Yeah, let's do it.”

CHAPTER 20

Zorah

The day inched into night, every minute swelling and bloating to feel like a full hour. Her head hurt, her body throbbed, and even the tips of her hair seemed on edge.

Ginny let out a blood-curdling scream as Zorah held the squirming demon in place to change her diaper for bedtime. Jace and Pixie were tucked into bed but loudly complaining about it and showing no signs of settling down. Zorah tried to tune out their bickering and whining, her throbbing head pressurized like an overstuffed grain bag.

A bead of sweat broke free and trickled down the side of her nose. Wrestling a diaper on a baby shouldn't be this arduous. She cut a quick glance to the hearth, as if the stone-cold fireplace had somehow burst into flames and now pumped the room full of heat. But, no, it still sat cold and ashy, as it had the entire time she'd been in Morris Hill. Now well into September, the weather had cooled, yet not cool enough to need a fire indoors.

She fastened the last pin on Ginny's diaper and used a free hand to fluff her shirt from her body, trying in vain to get some airflow on her overheated chest. It hardly helped. Her spirits dredged the bottom of the well she'd lived in for the past week. Nothing would help, and she knew exactly why: her Heat was coming.

"Hey, what's all this fuss about?" Grace's head popped through the door, carrying a laundry basket piled high with sun-dried clothes. "It's time for bed."

Hefting Ginny from the changing table, Zorah gave the baby a few quick bounces to try to settle the lingering discontent from having endured the indignity of a change. "We're getting there."

"Oh my gosh, Zorah!" Grace dropped the basket and crossed the floor in two steps, invading her space and laying a

maternal palm on Zorah's forehead. "You're burning up. Are you okay?"

Zorah raised her miserable gaze. "It's my Heat."

"Oh, you poor thing." Grace retrieved Ginny from Zorah's arms with a pitying look and an arm squeeze she clearly intended to be comforting.

It felt anything but.

Granted, all Omegas, eventually, went through Heats. It was one of the most notable differences between Omegas and Betas and a rite of passage, so to speak. But even in the universality of that Omega experience, how Heats played out varied wildly in Omega's lives. Thus far, Zorah had her first one around nineteen, and then two or three every year since, all taking place in her home. Her parents, ever vigilant about her purity, locked her in her room when the Heats came, discreetly delivering food and water and pretending they couldn't hear her pitiful and humiliating moaning.

But, in some places, unmated Omegas were given free rein to satisfy their lustful urges however, and with *whomever*, they pleased. She had heard whispers among the Omegas who arrived after the fire of long, luxurious Heat spells that were far more pleasure than pain. Other Omegas whispered about it, but could *she* take those kinds of liberties? Here? In Morris Hill? Not likely. Hunter and Colt swore to her parents they'd look after her, but "look after" hardly entailed letting her try out half a dozen knots to find the one best to her liking. No way: they probably wouldn't even permit *one* Alpha to join her in her nest, no matter how much she begged.

She could only imagine. But imagine, she did. Thoughts of a heavy body at her back, pressing her into her sweet-smelling nest and driving a heavy cock deep inside her, unfurled a dark ribbon of brewing need. Zorah bit back a whimper. A cramp twisted to life in her lower pelvis, stealing her breath and leaving her with little more than a pained gasp. She gripped her belly. Damn. This was coming on hard and fast.

"I'm gonna need a few days..." Zorah grit out.

“Let me get Lars to finish bedtime.” Before her sentence was out, Grace stuck her head out the door and yelled for her husband, her unruly, bedtime-resisting kids still squalling in the background. Grace planted an absentminded kiss on Ginny’s temple and snapped at Pixie and Jace to settle down before turning her attention back to Zorah. “Once Lars gets here, we’ll get you moved into the Heat Hut. Good thing it’s finished, right?” She flashed Zorah a wry smile. “Now. What will you need for your nest? What kinds of food do you like to have on hand?”

Zorah’s spirits plummeted; she hadn’t even thought about her nest. In River Bend, she’d always had her private room, with her own things, arranged the way she liked them. She didn’t want to go home — not *now*, not with her entire plan in shambles and no solution in sight — but she craved her pillow’s comforting feel under her cheek and the scent of the nourishing bone broth her mother made her. She wanted to hear Nana’s soothing voice tell her stories and feel the old woman’s cool, papery-thin skin mop sweat from her brow. For the first time since arriving in Morris Hill, homesickness twisted up her insides, not helped at all by another seizing cramp. She murmured a curse and bent in half. More sweat sprinkled her brow, and she dashed it away, still trying to get her head around what was coming.

“Just tell Rue,” She panted out to Grace, “she’ll bring my things.”

Grace hummed a noncommittal note and went to bellow out the door for her husband again. The sound bruised Zorah’s eardrums, her senses already raw and reactive. As much as Ginny’s shrieks pierced Zorah’s brain like a thousand shards of glass, she understood and even felt a little jealous that Ginny could fuss without reproach. If Zorah could, she would wail and protest, too. *Why now?* She would scream. After all these months in Morris Hill, why had her Heat arrived when the sand of her hourglass funneled down to dust?

Maybe the accumulated proximity to the Alphas brought it on early.

Maybe one Alpha, in particular. Her inner Omega's eerie voice sibilated deep in her brain.

"Go away," she silently commanded. "*He doesn't deserve another second of our attention.*"

Whether her inner Omega acknowledged the sentiment or not, at least she shut the hell up. It wasn't enough, though, to dispel all the memories of Jake that floated to the surface of her fevered mind. The memories she'd waged war against for the past week all danced in front of her like they'd been rehearsing for this moment. Was there no end to the insult? It was bad enough that she obsessively retraced every interaction they'd ever had, trying to sort through what had gone wrong (and what had gone oh-so-wonderfully right). She'd metabolized the hurt and rejection. Set the entire episode aside and forced her mind toward choosing one of the Morris Hill Alphas once and for all. And after all that work, after all that effort, to have her stupid inner Omega pipe up and thrust his stupid, handsome face in front of her eyes, she wanted to howl.

But she couldn't. If she started screaming, she wouldn't stop. Plus, it would hurt. Her feet felt heavy and sluggish, the solid weight of dread towing her under. Her immediate future stretched out ahead, days teeming with the misery of unholy lust while also keeping herself from tripping down the rabbit hole of mercurial Jake and his deficiencies. She couldn't do it, she simply *couldn't*.

And yet, she had no choice.

"Grace," Zorah whimpered through a veil of tears. "Can we go? I need to lie down."

A thumping scrape on the roof crashed through the small room. As Zorah bobbed between consciousness and unconsciousness, her head lolled against the brand-new cedar planks that made up the walls of the Heat Hut. The freshly hewn and only lightly sanded wood scratched and snagged at her skin, but at least it felt cool, the smell clean and non-offensive. She'd stripped down to nothing and sat naked on

her improvised bed in a haphazardly thrown-together nest. She didn't like it, it didn't call to her, but what else could she do? Oblivious to the inferior nest, slick had begun to leak from between her thighs, and she could smell herself, the fragrance both alluring and disgusting.

Outside, the wind whipped the trees into a frenzy, continuing to announce the impending storm. On the roof, the raspy thud happened again, probably a branch slapping against the corrugated metal. Wind whistled between the cracks in the door. Zorah narrowed her eyes at the structure, staring at the security bolt as if she couldn't remember how it worked.

She remembered setting it, of course, but distantly, the way one remembered a dream from the night before. Somehow, Grace herded her to the Heat Hut, along with some spare bedding for a rudimentary nest. The maternal Omega also managed to get word to Hunter and Kess about what was going on. No one had yet used the Heat Hut for its intended purpose, and it became glaringly clear, even to Zorah's fevered mind, that no one quite knew what to do now that they had it.

Unfortunately, that meant it all had to be worked out in hushed tones while Zorah sweated and cramped and generally wanted to decompose directly into the earth. So humiliating for the Alpha of Alphas to discuss such a private matter out in the open, wondering aloud how vocal Zorah would be in the worst of it. The hut, located opposite the settlement from the Alpha bunkhouse, wasn't far enough away to limit the impact her pheromones and guttural moans might have on the Alphas. What would they do if some of the Alphas had trouble staying away from an obviously Heat-sick Omega? In the end, Hunter decided against posting a security guard nearby. He didn't want to subject any poor Alpha to that awful task. The solid wood bar lock someone had thoughtfully installed during construction would have to suffice. It could only be set or released from the inside, and while it wouldn't keep a truly Rut-mad Alpha from breaking in, it would slow him down enough that others could come help.

At least, that was the hope.

During the deliberation, Rue slipped in and out like a ghost, depositing a huge bundle of Zorah's things and giving her a brief, but tight, hug before disappearing into the night. The pile sat where Rue had dropped it, and Zorah gave it a baleful look.

At home, items for a perfect nest had been the one comfort her parents provided. They paid an exorbitant amount to procure nubby, sweet-smelling chenille and plush cashmere blankets, cozy fleece-covered pillows, and silken, cool-to-the-touch satin sheets. In River Bend, she'd collected an entire closet overstuffed with everything she'd been gifted since her first Heat. Luxury and abundance inconceivable to the Omegas of Morris Hill. Those women had been near ecstatic over the rough and ready Heat Hut she now occupied. But her disgust for the structure shamed her almost as much as it dug the pit of homesickness ever deeper.

The unrelenting pulse of the Heat-drenched blood throbbed in her temples. Maybe this was a sign that Morris Hill was never destined to be her home. An acute sense of wretchedness punched her in the guts, adding to the surging Heat misery. Maybe this rustic life wasn't for her if she couldn't sustain a single Heat without the trappings of wealth and comfort she'd grown up with. The proof was in the pudding: she wasn't meant to live outside of River Bend. A life mated to Nelson was what she'd been raised for and the best she could hope to attain. This entire ruse had been doomed from the start.

The way they always did when her Heat kicked into high gear, the licking flames under her skin began to migrate. The intolerable warmth trudged a steady path from distant parts of her body to between her legs, picking up speed as it continued its slow crawl. Slowly, her shame and disappointment gave way as her mind filled with more overt sexual ideas.

Outside, the first fat raindrops hit the roof like a dozen tiny fists requesting entry. They struck the salvaged tin in forceful, heralding pings before rapidly shifting into a steady downpour. Clean, pine-scented rain wafted into the cabin, speaking of cool drops and promising relief for her overheated skin.

Rain. Water. *Relief.*

Cool water would feel good against her body. Like swimming. She'd never gone swimming while in Heat, but it probably felt *divine*.

The idea caught fire, and she was on her feet before she knew it, testing her ability to stand upright. Cramps twinged in her abdomen, but not intolerable, and a drop of slick wandered down her leg. Swimming would also wash that away, which was fine with her. More would inevitably return.

Satisfied she could walk, Zorah considered her lack of clothing. She could put her clothes back on from earlier, but the mere thought of that kind of confinement made her skin revolt in a horrified shudder. Alternatively, the nearest blanket, a sun-bleached linen, worked just fine. Wrapped around her body in an improvised dress, she wouldn't be embarrassed if she ran into anyone.

Ran into anyone. *Crap*. The thought stayed her plans. After the whole discussion with Hunter about her safety, could she, an Omega in Heat, honestly traipse through the settlement and expect to be left alone? It was a risk. A big one. In fact, probably the biggest one she'd yet taken, all the swim-lesson sneaking notwithstanding.

The rain assumed a soothing, steady rhythm that seduced her with every drop. Hours had passed since she'd come to the hut. It must be late. Besides that, no one would be out in this weather. Except the patrol, but she could avoid them by sticking to the shadows, and the rain would mask the worst of her scent. Conversely, though, the storm would also dilute any Alpha scent that came near her. It was a risk she'd have to take.

The lake called and she would answer.

CHAPTER 21

Jake

He woke, as he always did, surprised that he'd fallen asleep. With no idea of the time, the dark of night loomed outside the door, and the hairs rose on the back of his neck. In an instant, the knife he kept near for protection was in his hand, and he stood in readiness for who knew what. An ominous foreboding enveloped him. He was awake, but why?

Rain showered down, slapping against the crinkled material of the tarp slung over the roof. In the past week, he and Colt had finished the roof, but attached a tarp until he could waterproof everything. Jake listened deeply, straining his ears to hear over the wind and through the rustle of the trees and beyond the clattering raindrops on the plastic above him. It hit him then: a low, animal sound.

His groin reacted before his brain did, tightening as if to veer him toward the source. The noise wasn't a hum of discomfort or distress at all but a soft, keening cry of another type altogether. His Alpha nature charged back to the forefront of his mind, and without a single thought, he blasted through the doorframe, oblivious to anything but tracking the sound to its origin. Another muffled cry drifted up the hill and confirmed the location.

The lake.

Who would be at the lake in the middle of the night in the middle of a storm? His legs pumped harder, all hesitancy erased, all focus attuned to his destination. The air, thick with precipitation, clouded his olfaction, frustrating him with the hindrance. If it was her, was she okay? Was she alone, or were the noises he heard of a *coupling* nature? His Alpha roared, enraged at the suggestion. Now that he'd touched her, tasted her, and felt the solid softness of her body pinned under his, that knowledge belonged to him. And him alone.

He cut a rough path through the woods, the wet leaves and grass slippery under his feet and turning to mud. It squished between his toes, and he lost his footing once or twice, but

each sultry whimper propelled him forward, and the absence of any answering Alpha-timbre tone did not fail to escape his notice either.

The edges of the beach opened up, and he skittered onto the well-trudged path, recalling the many nights he'd walked this same course toward their clandestine lessons.

Close now, Zorah's distinctive scent raced up his nose and exploded into his awareness. *Holy shit*. Her bright citrus had transformed into something thick and sensual. He caught the clear tang of slick, and it twisted his stomach with need. He was losing control and didn't know what he'd do when he found her.

It didn't take long. Tucked away on the edge of the beach, as far away as possible from the trail, Zorah knelt on hands and knees, naked, her body undulating and rocking in an unmistakably erotic rhythm. Well, on her knees and *one* hand, that was. Her other hand worked between her legs, the frantic movements so violent and aggressive, he wanted to tell her to stop, to not attack herself with such vigor, to slow down and let the pleasure evolve without force. But even without being told, he understood the need that drove her did not have room for slowness or restraint.

Another pathetic cry escaped from between her mashed-together lips, and he left those thoughts behind, his only concern the imperative to provide relief. The rain, still coming down, pelted his cheeks and dribbled down his neck, and he slapped a drenched lock of hair from his eyes, skidding to a stop in front of the writhing girl.

Hair soaked and face dotted with droplets, she looked up with an expression caught between ecstasy and misery. "Jake?"

His heartbeat skyrocketed, and he fell to his knees, both to be near her and because he could no longer count on his body to hold him upright. He'd never seen a sight more beautiful in his life: Zorah, every inch of her soft lushness exposed and on display, wanting and needing and waiting and *ready*. Her spine undulated from the base of her neck, down her back,

hollowing above the rounded fullness of her hips and ending as her skin parted to the crease of her buttocks. A work of art in its delicacy and strength as it flexed and shuddered with her efforts. For those did not stop, even as she gaped at him in helpless wonder, her hand continued to rub, perfuming the air with her thick scent.

Jake sat on his heels, fists clenched so tight he might break his bones. “Yeah, sweetheart. What do you need?”

“It’s my Heat,” she sobbed. “And I can’t... I can’t...”

He knew. He saw it in the frustrated thrusts of her fingers against her flesh, the harsh grind of her hips against her wrist, the jostling tremors that bounced her neglected breasts. He felt it in the literal heat that radiated off her naked flesh, faint wisps of steam rising up as it battled the cooler, night air.

Heat. He’d never been with an Omega in Heat. In truth, he’d never been with an Omega at all. If Ava had been one, he hadn’t known, and she was the last woman whose body he’d enjoyed, nearly a century ago. But he’d heard.

He’d heard plenty of uncouth Alpha talk about Omega Heats and the primal carnality released when they hit. Endless days fucking and sucking in every imaginable position and unlikely contortion. Long ago, he’d dismissed the jealousy and raw bitterness and put it out of his mind, never truly bothering to consider the possibility it would befall him. Most Alphas never serviced an Omega through her Heat, so why would he be any different?

Yet, here he was, with the object of his obsession naked and presenting her body to him, so desperate for touch that she was on the verge of tears. An implausible “*I never thought it would happen to me*” story come true.

Pure, undisguised want clogged his throat. His worthiness, or lack thereof, no longer mattered. Not right now, not in this.

Fingernails biting into his flesh, he rasped, “You want help?”

Her eyes shuttered. “*Please.*”

Permission granted, he took hold of her rounded cheeks and brought her lips to his own. At the first touch, her taste washed over his tongue, sunshine-sweetness swirled with lust. He drank deep and went in for more. Like a dream, her pliant lips parted for his seeking tongue; it slid against hers, hot and wet and so erotic he nearly roared in exaltation.

Insane. Absolutely insane how wound up he was. Craving more, Jake tucked his shoulder under hers and nudged her upright to her knees. Bare breasts pressed to his abdomen, and Jake groaned, his dick so hard it chafed against the tight confines of his soaking wet jeans. Uncomfortable, to say the least, but he didn't care. This wasn't about him. His need was endless, but hers was foremost.

He found her breasts, scooping and hefting and squeezing them, reacquainting himself with their softness. *Fuck*, they were perfection. Tearing himself away from the kiss, he stooped lower, sucking a great mouthful of her nipple and its surrounding flesh into his mouth. Tongue lapping against the stubborn nub, he couldn't get enough. With a popping suck, he swapped to the other side, Zorah groaning and mewling. He wanted all his senses filled with Zorah till he burst, till he drowned, till he dissolved completely.

Her hand, still frantically working to bring herself to climax, rubbed against his imprisoned cock. With a grunt, he snatched it away, and Zorah startled at the withdrawal of the contact, releasing a plaintive protest. With a final, lingering suck to a taut nipple and snagging her gaze with his own, he brought her hand to his lips. She gasped when he stroked her porcelain-fine fingers down his tongue. The taste blasted into his bloodstream, and Jake, who'd been addicted to so many substances he'd lost count, shivered at the one that would surely be his final undoing.

Her fingers curled to caress his cheekbone and rasp against his stubble, the subtle acknowledgment speaking to something much deeper and profound than physical need. Something he couldn't allow himself to consider.

Instead, he savored the warmth of her palm against his face. Staring deep into her eyes, he said, "I'm soaked to the bone,

Zorah, yet I *thirst*.”

A growl percolated up from somewhere deep in his chest, accenting the word *thirst*. Her eyelids fluttered in response, and she began bobbing her head in permission and approval.

“Anything,” she breathed. “Anything you want.”

Jake set that aside, the suggestion of blanket consent too stimulating to consider. Instead, he flattened his body to the ground and guided her to bring a plump thigh over to straddle his waiting face. One inner thigh brushed against his cheek and her scent showered down around him, rich and thick this close to the source.

“This is what I want,” he said, soaking in the view from this new vantage point. Magic, she was pure magic.

Cock throbbing, he snaked a hand to release it from its confinement. Stubborn clothes suctioned to his damp skin, and he was less than gentle in setting it free. Not that it mattered; his dick was so hard it could hammer nails. He gave it a few strokes and squeezed it close to pain, trying to wrench his arousal back from the brink. Useless, but he tried.

With his other hand on her hip, he urged her forward, feeling the stuttering hesitation in her compliance under his fingertips. Fully aroused, the puffy lips of her sex parted before him, giving him a clear view into the darker red of the most sensitive flesh and the entrance nestled inside. Her tiny nub of a clit poked out, so taut and swollen that it mirrored the straining complaint of his cockhead. He pitied it for that reason and squeezed his hand around his similarly deprived body part, grateful for the relief. That’s what he wanted: to provide her the same relief he now barreled toward with embarrassingly few strokes.

”*This* is what I want,” he repeated, again adding that subtle growl. How he knew how to do that, he couldn’t say. It was like a bodily function he’d always had but never before used. When did one learn to sigh? Or to sneeze? Never. One just did it. And this growling, purring, commanding noise affected her as much as it did him, so he did it again. “*Now*, Zorah.”

The muscles of her thighs quivered as she seated herself on his mouth. Fragrant curls tickled the tip of his nose, moist heat and silky skin touched his lips, and her abused sex twitched at the first greedy swipe of his tongue. He tried again. Gentler. Slower. One curl of his tongue at her entrance. One long lick the full length of her slit. One tiny flick against her clit.

An incomprehensible noise rushed out of Zorah, so he repeated the pattern, retracing his tongue into her hot and ready hole and then back up to the hard little nub.

“Oh my god,” she breathed, head falling forward.

Jake continued his careful but thorough exploration, sampling all the textures and flavors on offer. She tasted divine, like citrus and summer and full-bodied spice, like woman and sex and the universality of what they were doing. No matter how many times the world evolved and transformed, over and over since the beginning of history, through it all, for millennia, humans had come together to worship each other's bodies the way he now — *finally, blessedly* — worshipped hers.

But philosophical thoughts were not where his mind needed to be. Not with his mouth occupied enjoying the erotic buffet. He redoubled his efforts, not changing but focusing, nudging a bit more against her clit with each pass, detouring to suck on one of her lips for a fleeting second, simply to enjoy her gasp of surprise.

Zorah sank forward onto her hands, splaying her thighs, pressing her body closer to his mouth and rolling her hips at the tempo she preferred. Faster than the pace he'd set, but he let her direct the motion, his own blood surging as she rocked against him. *God damn*, that was beautiful.

Slick flowed everywhere. It coated his mouth, chin, nose, and neck, and he did not give one single fuck. Doused in the evidence of her Heat and lust, it felt like a baptism, like a cleansing, one that no number of showers and scouring and sobriety ever achieved. This, this was holy.

Not letting up his steady rhythm, his free hand cupped her buttocks and massaged in sloppy handfuls. Moans flew from

her lungs, and her thighs began to quiver. Jake looked up and found Zorah's eyes, shadowed in the darkness but blazing with hunger and awe. He held them, their bodies straining toward this long-awaited finish, his eyes unblinking and fierce as he tried to transmit all the things he couldn't say in a single look.

You're incredible. You're magic. You're *mine*.

As if his thought tipped her over the edge, she came apart with a wail of relief and wonder. It went on and on, the pulsations so strong he felt them against his tongue as he labored to follow her wild, erratic thrusts and give her every bit of stimulation he could as she rode out wave after wave. Panting and crying out, twitching, writhing, arching, and wringing every ounce of her pleasure.

He'd never seen anything more exquisite.

Cock now beyond sensitive, Jake rubbed the last few strokes, calling forth the climax simmering since he'd tasted her lips. It didn't take much, and as Zorah caught her breath still astride him, he shattered. Pleasure bowled him over, his body no longer his own as blood roared in his ears and the seed shot from his cock in endless hot streams. It splashed against his abdomen and chest in a thick, ropey spray, the expulsion so abrupt and violent that his muscles cramped at the base of his spine. A mess to clean up, but he didn't care, giving his cock a few final pumps to clear the rest out. The climax wrung him loose, leaving him pliant and at peace for the first time in longer than he could remember.

Zorah lifted herself off him, and he rose to sit, both of them sticky and messy and suddenly unsure. He cupped her cheek, and her bewilderment reflected to match his own. What just happened? What had they done?

"Don't send me away," she said, her voice quaking slightly. "There'll be more, and I can't... I can't..."

Another Alpha instinct flared up like lighter fluid on an open flame. Protectiveness. This sweet girl — naked, alone, and soaked with rain and sex — needed much more than assistance with her Heat. She needed care and soothing and comfort. Abandoning her on this beach was never an option.

The cabin. He'd take her there, and once she was clean and dry, they'd figure out the rest.

Resolute in a way he hadn't felt in decades, Jake wiped raindrops from her cheek with his thumb. "I got you, sweetheart. C'mon, let's get cleaned up."

CHAPTER 22

Zorah

The need came on before she opened her eyes. Clawing up from her womb, it sunk its teeth in and refused to let go until she'd acquiesced to consciousness. Zorah delved a hand between her legs and opened her eyes.

The unfamiliar surroundings came into rough focus, and she circled her eyes around the small, square room. The structure wasn't much larger than her vacated Heat Hut. Just a simple, square-shaped enclosure with four walls, a dirt floor, a doorframe without a door, and space for a hearth, which hadn't yet been installed. The room smelled of fresh lumber and sap, of green things, and *Jake*. Exhilaration fizzed in her chest; this was *his* place.

It had been near dawn when they'd reached the cabin, and she'd dropped into heavy slumber. Vaguely, she recalled the trip up the hillside. Limp in his arms, drained from the release that had evaded her for so long, she'd had no energy to process the relocation. But now that she was awake, everything changed. Jake rested with his back against the wall, facing her with one leg bent and one extended.

"What time is it?" The question scratched at her dry throat.

Sitting up, she reached for the water flask thoughtfully within arm's reach and downed the entire content in a few gulps. She never ate much during her Heats, but drinking water lessened the more uncomfortable symptoms of headache, dry mouth, and stomach pains. After this flask, she'd request another.

Jake's sandy-colored brows lifted, either at her question or her guzzling of the liquid. "Midday." He hesitated, then asked, "How're you feeling?"

At the reminder, the Heat symptoms rose like steam from a boiling pot. Sweat beads broke out on her hairline, and a surging warmth toasted her cheeks.

“Like it’s coming on again,” she said, bashful at the remembrance of earlier.

Her swim had been a lovely reprieve from the invisible fire burning up her body, but it had been short-lived. Once the need overtook her, she’d been able to do little more than crawl onto shore and try to alleviate it.

But, for whatever reason, her own efforts hadn’t been enough. Nothing like that had ever happened before. Although difficult and near intolerable, she’d always been able to *attend* to her Heat needs before. Living day in, day out with so many available Alphas, she had no shortage of chests, hands, faces, and forearms to fantasize about, no deficit of scents to tantalize her with, conjuring images of rolling around and rubbing herself against a solidly muscled male. Yet none of that proved sufficient to get her over the edge and bring the release she’d craved.

Desperate, Zorah’d allowed herself to revisit the memory of the night on the dock. Permitted herself to relish it in a way she hadn’t in the days since its explosive happening. She remembered his lips on her breasts and that delicious, aching pull that shot straight to her core. She allowed it to carry her away, ecstatic when the thoughts harkened the elusive peak ever closer. But it proved insufficient and, therefore, even more hopeless. It was as if her body, having had a taste of Alpha attention, would no longer settle for anything less. Lying there on the beach, her skin and nerves scratched raw, she’d sobbed with the horror of the whole situation.

Until, like an angel, Jake arrived.

And then what he’d done... Zorah’d never been loved that way before. The novelty broke through the barrier and allowed her the climax she sought. And it had been *glorious*.

“I’ll need” — she gave him a shy look — “*more* soon.”

Jake’s eyes flared with understanding, and a muscle in his jaw ticked, but he made no move toward her. “Why were you out there? And why hasn’t anyone come looking for you?”

She raised defiant eyes. “My body felt hot, and I wanted a swim. I didn’t plan to” — embarrassment flooded in, and she couldn’t hold his gaze, instead flicking her eyes toward the open door and peering into the trees — “stay there. Like that. It just happened.”

“Does the Pack know where you are?”

Zorah shook her head, her now-dried hair dancing over her upper chest, drawing her attention to the exposed skin. Oh right, she was naked. Her cheeks tingled, maybe a Heat symptom, maybe more chagrin, and she tugged the thin blanket higher. This wasn’t her blanket, the one she’d brought to the lake; that one swayed on an improvised line strung across the cabin, no doubt still wet.

She ventured another glance at the immobile Alpha, reassured as the stern lines of his face softened. “They think I’m in the Heat Hut. No one was to bother me unless I hung a cloth on the doorknob. No one will know I’m here unless they barge inside.”

He gave her a solemn blink. “You can stay if you want.”

A different kind of pleasure flooded her, one having nothing whatsoever to do with Heat or sexual hunger. She studied the frayed blanket pooled in her lap, biting her lip to tamper the giddiness. She would stay, and they could do... *more*. Not stolen kisses on a half-sunken dock, but in a bed, in the light of day, so she could see his sun-burnished skin in its natural beauty and trace the strength in the muscles that had held her so tight. Her attention caught on the rudimentary pillow she’d been sleeping on, a coarse stuffed sack; it wasn’t important except that it made her consider the rest of the bed.

The bed. Here, she could build a nest. A *real* one.

The idea excited her. All hesitation evaporated, and she scrambled up onto her knees. In truth, the bed was little more than an improvised pallet with a worn mattress plopped on top of a low platform. Besides the ratty blanket she clutched to her chest and the pillow still sporting a dent from her head, there was a second pillow and another roughly folded blanket to the side. Definitely not much to work with and a far cry from the

sumptuous nest-building she did at home. Then again, the threadbare items had one very enticing feature: they all smelled like Jake.

She tucked some hair behind her ear, swiping through moisture gathering along her hairline. “Do you have anything else? Any other blankets or pillows?”

Jake’s face composed itself into baffled confusion. If she hadn’t been so focused on getting this nest business sorted out, she might’ve commented on the way the expression erased decades from his craggy face.

“Uh” — his eyes swept the room, and he got to his feet — “I have my old sleeping bag here somewhere. Why?”

“I need it,” she said quickly. “I need whatever soft things you have, for my nest. Blankets, pillows, soft, fuzzy things, cozy things.”

Jake crouched and began digging through a pile of supply bags and knapsacks left in a corner by the to-be-built hearth. Still shirtless, he wore only a pair of low-slung pants that hugged his lean hips and backside like a caress. Damn those jeans, touching him in all the places she never had. Zorah’s fingers curled with want.

She took a few deep breaths, the Heat’s simmer starting to boil, and consoled herself. *Soon, Zorah. Soon.* He shifted on his knees, showing her the broad span of his strong back. An unrestrained gasp slipped out, and Zorah clamped her hand over her mouth.

She had not been prepared. Could she ever have been, though? What could’ve prepared her for the sight of a back striped and ravaged by crisscrossing scars from his neck down past his waistline and into his pants? Some were little more than raised, thickened lines, but others were deep, ugly gouges spanning several sickening fingerbreadths. Regular, intentional wounds that had no origin other than cruelty.

How had she never noticed? Memories shuffled through her mind. For the swim lessons, he’d come shirtless, but it had been dark, and she’d never thought to examine his back too

closely. The day by the lake, with Nico... No, he'd worn a shirt that day. The night on the swim platform, she'd touched him, but too overcome from the kiss or too alarmed by Colt's appearance, she hadn't discovered the thickened irregularities in his skin.

Oh, Jake... Zorah's heart splintered into a thousand bloody shards. What other secret wounds did his silence and reserve conceal?

Jake's face jerked over his shoulder, catching her open-mouthed gaping at his back. His expression hardened as he rose to his feet, a rolled-up blanket clenched in his white-knuckled grip. He tossed it toward her, but she made no move to catch it, letting it land with a soft bounce on the mattress.

"Jake —"

"I don't want to talk about it." His voice stabbed into her as hard and cold as an icicle. He tipped his chin at the blanket. "That's all the bedding I've got. If you don't want to stay, I'll" — he cleared his throat so hard it made her wince — "I'll take you back."

Leave? Why would she want to leave? Because she'd seen his *back*? Zorah pulled the rolled blanket toward her and wrapped her arms around it, anxious to acknowledge the gift and forestall any discussion of departure. True, she had approximately three hundred questions about what he'd inadvertently revealed, but the most obvious ones answered themselves. He'd told her about his imprisonment; surely, those evil people had inflicted these scars. As if being torn apart from his lover and unborn child wasn't bad enough, his body bore evidence of physical and psychological torture that went well beyond what he'd described. Zorah wanted to know all of it. Every lash and stripe, every tear he'd shed, she wanted all of it dragged into the open so she could bear witness to what he'd endured and *survived*.

Zorah's eyes drifted to the beaten, but far from broken, Alpha, startling at the intensity of his regard. His green eyes met her own and then slowly dipped down the front of her body. Her heart raced. As if in answer, his naked chest heaved,

the slabs of his pale hair-dusted pecs lifting and lowering seductively, and Zorah decided she didn't care. She didn't care about the scars or the story behind them or the fact he might never tell her. Right now, in this moment, none of that mattered. She wanted his body pressed to hers and she wanted it *now*.

“No!” She levered up to her knees, craning her neck to hold his gaze. “I don't want to leave. I want to” — she paused to wipe a bead of sweat from her upper lip — “build my nest and share it with you.”

His chin tucked closer to his chest. “You mean that?” he asked with a wary, vulnerable note barely audible in his roughened question.

Overcome, she bobbed a vigorous nod, her nerves skittering. Tension rolled off Jake's shoulders, his breathing relaxed, and the heat returned to his expression. Zorah's spirits soared. Nothing was solved, nothing decided, and nothing made much sense, but right now, she needed this nest, and she was going to make the best damn one she'd ever had.

CHAPTER 23

Zorah

Unrolled, the sleeping bag exploded in a rich concentration of Jake's intoxicating scent. Zorah breathed it in, swearing she could feel it enter her lungs and pour into her bloodstream. Her sex gave a greedy pulse, and the first drips of moisture slicked her inner thighs. Her fingers gripped the cool, slippery fabric. She needed to hurry.

After having conspicuously slipped on a flannel shirt to cover his upper body, Jake had resumed his position at the doorway with one leg sprawled and the other bent. At his grunted direction, she unzipped the entire thing, doubling it in size and exposing the cozy interior meant to cradle a body in snug comfort. A satisfied sigh slipped out of her. At first touch, the waterproof exterior hadn't thrilled, but this fuzzy, fleecy side would do nicely.

After securing the lighter blanket as an improvised covering over her body, she set to work, bunching the sleeping bag in a circular shape to roughly cordon off an area inside the bed's perimeter. As she worked, her touches lingered more and more on the texture of it against her sensitized skin. The thick fabric, clearly designed for warmth, likely always possessed a pleasant downiness, but it also bore the weathered softness of years of noble use, the kind of wear and tear that added to the value of a thing, rather than detracted. With each reverent rub of it between her fingers, wistfulness spread through her for the nights it had spent enclosing and protecting her Alpha from the cold, from wind and rain, maybe even from danger. How many nights had the simple comfort embraced his broken, yet whole and perfect, body?

Her Alpha.

The phrase snuck in in an unguarded moment. Its use so easy, so natural and unobjectionable, it flowed through her mind. Her Alpha. Again, she allowed it and unquestioningly rode the wave of exhilaration it inspired.

Suddenly, quite ready to finish this nest, she reached for a pillow and brought it to her nose, disliking the older odors she detected. The other pillow was little better, making her want to toss them both out for being subpar. Yet a proper nest needed at least *one* pillow, didn't it?

Sitting back on her heels, she gnawed on a knuckle and then cut a glance at the silent Alpha, watching her with his sparkling green eyes like she was the best thing he'd ever laid eyes on.

“Can I have that shirt?”

Embarrassment flashed over his features, and he plucked at the shirt he wore. “It's not terribly clean.”

She eyed it with undisguised avarice. It was worn in all the right places, and her fingers tingled with the need to paw at it.

“May I have it? Please?” She forced herself to approximate politeness despite her desperation to possess it, and also, to have him half-naked once again.

It only seemed fair, after all, since this blanket barely covered her in any meaningful way. But, more than that, she balked at him covering up his scars. Those scars were part of him, and she wanted none of him hidden from her view.

Jake hesitated, scrubbing a palm through his wild curls and grumbling, “Never seem to be able to say no to you, don't see why this would be any different.” Once his hair fluffed up to twice its prior volume, he stopped and yanked the shirt over his head.

Zorah grinned and held out her hands, fingers wiggling in a “gimme, gimme” gesture, which cracked a smile onto his face. He bundled it up and pitched it to her waiting clutches, and she wasted no time in hauling it to her face for a deeply satisfying breath. Still warm from his skin, his scent clung to it, so fresh and so decadent, it both stoked her lust and made her crave it from the source. In a minute, this nest — redolent as it was with him — would cease to satisfy and she would need the real thing.

With redoubled haste, she placed the pillows where she wanted them and then snuggled the plaid flannel overtop as a makeshift pillowcase. She bent forward for a quick sniff, letting the fabric caress her cheek and sighing into it. Oh yes, *much* better. Greedy for more, she lay down in the improvised nest, satisfied by the reassuring textures and smells that billowed around her. It wasn't fancy or luxurious, but it was hers, and she loved it more than any nest she'd ever made. Zorah rolled from side to side, giggling and unconcerned when the blanket she'd tied around her came loose and fell away from her otherwise nude body.

Her skin lit up like a bonfire. Sensations prickled and clashed with the rain-cooled air in the cabin in a dizzying cacophony. The soft, worn fleece against her legs, the soft scratch of the blanket against her back, the flannel against her cheeks, it all worked together to blast her with untempered happiness.

Smiling and giddy, the Heat symptoms began pounding their way up the boiling caldera in her core. Warmth and desire buzzed through her abdomen, over her shoulders, and down her arms. It flared in her chest and neck and burnished her cheeks. Her Omega nature preened and reveled in it, and, for the first time, Zorah's bleary mind considered whether Heat might be a good thing. A positive thing for an Omega to experience. Maybe with an Alpha, with a proper nest, with rest, and safety, and the absence of shame, she could enjoy this for what it was.

Rolling to her side, she rested her head on an elbow and faced Jake with all her bold nakedness. Fully committed to seduction, Zorah raised her hand and caressed her lower lip with a fingertip, enjoying the blush of pleasure at the slight touch. Jake's eyes tracked the movement, smoldering so hot they felt like a physical touch.

Emboldened, she let her fingers trail down her chin and drop to her right breast, caressing the sensitive tip with a swipe of her thumb. A shiver broke out across her skin as her nipple tightened. Jake made a rough grunt and positioned his knees under him, as if readying to pounce.

“I think it’s time for more,” Zorah purred.

So many things she wanted to do, things she’d wanted for years, things she’d promised herself would be hers once she mated. Except, as the years passed, her mate took shape in the form of Nelson, and suddenly all those desires soured like milk left in the sun.

But Jake. Jake, with his golden and silver curls crowning him like some kind of heathen king, was definitely not Nelson. He was Alpha and she was an Omega in Heat. For today, he was hers. Without hesitation, without shame or subterfuge, without the watchful eyes of her parents, anything was possible.

He nodded in deliberate understanding, and his pants tightened with a growing bulge.

“How much more?” he asked, a muscle ticking in his stubbled jaw. Once he came into her nest, she’d lick it and feel that tiny jump against her tongue.

A smile played on her lips, and she leaned into the boldness, drunk on possibility. “Everything you have to give me.”

Zorah pinched at her nipple, relishing the sensation that darted from the tip to between her legs. Her sex throbbed with the beat of her pulse, growing swollen with every steady thump as slick leaked from inside. She let her hand wander, down below the soft curve of her belly to just above her mons.

With a groan and a low curse, Jake shifted to all fours and crawled toward the bed. Her eyes caught on the muscles in his naked shoulders, flexing with each predatory step. Saliva filled her mouth; she wanted to bite those muscles, to sink her teeth in and claim them for hers. *Only* hers.

Her Alpha.

All the years of waiting, all the Heats she’d soldiered through in solitary misery, sequestered and pitied by her family, masturbating herself to fantasies of hypothetical Alphas and imagined scenarios, none of that compared to this, to the feeling of Jake’s gaze forging a path over her body and the anticipation of every passing second. With every inch

closer, the air between them compressed like a physical thing, pressing against her exposed skin, a prelude to his impending touch.

His forward movement halted at the edge of the bed. Scant few inches from her bent knee, he could grab her if he wanted to, yet he held back. He angled his neck back as if to take in the entire scene: Zorah, lush and ready in her perfect nest. She squirmed in anticipation.

His lips parted, and a pink tongue swiped over them. “So, this is a nest?”

“Yes,” she said, hoarse with need and the significance of her next sentence. “Do you want to come inside, *Alpha*?”

“It’s very... inviting.” He smiled then, all white teeth and eye crinkles. “You’re so beautiful, Zorah. The most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

His voice spilled over her like honey, and she gave a throaty moan, her arousal so close to the edge that she couldn’t help but give a little, helpless pelvic thrust. “Then what are you waiting for?”

His smile faded, expression suddenly intense and serious. “You want me to touch you?”

“Yes,” she all but whimpered. Her desire coiled so tight that she practically shook out of her skin.

“With my mouth and my fingers?”

“And your cock, and your knot, yes. *Please*, Jake.” Hands clenched in the soft bedding, she vibrated with impatience.

Carefully, almost hesitantly, Jake laid a single palm on her leg. The contact almost sizzled, and her neck arched in pleasure. Jake hissed out a long sigh and glided up the length of her calf, brushing fingertips against the sensitive back of her knee. A shiver raced over Zorah’s skin, and lips quirking, Jake did it again, teasing the unassuming spot she’d never known could be so erotic. His roughened fingertips played over the delicate hollow like she wasn’t about to self-immolate from lust.

“Jake,” she breathed out, the desperation in her voice plain.

“What’s the rush? Hasn’t anyone ever taken time to explore your body?” His silky voice half soothed, and half made her crazy. Jake leaned forward and pressed a hot, humid kiss to her inner knee that rocketed to her core. “I’m going to find them all; all the secret places you need to be touched and kissed and licked and sucked. I’ve waited a long time for this, so don’t rush me.”

Her sex gave a slow throb, her clit so angry and neglected. She squeezed her thighs together. “But I need —”

“Fucking?” The look he gave her lit her up like lightning. “Yeah, I’m gonna do that, too.”

CHAPTER 24

Jake

With a herculean strength he didn't know he possessed, Jake tore his hand away from Zorah's impossibly silken skin and stood long enough to shuck his pants. They were doing this, and they were going to do it right.

He planted his knees on the bed and straddled her hips, drinking up the sight of the writhing Omega beneath him. She'd rearranged the bedding and turned it into an adorable nest or whatever, but that didn't change the fact that it was his. His cabin, his space, his bed. And she was in it.

His dick jutted from his body and pointed at her like a thick, accusatory finger. Her eyes widened, and she reached for it, trapping it between her hands and trailing teasing fingers along the underside. His stomach muscles clenched, the pleasure of her touch whiting out his vision for a second. Before he could open his mouth to tell her to stop, she began to stroke. Delicate fingers gripped him and worked up to a steady, confident stroke. He sucked in air between his teeth.

"*Fuck*, that feels good," he said, mesmerized by the sight of her small hands shuttling over his flesh. Above that, her breasts wobbled in a complimentary rhythm, her lips parted, and she stared at his dick. Fucking beautiful.

He allowed another few pumps before stilling her hands with his own. "That's enough," he gritted out, detaching her grip. "I'm supposed to be helping you through your Heat, aren't I?"

As if remembering her needs, Zorah moaned and rubbed her soft, fleshy thighs together. Jake took the opportunity to caress her silken hips, alternating light brushes with deeper, massaging touches, each pass bringing his hands closer and closer to the damp center at the apex of her thighs. He worked his way up and down, pulling her thighs apart and then pushing them together, each movement earning him a whimper of excitement or a groan of disappointment from the horny Omega. He watched her face, her fluttering, sex-fogged

eyes alternating between his hands and his cock, and he couldn't suppress a smile when her hands went to work, palming her breasts and toying with the pointed tips. He wanted his hands and lips on those, too, but he could wait.

Finally, when she keened in protest enough, he brushed a thumb along her center seam, gliding easily over the damp flesh. Zorah arched off the bed, so wound up that the barest contact sent her body spasming. He did it again, grazing his other thumb along the same path, staying on the puffed-up outer lips without going any deeper. He repeated the pattern: one thumb and then the other, alternating their slow, deliberate swipes along her sensitive seam.

In answer, Zorah spread her legs as far as she could with him straddling her, an overt invitation to go deeper, stroke harder, explore more. With her swollen lips parted, the dark nub of her clit poked out the top like a sign saying TOUCH ME. Jake bit his cheek to stop himself from diving in and tasting that sweet bud a second time.

Instead, he withdrew his touch, smirking when she groaned in protest, even going so far as to beg so sweetly. "Jake, *please*."

Like a bastard, he simply shook his head and bestowed light touches on her thighs and the gentle roll of her lower belly. "Not yet, Omega. I said we were going to take our time, and we are." He bent over her, lowering his mouth to a hairsbreadth of hers. "There's a lot more of you I need to explore."

He crossed the minuscule space, and their lips touched in a long, sensuous kiss. All teasing licks and soft sighs, he loved the feel of her lips, the taste of her tongue, the scent of her skin, the scrape of her teeth. Sweetly eager, there was nothing coy or restrained about the way Zorah kissed, and he lapped up her enthusiasm with relish.

He remembered this feeling. The thrill of touching another's body in an intimate way for the first time. Even beyond his first sexual experiences, he remembered it from each new partner he'd ever had, the exploratory process of finding out

what made each of his lovers sigh, groan, or scream. Each one a beautiful puzzle to solve.

He'd fucked a lot in his life before TheEnd, both a lot of women and a few men — he'd try anything twice. Once he'd set his sights on someone, once was rarely enough. Often it was the women who would message him after a one-night stand, wanting to meet up again, wanting more of what he'd given them. Over time, he came to understand that many settled for terrible partners in the bedroom, so when they finally met someone who cared enough to figure out how to make them come, they couldn't get enough. And who was he to deny them?

His Alpha nature rumbled underneath his skin, clamoring and beating against his ribcage with pent-up animal energy. But beneath that, something else glimmered in a part of himself so buried under pain and regret that he'd forgotten it existed. He'd been a lover, once. A *good* lover, who gave and received pleasure in all kinds of ways with all kinds of bodies and all colors of people. He'd been a party boy, a fun-times guy, a free-spirit surfer, but being a lover, in some ways, was the most core and serious part of his entire self. A part he'd lost entirely and only now seemed to be getting a piece back.

With a nip to her lower lip, Jake pulled away, staring into her pretty, half-lidded eyes. “Now roll on your belly so I can play with that sweet little ass of yours.”

CHAPTER 25

Zorah

It was simultaneously the best and worst thing that had ever happened to her. Well, no, it was hands-down the best, but Jake's pace and deliberateness threatened to drive her out of her barely-hanging-on mind.

Face cradled in the shirt-covered pillow and hands fisted in the plush sleeping bag, she simultaneously endured and exalted as he breathed against the thin skin of her instep. It didn't stop there. Strong fingers massaged her feet and ankles before he kissed a path up the backs of her thighs and to the erogenous zone behind her knee. Pleas and whines hovered on her tongue, but she held them back, knowing he would only give a dark chuckle and proceed how he planned. How much time had passed, she had no idea. Her body had been on edge for so long; she could hardly remember a time when she hadn't been in this state.

Zorah wanted to hate it, but she couldn't. Like everything to do with Jake, the experience was unlike any she'd ever had. Her encounters with the Beta boy had been quick and to the point. Never having the luxury of spending hours simply kissing and petting, they'd dove for each other's bodies and devoured one another in a frantic, binging feast before going their separate ways. Good enough for the time, but nothing like this.

Somehow, she'd assumed, without considering it in any depth, that sex with an Alpha would be similarly focused and efficient, a rough fuck culminating in a thick knot.

Absolutely nothing prepared her for this. For the heights of her Heat demands being pushed ever higher and higher. For the need inside her to churn and rumble with ever-increasing desperation at every barely-there brush of his fingertips. It was insane how slight a touch she responded to now, all her senses trained on every single thing he did. She'd nearly climaxed when he'd *breathed* a gust of warm breath over her sex.

Strong, calloused thumbs soothed the crease of her bottom, and she sucked in a gasp, not even daring to hope he would attend to the blaring ache between her legs.

“How does that feel?” he asked, using those thumbs to knead the muscles, lifting and separating her cheeks with each pass until he’d spread her completely apart, and Zorah knew exactly what dark secrets he’d exposed.

The unabashed exposure cranked her arousal higher, the vulnerability delirium-inducing on its own. Despite the raging Heat, her cheeks flamed even hotter.

“Fine,” she forced out, fingers clenching and unclenching.

She squirmed on her stomach, pelvis angling and rolling, unable to sit still with her entire body an exposed nerve.

A heavy weight pressed to her back. His cock, hot and hard, dug into her lower back, and her empty sex gave a hearty throb, a demand for the thing he denied her.

“Fine?” he crooned into her ear, the smile in his voice evident. Jake mouthed over the back of her neck and licked behind her ear. “Not good? Not bad? Just fine?”

Zorah turned her head, sudden tears springing to her eyes. This denial, this torture, had gone on for so long that she hovered on the edge of despair. “Jake” — her voice broke — “it *hurts*.”

A low purr rumbled from his chest and permeated into hers, mollifying the ache from the inside. But only just barely.

“All right, sweetheart.” He dusted a kiss to her sweaty temple. “You’ve been a good girl for me, so here’s your reward.”

And then, without any warning or prelude, the fat cockhead notched at the entrance to her sex. He rubbed it through her juices, coating the tip with the copious slick she’d produced in the long minutes of this encounter. She canted her hips backward in invitation, and the hard length slipped forward, missing her entrance and gliding over her clit.

Zorah yelped at that tiny bit of unexpected stimulation, so little and yet so much after the interminable buildup. She did it again, rocking up to slip and drag her sex along his cock, her eyes rolling into her head as she glimpsed her peak on the horizon.

Jake gripped her waist, holding on as she rocked with desperate, flagrant want. Then, the horror began again when he withdrew, taking his hot prick along with him and away from her seeking movements. The pause was just long enough for her to whimper, and then it was back, slipping inside her entrance in the first breach she'd had in years. The contact — hot meeting hot, slick meeting slick — opened her mouth in a wide, soundless O, words being so foreign she couldn't grapple for even one.

With a grunt, he slid in farther. Zorah's walls stretched, each inch accompanied by a pinch of delicious discomfort as her sheath expanded. As with everything, the impalement was slow, deliberate, inexorable, and incredible. He filled her up, sinking in all the way till she felt the hard planes of his abdomen against her backside, till she felt the kiss of his sack against her outer lips. He filled her up till he reached the place of her deepest ache, massaging it as he'd massaged her thighs, feet, and breasts.

And then he began to *move*. A gentle slide in and out, and then another, and another. Full and empty. Empty and full in a dizzying, never-ending pattern. Stretched to the max, Zorah couldn't imagine she could go back to living without this. She'd never settle, never settle again for being sequestered to suffer a solitary Heat. No, now that she knew what she was missing, she'd never go without.

"Fuck you feel good." Jake's voice cascaded over her, reminding her that she wasn't just being fucked by an extremely capable cock, but that cock was attached to a man.

Zorah raised herself to her elbows and ground back into it, seeking more, seeking all of it, anything she could take from him after so much denial.

He didn't seem inclined to deny her now, letting her join in the fucking without any attempt to slow her down. Freed to move as she pleased, Zorah's buttocks bounced with the vigorous pounding, meeting his strokes measure for measure. Pleasure sparked and sparkled in her pelvis, zinging around her insides like a hysterical firefly.

The hard invasion was everything she'd needed, but it wasn't enough. Zorah reached behind, hooking his neck and pulling his head and torso back against her own. The planes of his chest plastered to her back in a sticky embrace, changing the angle of his cock as it pounded into her. He kissed the back of her neck, suckled her earlobe, and nibbled on the fleshy spot where neck met body. He lingered in that area, the traditional claiming site where an Alpha would place his bite to tell the world an Omega belonged to him, nuzzling and sucking deep.

A crazy wild exhilaration screeched through her. The pleasure and danger as dark and sweet as sun-ripened blackberries. Should she tell him to stop? To hold back, to restrain? Jake was an odd Alpha; did he even understand the significance of the spot? Did he know how the tease threw her into a maelstrom of yearning and horror?

The sharp points of his teeth scraped against her skin and fastened on for a hard sucking pull that tipped her over the edge. Her climax detonated in her pelvis, sending shards of clenching, reeling, unending pleasure to every inch of her body. Breath whisked out of her body, and stardust exploded behind her eyes. Zorah shuddered and cried out, ecstasy and knife-edged thrill rampaging.

It went on. Longer and harder than anything she'd felt before, and a distant part of her mind wondered if it was all one long, never-ending release or a million small ones stacked upon each other in an infinite spiral. Jake's arms tightened around her as she thrashed and shook, her body threatening to blow apart completely.

A guttural Alpha grunt pulled her back to earth, and Zorah turned her head, seeking her Alpha. She wasn't alone in this experience. For the first time in a long time, Zorah felt not

only not alone but held and seen and cherished. His mouth found hers, renewing his taste on her tongue. Jake's large, calloused hand came up to grip her cheek, and his tongue delved in farther, seeking more, and she'd give him anything he wanted.

"Can't say no to you," he whispered, echoing her thoughts. He came into her harder then, short, rough thrusts that assaulted her womb, and Zorah felt the stuttering flutter of his hips as his climax claimed him. With another agonized curse, he jerked from her body in time for the hot streams of his release to lash against her back. The reality of her sudden emptiness crashed through her blissed-out brain.

His knot! What about the knot?

"No," she whined through panted breaths. "The knot, I need it..."

In answer, he only rocked his forehead against her shoulder, voice shaking as his pleasure ran its course. "I'm sorry," he murmured against her skin. "I can't."

Her body spent, Zorah collapsed onto the pillow, her entrance still twitching with demand for the knot denied her. Disappointment spoiled the moment. She'd wanted this so much, and she got what she wanted, everything she imagined and more, except that small and enormously important detail.

Another thing Little Zorah wasn't ready for.

CHAPTER 26

Jake

He peeled his body off hers, cringing at the gloopy mess as his knot throbbed in protest. Jake wrapped his fist around it and squeezed as tight as he dared, verging on pain. It wasn't the same as lodging the knobby swelling in a willing Omega's cunt, but it would have to do.

He hadn't given birth control any consideration up until the inevitability of his climax gathered in his balls. But in that moment, all he could think about was how Ava's pregnancy had been the final mistake, the one that got them discovered and ultimately led to their separation. He couldn't put that kind of burden on Zorah. Not when their union had no real future.

Still reeling, Jake's unfocused eyes coasted down her semen-streaked back, ogling with perverse satisfaction where the stripes slid into the cleft of her ass.

She's yours. Your Omega. Your mate.

Sharp pain stabbed into his chest, so hard he dropped his dick and rubbed his sternum with the heel of his palm. The conviction launched from somewhere deep inside him, as if yanked from the marrow of his bones and pushed in his face, daring him to deny the truth he felt in his soul.

An impossible, ridiculous truth, one that had no bearing in reality.

Shaking himself loose, Jake got to his wobbly feet and distracted himself by swabbing her back with a damp cloth and refilling her water. Head resting on folded elbows, Zorah tracked him. The tilt of her brows and the faint pinch at the corners of her lips suggested pensiveness, but she said nothing. Unable to bear the directness of her gaze and all its questions and accusations, Jake crawled back into the nest, propped his back against the wall, and pulled her to sit between his legs, her back to his front. To his relief, Zorah didn't resist as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. She melted against him with a quiet sigh.

They sat like that for long moments, listening to the rainstorm-turned-gentle shower. How long would this weather last? How long before someone noticed Zorah wasn't in the Heat Hut? How long till the Pack charged up the hillside with torches and pitchforks? Hunter would surely kill him now, and he'd deserve it. At the same time, a new defiance percolated, a conviction that, while their affair was illicit, that didn't make it wrong. Jake's arms cinched tighter, and Zorah squeaked.

With effort, he loosened his grip, reminding himself that, at the moment, no one was coming to rip her from him. He would take this time, this gift, and enjoy it while it lasted. "Sorry," he said and kissed her temple. "You okay?"

Zorah hummed, filling the long pause as she considered her answer. "Yeah."

Jake cleared his throat. "How long till... uh... the next...?"

Her head fell back to rest against his shoulder, her eyes rising to meet his own. "Don't know. Maybe an hour, maybe several." His just-barely-deflated cock gave a jaunty twitch of interest. He ignored it. "It's hard to predict," she went on, "but usually my Heats last about three days."

Three fucking days. Three days of fucking. His cock jumped again, a quick reminder it volunteered for duty. Zorah conspicuously wiggled against it as a dusky mauve stained her acorn-brown cheeks. He thumbed over the curve of her face, deciding that delicate flush lit by the cool, watery light was the most perfect color he'd ever seen. Even before TheEnd, he'd never owned a house, but in this moment, he wished he had. Then, he could've gone to a hardware store, sorted through a thousand paint swatches to find the exact right match, and splashed it on every single wall. Except the reality where Jake, a responsible homeowner popping into Home Depot to debate eggshell versus semigloss, ceased to exist over a century ago.

Golden-flecked eyes shone brightly in the overcast light of the cabin, like the first two stars visible in the rising twilight. Zorah studied him like she wanted to glean every detail from his every feature. What could she possibly see in him?

“Were you a virgin?” The question leaked out of him, a concern geysered up from the depths of who knows where.

How had he not even bothered to ask before riding her hard in her precious little nest?

“No, I’m not.” A deep sigh wobbled her breasts, and he considered trying to rearrange the bedding to cover her nakedness. But she didn’t seem to be overly concerned about it, and the warmth radiated off her skin. “There was a Beta boy living in my village. We’d known each other since we were twelve, and eventually, we got a little curious.” Her eyes lit up with the memory, thankfully a happy one, and her lips quirked to the side. “I told you before I had practice sneaking. Well, we carried on for the better part of a summer.”

“Did you get caught?”

The joy drained from her eyes. “More or less. My mother figured it out, and she went to his parents. I begged her not to, but she wouldn’t listen. Told them they had to pack up and leave or she would tell the Alpha. He would’ve killed the boy, maybe his whole family, and they knew it. So, they made up some flimsy excuse about distant family who needed them and left. It was the middle of winter, and I’m not sure they had anywhere to go. I tried to talk to him, to apologize, to tell him I kept our secret, but he hated me. Said me and ‘my stupid bitch mother’ ruined his life.” She swallowed. “He’s not wrong.”

Jake stroked his thumb along her jawline. “I’m sorry.”

“It was all my fault. I knew my parents were ‘saving’ me for my future Alpha, but I didn’t care. Thought I knew better, thought I had everything under control. I was wrong, and they paid the price.”

The pain in her voice brought him low. Made him hate that he’d asked her, hate that she’d dredged this memory up because of him. But more than that, he hated that this happened to her and *hated* her Pack. Hated her parents and the Alpha and their backward, ignorant beliefs. Hated that something as innocuous as teenage experimentation got twisted into a life-or-death mistake. Yeah, she wasn’t a virgin

(as he'd momentarily feared), but he felt far from relieved. Maybe he shouldn't have asked the question in the first place, but on some perverse level, he was thankful for the trust she'd offered with the painful story.

"That wasn't your fault, sweetheart," he said softly but firmly. "Teenagers sneak around so they can screw, that's a story as old as time. Your Pack is wrong."

"I knew it was risky. I knew we might get caught, but I didn't think..." She faced away from him and whisked out a sigh. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. Are you disgusted, then? That I'm not pure?"

The question teemed with bitterness, a wholly un-Zorah-like sentiment. Jake shifted uncomfortably against the rough boards at his back. "Nothing you do could disgust me. And purity is just some made-up, puritanical bullshit, so no, I don't give one flying fuck about that. I only asked because I was afraid I'd hurt you or that you didn't know what to expect."

Her fingertip strayed along the length of his arm, as soft as a flower petal. "I've never been with an Alpha, though. And never during my Heat."

Any Alpha in the village could've serviced her; many would be happy to, but she'd come to him. It hadn't been an accident, had it? That she'd come to the lake, that he'd found her, that she'd presented to him in that way, so deep in her desperation and need. He couldn't help it. As regressive as it was, primal satisfaction roared in his veins.

My mate. Mine. God, he wanted it to be true.

But it couldn't be. It could *never* be, for so many reasons that if he were to consider them, they would make his head spin. No, he had only one job here: to help her through this Heat and then get her back to camp. No one would have to know.

But you know.

"Is that why you pulled out?" She angled her face toward his again, uncertainty in her expression. "Why you didn't... with the knot?"

“No.” He shook his head, surprised by the question. “I’m afraid I’ll knock you up.” Her nose scrunched in confusion; apparently, the phrase “getting knocked up” hadn’t survived into this century. He rephrased. “I don’t want you to get pregnant. That’s why I pulled out.”

“Oh.” Her fingers toyed with the hair on his arms. “Okay.”

Silence fell, Zorah so still and quiet he kept checking to see if she’d drifted off to placid sleep. Jake’s thoughts wandered the ragged terrain of his broken mind. Roamed all the pathways and detours of poor decisions and bad luck, all of them leading to the conclusion he arrived at again and again: *she deserves much better than you.*

“Is it weird?” Zorah’s small voice jarred him from his maudlin musings. “Having lived through TheEnd and remembering what life was like before?”

Jake’s back protested with a sudden ache like it also wanted to remind him of his unnaturally advanced age. With a grimace, he shifted their positions to lie on his side, Zorah facing him with her palm resting flat on the bed between them.

“Truth be told,” he said, stroking lightly over her knuckles with his index finger, “most days, I forget how old I really am.”

Her brows twitched in contemplation. “You never told me: how did you get free? From the bad people?”

Jake flashed a wry grin. “An accident, if you believe it. They had a stockpile of some explosives along with ammunition. This was before all that ran out, y’know? Anyway, I always hated going by the barn where they kept their hoard. I knew they were too stupid to store them properly. It was an accident waiting to happen, and eventually, the whole thing exploded. Caused a bunch of damage, lots of shrapnel, injuries everywhere. In the chaos, I escaped. It’s funny... I didn’t expect to make it very far. I was sure they’d run me down and beat me within an inch of my life again. But they never did, and I just kept going. One foot in front of the other.”

That night burned in his memory so clearly that he could still feel the heat of the blast, feel the desert grit that abraded his face as he tried to comprehend the nightmare unfolding around him. None of the flying scraps of the blown-apart building hit him, but his minder hadn't been so lucky. Shrapnel embedded in his guts; the man's screams lived in his head like it happened yesterday. His clammy palms pathetically pawed at Jake's shirtfront for help, as if Jake would help one of those assholes. He'd not looked the man in the face. It seemed important, somehow, that he not know which one he left to die, like he wouldn't even give them that. Instead, he dug into the man's clothes. Blood and entrails coated everything, the sticky, fetid mess soiling his skin up to his elbows when his fingers finally extracted the keys from the blood-soaked pocket.

Then he was free. Scrambling and stumbling and scrabbling through the parched California desert, one thought echoed in his mind: he was going to die, but at least he'd die a free man.

Two days later, when the withdrawal rode him hard, he prayed to die. But he hadn't.

Eventually, a traveling caravan picked him up and dropped him off at a larger settlement, not disguising their relief to be rid of him and his vomiting, diarrhea-racked body. Because he wasn't yet free, only imprisoned in another way. After that, he'd roamed around the West Coast in search of any drug he could find, eventually settling in OT. It had been near the last place he'd called home, the last place he'd had the semblance of a normal life, but mostly he stayed because the scratch supply fed the beast inside him.

There he became something even less human, a golem that lived in a garbage truck and mumbled incoherently to himself all day long. He could see all of it: the walls of his dingy refuge, the way the lamp light would flicker on the metal rivets that kept the creaking thing together. After a while, he couldn't even detect the stink. It clung to him, seeped into his pores, and kept others away. The whispers about him in town reached his ears, how he was twisted in the head, damaged beyond repair, a crazed beast, dangerous and unpredictable.

Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't, but he could never know for sure. He doubted himself, and that was the worst prison of all.

After a particularly bad run-in with a drug dealing gang member where he almost died, he decided he'd had enough. He endured the long and extensive withdrawal and the months and years of cravings it took to break free. But, even then, when his mind had mostly cleared, the paranoia remained. He'd jump at every shadow, always on edge, even in his safe place, and he stayed filthy in his garbage truck simply to feel safe and keep others away. The grating metal screamed every time he opened the gate, its giant maw yawning open like the beast of his past come to take him. How many times had he wished it would simply chew him up and be done with it?

“Jake? Jake?”

His name trickled through the haze, and he jerked to sitting, clumsily heaving himself back to wedge his spine into the corner where the bed met the wall. Heart thundering, he scanned the room, eyes seeing nothing as his palm opened and closed on emptiness. Not his dagger, not a stick, nothing. He was weaponless. Who was it? Who was coming? What had he done?

“Jake!”

On some level, his brain understood the voice was two things: female and afraid. Brain whirling, her face came into focus. Big eyes, pointed chin, freckles, and more freckles.

Zorah. Naked, sitting on her knees, she stretched out a trembling hand, hesitation and fear holding her back from making contact with his body. Smart girl. She was right not to touch him.

No one should touch him.

“Hey.” Zorah waved her hand instead, drawing his attention to her worried face, and he hated himself all over again for putting that concern there, for tainting her with his darkness.

His chest hollowed like someone shot a cannonball through it. He must've fallen into it again, like he'd done that night under the dock, like he'd done the night he'd taken Kess.

“Hey,” she repeated, softer this time. “You’re all right. You’re here now, not there.”

Jake dug the heels of his palms into his eye sockets and shook. He looked up at her, the bleakness contaminating him all the way down to his bones. After all the things he’d done, all the ways he’d abused himself and others, how could he even defile her with his filthy hands? He was nothing, worse than nothing. Damaged. Hopeless. Worthless.

Carefully, holding his eye contact, she lowered her hand onto his bare knee. The gentle pressure imbued with so much consideration and kindness, he would have cried if his tears hadn’t long ago run dry.

She held his eyes with her own. “You’re not there anymore. You’re here, with me, and I need you. I need you to stay with me, Jake.” Her fingers flexed, firming their hold on him, repeating the message her words delivered. “Stay with me.”

Three simple words. *Stay with me.*

“I didn’t mean to hurt her.” He dropped his eyes to his lap. “Kess. I don’t know what you’ve heard, but it was an accident. I didn’t want to hurt her,” he said again, reiterating the most important point. “I thought that if she was there, the Brethren would also be there, that they’d come for us, that they’d take her again.”

Zorah nodded sagely. “That’s the past. You’re here now, and I need you. Here.”

Jake laid his shaky hand over hers, carefully squeezing in acquiescence to her plea. Breaths sawed in and out of his lungs. He ran the pad of his index finger along the bumps of her knuckles, and his skin remembered kindness and tenderness. Remembered that he knew how to caress a woman until she dissolved into pleasure. Remembered the good things in the world, like Zorah’s silken thighs draped over his own and her breathy little pleas against his ear.

She needs you. Your mate needs you.

He could stay. In good conscience, he could never be her mate. It would never work out for either of them, and she

deserved so much more. But for here and now, he would stay.

What other choice did he have? For her, he would resurrect his humanity imprisoned under a century of debris.

CHAPTER 27

Zorah

“Jake.” Her voice barely above a murmur, Zorah broke the drowsy silence before she chickened out. Not moving a single other muscle, she held her breath. Anxiety sat like a loaf of hardened bread in her stomach, spawning a never-ending series of unanswerable questions like mold on its stale crust.

The relentless drip-drip-drip of rain and runoff needled her.

Tell. Him. Tell. Him. Tell Him.

She had to tell him. She *had* to... but did it have to be now?

She blamed the darkness. Its ashy shadows had lured her into a confessional mood. Somewhere along the line, nighttime had become their time. They'd stitched together stolen moments under the ever-watchful stars into the weirdest relationship she'd ever had.

“Hmm?” Jake's arm, draped heavily across her chest, shifted to give her a small, affectionate squeeze that nearly brought tears to her eyes.

They rested in what she'd discovered was Jake's favorite postcoital position: his back propped against the wall with her lounging between his legs, resting against his body like he was a living, breathing, orgasm-providing chair. Inevitably, when her Heat episodes abated, he'd casually reassemble them into this position and then hold her for hours on end and purr softly as she dozed. Sometimes, she believed, he even snoozed himself, although that was always hard to discern as whenever she awoke, he always seemed to be waiting. She wondered if he truly enjoyed the position, or if he offered it as consolation for depriving her of his knot, welding their bodies together even without the physical tether. Nonetheless, it was rather nice; and she was about to destroy it all.

And for what? He'd told her, again and again, that they could never be together, that he'd made a promise, that he risked his life even for this temporary dalliance. But... was it wrong to wish for more? To wish that he would face down the

constraints, his Pack and her parents, and demand to have Zorah for his own? Perhaps it was childish to want these things. Perhaps it was petty to throw this in his face, to sketch out the future that waited for her outside the magical confines of his cabin. Perhaps he would end things here and now, toss her aside, or send her back to the village to finish her Heat, alone, in that drab little hut. Perhaps he would hate her the way the Beta boy did.

“I need to tell you something.” Her throat spasmed on the last word, but she forced the words beyond the blockage. “But you have to promise you won’t get mad.”

The soft cradle of his strong chest and long limbs stiffened. Her anxiety ratcheted higher. She’d put him on edge, and she hadn’t even begun.

A low growl rumbled in his throat and vibrated against the back of her head. “What is it?”

Uncomfortable all over, Zorah readjusted her seat on his lap, pulse pounding like a hammer on an anvil. *Courage, Zorah*. She squeezed her eyes shut and blurted, “I’m betrothed to an Alpha in my home Pack, my cousin Nelson. I’m expected to take him as a mate at the end of summer.”

A brief, but interminable, pause passed, and then he burst out an incredulous, “*What?*”

Her words tumbled out in a low, tormented tone. “Nelson’s father and my mother are distant cousins, so technically, he’s my cousin and we’re family. But half the people in River Bend are family so it’s not that close of a connection.”

He made an impatient noise. “What does that have to do with anything? Who betroths women to anyone?”

Zorah continued, striving to keep her words clear and unwavering. She had to make him understand this, understand her situation and the mess she’d created for herself. “Nelson’s father, Harold, is the Alpha of Alphas in our Pack; my parents want a closer alliance with him. You see, I’m the only Omega of mating age, so it’s an opportunity to secure a connection

between our families that would increase our status and power in the Pack.”

Jake sat up and shifted her off his lap. The removal felt like a rejection. But, facing her, his hand found her jaw, and he traced the curve of her chin with his thumb with a tender reverence. She leaned into his touch, soaking up the proffered comfort she desperately needed. Without the light of a candle, the outlines of his brow, cheekbones, jaw, and crooked nose slashed through the darkness in the scant light. His face had become so familiar that she could imagine the concerned folds around his eyes and the frowning divot by the corner of his mouth. She knew every detail, yet it would never be enough. Maybe that’s why she’d chosen to bring this up in the deep of night: to avoid the distraction. Or maybe to avoid the memory of the inevitable disappointment marring his beloved face.

“I don’t understand,” he said slowly. “Is this what you want?”

Mouth suddenly dry, she wet her lips to continue. “No. I could try to refuse, but... they would say I don’t know what’s good for me, that I’m sheltered and naïve and my judgment isn’t good. They would say they know better.”

A shudder of humiliation rippled over her shoulders. They weren’t wrong, were they? Look what happened when she tried to take her destiny into her own hands. This summer was meant to be her chance at freedom, but here she sat, midway through an unexpected Heat, shackled up with the most unsuitable Alpha in the entire Pack, trying to explain her betrothal, with her parents due to arrive any day.

She sucked on the corner of her lip, defeat infusing her words. “Maybe they’re right.”

“Why would you think that?” he said with a hint of affront. “Your judgment saved that boy’s life —”

”*You* saved Nico. Not me.”

“If you hadn’t been there” — his tone brooked no argument — “he would’ve died. End of story.”

“So I’ve done one thing right. I’m twenty-six years old, that’s not a whole lot to make my point.” Frustration welled up from the buried prison where she sequestered all her failures at independence. “Look at what happened when I snuck around with that Beta boy. He and his family might be dead because of me and my actions. And then there was the time I tried to run away...” Her voice snapped in two; the remembered shame was too much to excavate all at once.

Jake cupped her neck and leaned toward her. “What happened when you tried to run away?”

Unable to look at him even in shadow, she averted her eyes. “I was upset about something; I don’t even remember what it was. But I threw a few of my favorite things in a bag, took a loaf of bread, and started walking. I figured if I followed the river, eventually, I’d make it to the next settlement and maybe I could find a ‘new family’ there.” A resigned breath leaked out of her. “But what I didn’t count on was the rain. The skies opened up, and within a few minutes, I was soaked to the bone. I tried to find a larger tree for shelter, but that took me away from the river, and I got turned around. Then, the sun started to set and I was lost, cold, and alone.”

“Okay,” he said, drawing the word out as an invitation to continue. “But someone found you, right?”

“Yes, but...” Zorah twisted her fingers till the joints creaked. “When my father found me, I was almost frozen. Hypothermia. I was sick for a week and my father... he’d fallen while looking for me and broke his arm, but he kept looking, getting colder and colder himself. He was sick, too, after that. Alphas are strong, but... he got hurt. He could’ve died because of me.”

Tipping forward, Jake pressed a soft kiss to her forehead and murmured against her skin. “How old were you?”

“Eleven? Twelve?” Zorah jerked her head up, suddenly irritable. “But they never let me forget it. After that, every time I disagreed with my parents about anything, anything at all, they’d bring it up. ‘Remember when you thought it was a good

idea to run away? How did that turn out?” Their snide admonishments scraped a jagged path through her memories.

Jake’s head flung back in dramatic astonishment. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. You were a kid. Lots of kids get mad about some stupid little thing and fantasize about running away. It’s basically a rite of passage.”

“They don’t see it that way,” Zorah argued. “The refrain has always been, ‘Little Zorah doesn’t know what she needs.’ That’s the reason I can’t be trusted to make *any* decision, let alone one as important as choosing a mate.”

Jake scoffed. “That’s their opinion, and it’s a stupid one. If they can’t see how smart, brave, and capable you are, they’re the problem. You have good instincts, and you’re cleverer than they realize.” His voice hoarsened with frustration. “They underestimate you, and if you go along with this betrothal, then you’re basically agreeing with them.”

A bleak heaviness centered in her chest. “What other choice do I have?” she said miserably. “I came to Morris Hill to find a different Alpha to mate —”

“An Alpha from *this* Pack?” For the first time in the conversation, Jake’s tone took on a dangerous edge.

She nodded warily. “That was my plan. In a large Pack like this, I thought it would be easy but...”

But the only one I want is you.

The pronouncement hit her full force, shattering the end of her sentence. Whispered in a voice indistinguishable from her inner Omega and her own thoughts, the truth of it rammed through her so hard and fast that it knocked the wind from her lungs. Zorah stared into nothingness, speechless, as the sentiment ping-ponged around her brain.

The only one I want is you.

There it was again, said with certainty, as if her inner Omega and some part of herself she refused to acknowledge banded together to override everything else. This time, a different feeling rode in on the coattails of the shock. Comfort. Relief. Safety. Like sliding into a hot bath, the idea embraced

her with open arms, the answer to so many of her questions and exactly none of her problems.

Jake was about as far from a Prince Charming as she could imagine, and yet, he was better. Because he was here in front of her, talking with her, teaching her, caring for her, caring about her, making love to her. In short, he had something Prince Charming never would: he was *real*.

And he's ours. He's our Alpha.

Zorah raised silent, beseeching eyes to the deep recesses of Jake's own, willing him to see through it all and understand. To catch her up in his arms and tell her he wanted her and would claim her for his own despite everything that stood against them.

His hand withdrew from her neck, and his posture straightened as discomfort contaminated the middle-of-the-night peace. "Zorah," he rasped. "You know I can't..."

Zorah's heart nose-dived through the floor. She hugged her knees to her chest. "I know. You told me by the rocks."

"It's worse than that." Jake dug aggravated fingers into his hair. "He'll kill me, Zorah. I promised Hunter I'd stay away from Omegas, or he'd kill me. That was the deal I made."

Any faint hope scattered like a wisp of smoke in the wind. If she pressured Jake to be her mate, he'd lose it all. A home, his friend, a place to belong, everything she took for granted, everything he'd suffered without for a lifetime. To ask him to shun all of that after decades of desolation was unconscionable, but it wasn't even the worst of it. Her stomach bottomed out. He could lose his life. Was it not enough she'd put the Beta boy and his family in jeopardy? Not enough she'd endangered her own father? Was she truly going to choose this Alpha and condemn him to death? How could she be that selfish? Only a child would be that selfish.

Several quiet minutes passed, and Zorah sat alone in a new and unique flavor of misery. Her Alpha waited a mere handsbreadth away, yet that distance gaped like the greatest canyon in the deepest ocean.

Zorah rocked to and fro in mock solitary solace. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No. Stay,” he said with quiet command and reached for her.

Freed to touch him, Zorah nearly leaped into his lap and mashed her face into his warm, fragrant neck. Inhaling his comforting aroma, she circled her arms around his back, squeezed him tight, and felt the ridges of his scars under her fingertips. How many more times would she feel them? When would be the last? A single tear dripped from her eye, her heartache beyond such a trivial display.

Jake’s voice rumbled over her tattered heart, betraying the suppressed trace of his own anguish. “Stay with me.”

CHAPTER 28

Jake

Jake pulled open the heavy door to the mess hall, his guts pretzeled into one giant knot. This was a bad idea. A very bad idea.

But there was no alternative. Zorah was hungry, and his food supplies had run out.

Stale, indoor air blasted him in the face as he stepped into the cavernous space. Smells of used oil and vegetable waste warred with human aromas: Alpha, Omega, pups, and babies. Every member of Morris Hill ate here, usually two or three meals a day, and he swore he could smell each and every one. The overpowering *mélange* made him want to spin on his heel and charge right back to his cabin, food or no food.

Hard to believe he'd once spent his days in buildings bigger and stuffier than this one without a single qualm. Office buildings reaching up to the sky like greedy fingers stuffed with people doing every imaginable kind of job, and once upon a time, he'd been in the mix. Wearing a collared shirt and iron-creased pants, he breathed the stifled air and pushed numbers around spreadsheets in service to the almighty buck. Stupid, stupid work that provided him absolutely no useful skills for surviving in the AfterEnd.

If some fairy godmother materialized out of the woodwork, asking if he would like to be whisked back to his life before TheEnd, what would he honestly say? Maybe it would depend. Could she erase those years of his imprisonment and servitude? From his body and from his mind? Or would he carry all of that with him as he returned to his laptop and his cell phone and his daily commute and his stale indoor air? Air-conditioning, it had been called. Not fresh air, but air that had been altered and processed, its molecules cleaned and rearranged into some precise shape and temperature. It was hard enough being in the mess hall; thinking of air-conditioning made him want to gag.

Maybe the AfterEnd had changed him in this one positive way. He'd adapted to the fresh, outdoor, pine-scented breeze brought into his body by every pump of his lungs. Then again, maybe it would be worth it to give all that healthy freshness up. If he could be zapped to some alternate reality where he didn't have to confront the ugly truth of Zorah's betrothal, he'd happily suck air-conditioning through a straw for the rest of his life.

Because, as it was, he didn't know how he was going to continue to live in this reality. A tornado of fresh air couldn't scatter the thought from his head. Even thinking the words made him sick. *Zorah's betrothal*. What the actual fuck was with that, anyway? Promised to her fucking cousin, like a medieval princess or some shit. And for what? So her parents would feel they had a leg up on their neighbors as they played keeping up with the post-apocalyptic Joneses?

And what was he going to do? Continue hiding in the shadows in Morris Hill, building the stupid fucking watchtower and impotently watching from the sidelines while they herded her into marital imprisonment?

How had it come to this?

"Jake," a deep Alpha voice called to him, and Jake's nerves went on high fucking alert.

At the other end of the room, Hunter stood near the doorway into the kitchen in conference with Logan, the head cook. They both gaped at him like they'd seen a ghost, and Jake raised a shaky hand in an awkward, stilted greeting.

"Hey." Behind him, the heavy door clicked shut with grim finality, locking him into the exact nightmare scenario he'd wanted to avoid on this mission. Jake shoved his hands in his pockets to hide his obvious trembling. "Running low on food; I was hoping to get some to take back. If you have any to spare."

Hunter's eyes slid to Logan and then back to Jake, a carefully neutral set to his jaw. "I'm sure we can figure something out."

“No sweat.” Logan lifted his chin in Jake’s direction. “I’ll go get some stuff together if you want to wait. Or you can swing back by later if you have other stuff to do.”

“He’ll wait,” Hunter answered. Grabbing a carafe and a few mugs, he cocked his head toward a nearby table. “Come sit.”

Water dripped off the tips of his hair and trickled down the back of his shirt, mingling with the cold sweat that had sprouted at Hunt’s invitation. Or was it a command? Jake trudged across the room and slid into a chair, his nerves vibrating on a knife’s edge of danger and betrayal. Was there a name for a state of being both terrified and resigned to it?

In preparation for this restock errand, he’d taken a bar of soap to the lake and attempted to scrub every speck of Zorah off his skin. Jake had scoured his skin nearly raw to erase the evidence of his crime. Yet, he was so drunk on Zorah that he could still smell her on himself, like she’d invaded his senses so completely she was inescapable.

It wasn’t far from the truth. He only prayed Hunter wouldn’t notice. The Alpha poured out a dark liquid into the two mismatched ceramic mugs. Its bitter smell itched the inside of Jake’s nose.

“Is that coffee?”

“Nah.” Hunt set the pot aside and took a sip. “It’s straight chicory, but it’s the best we’ve got.”

Jake lifted the pungent herbal brew to his lips with a steadiness that hopefully resembled a normal person. Sampling a quick taste, he appreciated the way the earthy sharpness focused his spiraling thoughts. He drank deeper. He could get through this. One minute at a time.

Hunter leaned back and stretched his legs out under the table. “In OT, I heard trading boats were starting to arrive from Central America with coffee. That would be something, wouldn’t it?”

Jake took another slow slurp. “Can’t even remember what coffee tastes like.”

“Yeah, well... maybe that’s for the best. I’m sure that makes this shit more tolerable.” Hunter lifted his mug in a mock salute. “How’s it going up there?”

Jake’s stomach clenched uncomfortably. “Not bad. Got the roof on and a tarp secured before this rain started.”

Hunter frowned. “You probably haven’t been getting much done in this weather.”

Jake almost choked. No, he hadn’t been getting much done from a construction standpoint. From a fucking a hot-as-hell Omega standpoint, he’d been exceedingly productive.

“No, not much.” He slanted a look at his old friend. “Did you send Colt up there to babysit me?”

Hunter lifted a shoulder. “I thought you could use some help. Or company.” He paused, as if considering his words. “Colt’s a good guy, always been loyal, good intentions, tried to be fair to everyone, but he blames himself for this shit with Cal and Della. It’s gotten in his head in a big way.”

Jake spun the mug in a slow circle. “Guilt’ll do that to you.”

He wasn’t clear on all the details of what went down the night of the fire, but the bare-bones whisperings painted a clear enough picture. Somehow Cal ended up chained in the basement of a burning building, with Colt, who held the only key, nowhere to be found. Cal escaped and lived, minus one foot.

Jake felt for the guy. Well, all of them, to be fair. Any kind of weakness in the AfterEnd could be fatal, and now Cal had to reckon with his disability while caring for his mate for the rest of his life. And Colt... hard enough to make a mistake and fuck up your own life, but to mess up someone else’s? That kind of thing twisted you up for good. Zorah would attest to that. As would he.

Had he ever found a way to forgive himself for what happened with Ava? It shined an unflattering light on this whole mess with Zorah. Was he doing it all over again? Making the same selfish mistakes? What would he do differently, if he had to do it again? Come clean? Fess up?

Plead his case and ask for mercy for her and their unborn child?

With Ava, he'd never had the chance. Or had he and just didn't take it? Had he been too much of a coward, too content to put his head in the sand and convince himself they'd never be discovered? He'd known she was pregnant; he'd known the jig was up, and he'd done nothing.

The opening and closing of drawers and clinking of dishes from Logan moving around in the kitchen filled in the gap in conversation. Jake traced the table's wood grains with the tip of his finger and cast another sidelong glance at his friend. Hunter sipped the acrid, measly approximation of what they really wanted, and the question burned in Jake's mind: is that what he was doing? Accepting the paltry scraps of what he truly wanted — Zorah as his *mate* — because he was too cowardly to stand up and fight for something better? Was he, like Colt, taking up permanent residence in his self-imposed purgatory?

Were the keys right in front of him? A simple conversation to get it all out in the open. "*Listen, man, something crazy has happened and I need you to hear me out.*" The words burned on his tongue. "*She wanted my help. She came to me. I know I should've turned her down, but I think... it's crazy, but I think she's my mate.*"

Hunter reached for the carafe and topped off their mugs. "We should be okay for winter, I think. With food. We might have to trade a bit more than I'd like with those pricks in River Bend, but we'll do it if we have to."

Jake's head jerked up at the mention of Zorah's home. "What's their problem?"

"They're a pain in the ass." Hunter scrunched up his face in disgust. "It's a sort of post-apocalyptic gated community if you can believe such a thing fucking exists." He snorted. "Unfortunately, it's also a major trading hub between the Cascades and OT. They get first dibs on stuff that comes from the east, high-demand things like nails, glass, wiring, some

medicine, stuff that gets scooped up before it ever makes it to OT. So, we try to stay friendly with them.”

The chicory fizzed like acid in Jake’s stomach. “But they’re assholes?”

Hunter sucked down half his refill in one gulp. “Oh yeah. They didn’t build any of what they have there. Alphas came in and took it from some Betas, if I remember correctly. It happened a long time ago, but they bullied their way in and claimed ownership of this prime spot and then convinced themselves they were so clever for building it up to what it is. They have a bunch of stupid ideas about their own importance, and I wouldn’t fuck with them for a pair of tweezers if we didn’t absolutely have to.”

“Shit.” Jake stared into his mug, wishing he could drown himself in it.

Hunter scratched absently at his salt-and-pepper beard. “I’ll be glad when they come and take their Omega back, too. Of course, she had to go into Heat as a fucking parting gift.”

“I’m sure she didn’t mean to,” Jake said with as much composure as he could.

No one needed to be criticizing Zorah, not even Hunter, and certainly not for something she couldn’t even control.

“No, I know, I know.” Hunter shoved his empty mug to the side and scrubbed a palm over his face. “Unmated Omegas are the bane of my existence. The sooner that one is gone, the better.”

Jake’s leg began to jitter uncontrollably under the table. “Wh-why’s that?”

Hunter waved a hand. “Every unmated Alpha in this place has been trying to get in her pants for months. I mean, don’t get me wrong, she’s a nice enough girl, takes good care of the pups, but we can’t afford to stir shit up with River Bend. If someone here tried to claim her, it would be a right fucking mess. The whole thing is enough to give me an ulcer.” He choked out a bitter laugh. “Honestly, all the rebuilding after the fire has kept those horny fuckers too busy to get up to no

good with her. And the new Omegas, too, come to think of it.” He chuckled again, louder this time, and shook his head. “Never thought I’d see the silver lining in that whole disaster. What the fuck’s happened to me?”

Numbly, Jake nodded as if that speech hadn’t opened a pit of quicksand under his very feet. In the space of a few flippant sentences, he’d fallen in and sunk up to his eyeballs. Declaring himself as Zorah’s mate would be worse than he imagined. All the dozens of people under Hunter’s protection, everything his friend had devoted himself to building, this community where Omegas could find a measure of safety, would all be jeopardized by an attachment to Zorah. It would make an enemy of River Bend right when the Pack was at its most vulnerable.

Jake pulled his lip to the side, affecting a casual tone like he wasn’t sinking, sinking, sinking into the sucking pit under his feet. “You’re a changed man, dude.”

Hunter cocked his head, studying Jake for a moment. “You too. You look... better. More focused or something.”

Jake had nothing to say to that, so he said nothing and gulped the rest of the lukewarm brew.

“I’m glad the work up there is agreeing with you,” Hunter continued, “but you’re welcome to come back any time. I never expected you to stay up there. It was late in the summer to start a project like that anyway.”

Jake let the words wash over him. Welcome to come back any time? Come back to *what*, exactly? The same shit he’d left over, only with the added trauma of pretending everything was fine as he watched his Omega return to her shitty Pack?

He spun the empty mug between his palms. “You know why I left.”

“Yeah, I do. But things might be different now, after you rescued that kid. These guys are a pain in my ass, but they aren’t all bad.” Hunter stood from the table and pushed his chair in, slapping Jake on the back in the process. “Besides,

whether they like it or not, you're Pack now. That means we all look out for each other, even the assholes."

"Right," Jake said grimly as he stood and faced his friend. "No asshole left behind."

Hunter's mouth contorted in an ambivalent grimace. "Not quite sure that's the slogan we want to go with."

"Yeah." Despite his careening depression, Jake tried a relaxed smile. "I was just spitballing. Probably should keep workshopping that one."

Hunter's delighted chortle filled the entire room. His icy blue eyes danced next to the crow's feet that mirrored Jake's own. "I swear to God, if I hear the word synergy come out of your mouth, I will punch your fucking lights out."

Jake bowed his head and scratched the back of his neck, more than ready to take his food, and his misery, and hike back up the mountain. Zorah'd wake up and need him again soon, and he couldn't bear to leave her wanting. Not now, when he knew their time was running out.

CHAPTER 29

Zorah

“Yes, yes, oh god —” Zorah’s neck arched, digging the snarled crown of her head into the destroyed remains of her beautiful nest, and she didn’t care one bit. Jake’s narrow hips pounded deep in her body, so deep it set off a different kind of fireworks all over her insides. “Yes!”

She’d lost track of the time, but the first rays of light filtered into the cabin door. It had to have been at least three days, maybe four, since that night on the beach, and her Heat had to be nearing the end. Heats had always seemed like a special kind of torture, a shameful and humiliating ordeal that put her entirely at the mercy of her most base instincts. But that wasn’t true at all. This Heat, with Jake, had unlocked something that could never again be caged. This Heat had freed her, and knot or no knot, there was no going back.

“Not yet.” Sweat dotted his face and chest, and Jake’s gruff words cut through her spiraling pleasure. He slowed his pace, pushing in with a slow, deliberate grind of his pelvic bone into her clit. Zorah whined deep in her throat at the change but also the new kind of sensation. “C’mon, get up.”

With a hand around her waist, he flipped their positions, rolling Zorah on top without dislodging his cock from deep inside her.

Zorah planted her palms on his golden-haired chest and whined. “I like it the *other* way.”

“I know,” he said with a playful twitch of his lips, “but you need to practice this way, too.”

“Why?” Even in the momentary pause, her cranking climax receded, slipping back into a dull, buzzing ache in her core.

This was a game he liked to play, taking her close to the edge and then backing off, starting all over from the start, only to do it again. The release, when it finally came after his teasing torture, had her shaking and crying for long minutes,

her muscles spasming so hard they skated the line between pleasure and pain. Brutal, delicious agony.

In a conciliatory gesture, Jake spread his palm over her lower belly and swiped through her sex with his thumb, rubbing her sensitive clit in a slow circle. “Because,” he crooned, “you can’t always be a pillow princess.” His lips spread into a mocking grin that erased the century of unimaginable hardship from his face. He slapped at her ass, a sharp stinging that made her inner muscles clench. “Now, ride that dick, sweetheart.”

Seduced by his grin and the warm fondness in his eyes, and despite her aggravation at the change in position, Zorah rotated her hips with toe-curling results. Maybe there was something to be said for being on top, with the full width and breadth of his golden chest laid out in front of her like a feast, the carved bulges of his pecs and the thick line of his jutting collarbone.

She bent over him, her lips finding this enticing line and mouthing over it, lapping at his skin. She tested another slow grind, shuddering at the pleasurable pressure she wrung from the position. Okay, maybe this wasn’t so bad. His scent cascaded over her, rich and salty and musky. Zorah licked, savoring that salt on her tongue and letting her body do what it wanted atop the thick member piercing her sex. She rocked against him, finding the spot that felt the best and groaning into it.

“There you go,” he purred. “There’s a good girl. Rub that sweet pussy and come for me.”

Rearing back, Zorah planted her palms on Jake’s chest, pushing against the hard, unforgiving muscle. With a curl of her spine and a pulse of her hips, she found the spot she liked, grinding and grinding as stars gathered behind her eyelids.

Jake rumbled a low growl, making it clear she wasn’t alone in her enjoyment. His nails bit into her hips, and he met her movements with upward thrusts of his own, going deeper and deeper still.

“That’s it,” he said with a pleasurable grimace carved into his face. “That’s my girl.”

“Say it again,” Zorah panted, pleasure coiling through her like smoke. “I’m yours. Say it.”

Her words did something to him because his hips arched off the bed and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Zorah,” he breathed, fingertips digging in so hard they’d leave bruises.

“Give me your knot,” she demanded, the first pulses of her climax tingling deep in her womb. It hurtled toward her now, out of control and unstoppable. “Just this once,” she panted, “give it to me.”

Release rolled up through her pelvis, shimmering in blasts of clenching, quivering pleasure that traveled over her skin and along every nerve pathway to every part of her body. Zorah slammed her hips down, screwing her body flush to his, holding on tight with her thighs, calves, inner muscles, toes, and fingers, cleaving to him in any way she could, in every way she could, communicating in no uncertain terms that she would not be letting go. Not now, not ever.

“Zorah!” he gasped through the thrusts he seemed unable to stop, and she felt his climax explode into existence.

With a guttural shout, his knot began to swell, and Zorah moaned in triumph as it throbbed against her inner walls. It filled her past full, past pleasure and into a bite of pain that made it all the more savory. She moaned again, in ecstasy and satisfaction, as a second orgasm rocked her body, and she clenched down, pulsation after pulsation around the thick, indecent knob of flesh.

My Alpha. My Alpha.

Zorah stared down into his heavy-lidded, pleasure-glazed mossy-green eyes and made up her mind.

There would be no other Alpha for her. There would be no accepting what she was given and smiling through her teeth like a good, obedient little Omega. She got herself to Morris Hill. She convinced him to give her swim lessons. She chose

this Alpha for her Heat. Maybe not with any kind of foresight or consideration, but she'd done it. Her inner Omega had understood what she needed and brought her to the lake that night. Brought her to him.

Yeah, he was damaged and strange, and he'd crept on her from the shadows, but she understood now. Understood that he didn't do that because he wanted to but because he'd been accepted into this Pack yet was cast out to remain on the periphery. That he'd accepted this arrangement because his Alpha had been beaten and bruised and exploited, nearly expelled from his body after all the abuses he'd suffered. But not anymore.

He was Alpha enough for her. *My Alpha. My Alpha.* The beat thudded deep in her chest, pushing against her breastbone at the place where their bond would live, like it was calling out to her, inviting her in the same way she invited him into her nest all those days ago. *Her Alpha*, her beautiful, scarred Alpha. Brave and kind and so unsure of all the things he needn't be unsure about: his own strength, his honor, his value, his place in the world, his place in her heart.

With a cry, Zorah flung herself onto Jake's naked chest and bit down hard. Flesh and muscle filled her mouth, the scent of blood hot in pursuit, and Jake yelped either in pain or surprise or both. She writhed through the pleasure, her mouth and sex full of him in a way she'd been craving since that night on the dock. She shuddered and heaved but held tight. Jake's hand grabbed at her hair, tugging as if to lift her away or hold her fast, but she only bit down harder, feeling the pops of skin as her molars sunk further in, marking her greedy claim high on his muscled breast.

She wanted to crow with triumph. Let him try to get rid of her now. Let him try to pass her off to some other Alpha. Let him try to deny *this*.

His emotions flooded into her chest as the bond braided itself between them like a strand of unbreakable golden light. Confusion, fear, wonder, anxiety all swarmed together, and she let them flow through her, knowing he would be afraid, knowing he'd be uncertain. But it didn't matter because she

was certain enough for both of them. She sent a push of reassurance through the connection. This wasn't Little Zorah running away on an ill-conceived whim. This was full-grown Omega Zorah choosing her Alpha once and for all.

Slowly, Zorah released the clamping hold and lifted her head. Blood tinged her lips and coated her tastebuds, rich and coppery and *his*. Her mouth flicked up in happiness, and she met wide, green eyes petrified with awe and horror.

Zorah seized his hand and pressed his palm between her naked breasts, holding it there with one hand and reaching for his chest with her other. "Do you feel it?" she whispered. His chin quivered in a shaky nod. "That's our bond. You're mine now, and I'm yours. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he said, voice like frozen gravel.

Pleased, Zorah wiggled against the knot and smiled as exhaustion claimed her body. Her Heat finally broke against the rocks of this new and profound connection. "When you're ready, you can return the bite."

"When I'm ready," he repeated, looking slightly lost.

Zorah nodded in approval. It was okay. He could feel lost, she knew where she was, and as long as they were together, he wouldn't be lost again.

"You said I have good instincts and that I should trust myself. This is what I want. *You're* what I want." Zorah laid her head down and snuggled into his chest, her ear pressed to the still-oozing claiming bite.

Her eyes drifted shut, and for one blissful, scintillating moment, everything was perfect.

CHAPTER 30

Jake

What the fuck had happened?

One minute, the insatiable little Omega was riding him for all she was worth, and the next thing he knew, she'd sunk her teeth into his flesh like a vicious, but adorable, rottweiler. Not only that, but so lost to pleasure, he'd allowed his knot to lock inside, her body squeezing and holding him so tight he swore he could feel it in his lungs. A special kind of torture to be so deeply satisfied and so wildly freaking out at the same time.

The golden glow that sprung to life in his chest vibrated with Zorah's deep contentment. It wiggled and sighed as much as she did, slinging itself around his heart as surely as her arms and legs anchored themselves to his body. Nothing in his entire life prepared him for this, this connection that had opened up between them. He could feel her emotions as they resonated down the bond, her delight and excitement and pleased sense of accomplishment at what she'd done. No hint of hesitation, no pause of remorse or regret. He'd been so terrified of getting the girl pregnant that he'd never considered the possibility of having to explain an accidental mating bond.

Holy fuck. Mating bond. Mating bond.

What was he going to do? Shit, shit, double shit. Fucking hell. His brain spun like an out-of-control top, careening and bouncing off the pile of jumbled-up thoughts, unable to keep a single one front and center for more than two seconds. Knot. Pregnant. Baby. Bite. Promise. Omega. Mate.

Mate.

She was his mate. There was no denying it.

But, no, this couldn't work. He'd promised Hunter. He'd sworn to abide by the rules of the Pack and stay the fuck away from Omegas. Not only that, but it would endanger the entire Pack by causing trouble with River Bend. Hunter would never abide this; he'd be forced to exact his promised punishment, and what happened to Zorah, then?

He had to get rid of this, but how? How could he extract this thing from his body when it insinuated itself so deep it felt like it had always been there waiting to be discovered?

Zorah let out a soft sigh, the kind she released when she was about to drift off into deep sleep. She always slept hard after a strong climax. Jake's eyes cut to the all-too-quickly lightening sky. Dawn approached, and he had to hurry. Anxiety deflated his knot until he slipped from her body with a worrisome rush of fluids that gushed over their tangled legs and dribbled over his balls. A shudder tore over him at the warm sticky goo. So much fucking seed; how could he fail to get her pregnant with this amount? He couldn't think about that right now.

First order of business: he would take her back. Back to the Heat Hut. That's where the Pack thought she was, where she was supposed to be all this time. If he hurried, he could get her there and slip her inside before anyone saw him. If luck was on his side, he could do so without either alarming the village or waking Zorah.

The thing in his chest twanged an out-of-tune note of displeasure, balking at the thought of depositing this Omega like a package on a doorstep.

Coward, that Alpha voice roared inside his head.

He knew it. It wasn't wrong. Maybe he'd hidden it from Hunter, and these people, for all these months, but that's what he was, wasn't he? A coward who couldn't save Ava, couldn't save himself, lived in filth, and attacked and abducted Kess. Hunter knew. Jake had seen it in his eyes that night in the darkness, seen the disgust and disdain in his friend's furious gaze. Jake wasn't any better than what they saw. Maybe they had deluded themselves otherwise, but he knew better. He knew what he was.

With effort, he extracted himself from the bed and hurried to his feet, grabbing whatever clothes lay within reach. Pants, boots, a soiled shirt, he threw them on his body, his temples pounding with the time crunch in which he now found himself. If he was discovered putting her back, it would be even worse.

A hurried glance around his cabin set his eyes on the small pile of Zorah's clothes hanging up, leftover from their final swim lesson. It seemed like an age ago that had happened. He snatched them, along with the blanket he'd found her on the first night of her Heat. Memories of Zorah on her hands and knees stampeded into his mind, but he pushed them aside, not allowing himself the distraction of an inconvenient sexual fantasy.

How could he, in good faith, ever think about her again with what he was about to do?

Moving quickly, he threw the blanket around her, tugging it into place so it wouldn't fall off in transit. She slept heavily, which would be in his favor for this shameful task. He tucked the clothes near her belly and then lifted her up. She grunted a protest, but her eyes remained closed.

"Jake?" she said sleepily.

"Shh," he soothed, "go back to sleep."

"Okay." It was barely a word — a sigh in the shape of a word — and she wiggled her head into his neck, arms looping around it like she'd done so many times in the last few days.

Without waiting, Jake strode for the door, his legs stiff and sore after so many days of primarily horizontal activity. Muscles in his thighs and ass lit on fire, the vigorous thrusting having taken its toll there too. He gritted his teeth and ignored it. It was a distant clang of discomfort compared to the horror unfolding in his chest that questioned him with every step away from the cabin.

Are you seriously doing this? Are you really going to leave her? How could you? How can you?

Coward. Another part of his mind answered.

He was a coward; that's how he was going to do it. Plain and simple.

With effort, he tore his attention away from his inner turmoil to reorient to the world beyond his suffering. He was heading back into Morris Hill with an Omega who reeked of Alpha and sex and copious amounts of his seed. Would the

evidence on her body give him away? Could they recognize his scent as opposed to other Alphas? A deep growl rumbled in his chest, the mere thought of another Alpha sniffing her making his inner Alpha gnash its teeth in protest. He batted it down. That part of him would have to learn to live with this. There were no other options.

Before he knew it, the roofs of the village peeked through the trees, and he paused on the well-trod path. Inhaling fully into his lungs, he searched the air for any Alphas nearby that might discover him on this high-stakes mission.

Only clear, clean, petrichor-scented air greeted his nose, and he allowed himself one ounce of relaxation. Backing up, he ducked into the surrounding woods, skirting the direct paths through the village. He'd circumvent around it and sneak into the Heat Hut, which thankfully was positioned well away from both the Alpha bunkhouse and most of the other cabins. There was a risk, passing near a few nearby family abodes, but he would have to take it.

His feet crashed through the underbrush, making him sick with the noise it was causing. Anyone would hear him coming through if they got close enough. Nausea pooled in his guts. No turning back now, no turning back. The sun peeked over the horizon when he exited the forest at the door of the Heat Hut. A solitary ray of light poked through the trees and bit into his eyes as he shouldered it open with a grunt. Zorah stirred, her eyelids fluttering prettily, but did not wake.

He laid her down on the rough pallet of the hut, remembering the night she'd torn his bed apart to make her nest. Remembering the glee in her eyes when he produced his ratty, threadbare sleeping bag. One of the only things he'd salvaged from his days in OT. It had taken a few washes to get it well and truly clean, but it was still a good piece of camping gear, and he wasn't about to get rid of it. But Zorah's face had shone like it was thousand-thread-count sheets at a five-star hotel. She touched it and sniffed it and arranged it and burrowed into it with near ecstatic fervor.

Jake squatted and tucked the blanket around the naked girl. His palm on her forehead showed her temperature was less

scalding than the other times he'd checked over the past few days. If her temp was normalizing, maybe her Heat was ending. He wished that for her.

Heart heavy and bleeding, he stroked a fingertip over her cheek and down the tip of her nose, indulging in a last, long look.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said into the hazy light. "I'm sorry I'm not what you want me to be."

The golden bond vibrated displeasure, and he shoved it back, fighting to keep it from flowing through the connection and going into her. Bad enough to taint her with his flashbacks and his memories and his seed, now he'd sully her with the black hole of his emotions.

Fuck. Fuck!

He had to go. Maybe if he got farther away, it would hurt less. He could run back to his cabin. No, he'd stop by the lake and wash himself. Once again, scrub all the vestiges of their activities from his skin, rid himself of the evidence of everything they shared. The bond screeched again, louder this time, angry at him for even considering what he was about to do.

"I made a promise," he said out loud, not exactly sure who he was talking to. "I made a promise."

Hunt might kill him. That was a real possibility, but Jake cared less about that. If the Alpha wanted to kill him, then so be it, but what he absolutely could not stand was to see that disdain and disappointment reenter his friend's eyes. To see Hunter's assessment of him fall even lower than it had been that night in OT. The night he'd been captured, the night he and Ava had been discovered, the night he'd tried to abduct Kess, they all ran together in a shameful smear. He couldn't disappoint Hunt again, and not with this.

And then there were the long-term considerations. Beyond the precarious trading arrangement with River Bend, what would he do with a mate? How would he care for her, protect her, provide for her as the barely tolerated lowest member of

this Pack? That's if he even got to stay in the Pack, a huge assumption. An ugly surge of frustration roared in his chest. Why had she done this? Why had she tethered not only her affection to his but her *life*, too? He didn't deserve any of those things: her heart, her affection, her devotion. None of it. Eventually, she would come to understand that. She had to.

Jake scanned the bare-bones little shelter, hating the blandness of it, hating the new-cabin smell, hating the lack of soft, beautiful things to cradle his girl.

His mate.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the pain, the bond stabbing into him with discontent and horror. Wrenching his eyelids open, he bent and brushed a kiss over her soft, perfect lips, breathing in her sweetly scented breath one final time. His heart thrashed in his chest. Unable to stop himself, he stole another kiss before he tore himself away, clenching his fists to keep from snatching her up and running her directly back to his cabin and his bed, where she belonged.

But that was the thing. She *didn't* belong. Zorah was young. And beautiful. And clever. And resourceful. She had a whole life ahead of her, a whole life to recover from what he was about to do. Forgiveness he could not wish for and knew he'd never deserve, but in time, she might forget him.

Breaths coming short, he went to the door, not allowing himself even a single last glance at the Omega he was leaving behind. It was part self-preservation and part self-punishment. He'd have to make do now. Make do with the memories of her that filled his head; he didn't deserve a single one more.

Outside, the screaming dawn sunlight blasted his face and seared his retinas like an avenging angel pointing a sword at him on judgment day. Tears leaked from his eyes, blurring his vision as he disappeared back into the cover and safety of the woods, leaving behind the most precious thing he'd ever had.

CHAPTER 31

Zorah

Zorah had been hovering on the doorstep of consciousness for a while, deliberately keeping her eyes closed to enjoy the lazy feeling of lying in bed with no reason to get up. Jake's smell surrounded her, in her hair and on her skin. Even if the bed lacked the heat of his warm body, it didn't alarm her. These past days, he'd often stolen out of bed while she'd slept, only to appear at her side with a glass of water or a snack when she finally opened her eyes. The thought of seeing him coaxed her all the way awake, the golden bond in her chest humming in anticipation.

But an unfamiliar room disoriented her. She sat up so fast it made her dizzy. No, she knew this place. She was back in the Heat Hut. As she scrambled to her knees, the blanket fell away from her body, and a bunched-up pile of her clothes fell with it. Clothes that she'd last seen in Jake's cabin. Confusion pelted her on all sides. What was she doing here? Why were these clothes here? And where was Jake? Where was her mate?

The bond smarted in her chest, the golden glow mutated into a swarm of angry, stinging bees, as if it knew something she didn't. As if to tell her that his absence was not an accident or a fluke but a message. Zorah dug the heel of her palm into her sternum, pressing hard against the discomfort. She'd gone to sleep with the bond, a neatly woven line connecting her heart to his, but now, that connection snarled and frayed and tangled. It howled its displeasure so loud she felt the echoes in the marrow of her bones. She'd given her claiming bite, and this is what he'd done.

He'd left her. While she'd slept, he'd brought her here and left her.

He doesn't want you.

Pain blistered her insides, and Zorah bent at the waist, her stomach heaving as she reached out a hand to steady herself on the wall. No. No, this couldn't be happening. Breaths short

and gasping, she groped for the bond, snatched at all the shredded ends that slipped from her grasp, desperate to take hold of one, just one, that would lead her back to him. A distant wail shuddered down the connection, one that Zorah knew did not come from her. Jake, wherever he was, was hurting too, and that quelled her agitation to a very small degree.

Something must've driven him to do this. Some outside force. He couldn't have just discarded her like this, like a used dishrag.

Her disgusted, indignant inner Omega sneered, sounding just like all the condescending talking-tos she'd received from her family over the years.

Alpha left. He doesn't want you.

No. She refused to believe it. There must be an explanation. Was he mad at her because of the knot? Because of the bite? Had she gone too far? She could understand that; she wouldn't want an Alpha biting her without her permission, but she could've sworn — would've sworn on her life, on Nana's life! — that he'd felt the pureness of their connection, that all those joinings had been about far, far more than just sexual relief.

Chest burning, Zorah stumbled over to the basin of stale, tepid water and splashed a few handfuls on her face. It spilled over her naked chest, chilling instantly in the air. Without the internal fire of her Heat to warm her, goose bumps broke out over her skin.

Resolution stilled her spinning thoughts. She needed to find him. Needed to hear him explain this rejection. Every Alpha in this village wanted to mate her. Was he so different from them? Sure, she wasn't the most sexually experienced Omega, but she'd done okay, hadn't she? She'd learned a lot.

Hastily, Zorah plaited her hair and threw on the stiffly dried shirt and shorts she'd swam in. Maybe he'd been thoughtful in leaving them, although it felt much more like, "and take your stuff and get out."

A child's shriek cut across the air, and Zorah froze, fully realizing for the first time that she was back in the village proper and that it had stopped raining. Given the sunlight streaming into the room, the village would be in full swing of midday activity, especially if they'd been holed up for days due to the rainstorm.

Holding her breath, she cracked the door open and peeked around the corner, hanging back in case anyone happened to be passing by. As expected, Morris Hill residents scattered across the pathways and green areas, all heading in different directions, looking busy with days of backed-up work. She jerked her head back inside and eyed the forest beyond the backdoor to the Heat Hut. Jake had likely slipped in and out that way; no way would he risk cutting across the middle of the camp with an unconscious Omega in his arms. She would do the same, skirt the perimeter of the cabins until she hit the path to the lake. If she was quiet, she might miss everyone. If not, she'd deal with it then.

She'd risked much more for much less many, many times before.

CHAPTER 32

Zorah

The slope up to Jake's cabin pitched at a taxing angle, and Zorah's Heat-ravaged body complained the entire way. Her thighs burned as her bare feet slipped and squished in the mud. It didn't matter, she'd get cleaned up eventually, and what was a little mud on top of everything else pasted on her skin? Determination suffused her. They would figure this out, they simply had to.

Huffing and puffing, she crested the hill right as Jake came around the corner of his cabin. He startled and nearly dropped the large boulder gripped between his hands.

His eyes cut away; face contorted into an aggrieved scowl. "What're you doing here?"

Zorah charged forward, mud splattering under her angry stomps, annoyed he held the rock before him like some kind of shield.

"You know why," she said tightly.

Turning his back, he dumped the rock next to the stump he used for chopping wood, picked up a hammer and chisel, and began chipping chunks off the rock. Each scraping blow resounded in her chest, and the bond vibrated with unhappiness; some of it his, most of it hers.

"You shouldn't be here," he said between clinking, grating strikes.

"And why not?" she demanded, pacing into the hammer's arc to force him to stop and face her. Which he did, his eyes cast down and his hammer-wielding hand dropped to his side with an air of defeat. "How could you dump me in that shack without a word?"

He hissed a sigh, tilting his head up to the sky, still looking anywhere but at her. The rejection upon rejection gouged into her resolve. She needed more than this. Needed him to engage, at least.

His voice grew thick. “This is never going to work, Zorah.”

Zorah shook her head, strands escaping from the sloppily-woven braid. “It’s too late.” She pounded her chest. “We’re mates. I’m sorry if it came as a shock, I’m sorry you didn’t agree beforehand, but Jake...” She stepped closer, grabbing his free hand to lay it against her breast. “I chose you. I don’t *want* another Alpha.”

The familiarity and warmth of his skin urged her forward, the bond sparkling with recognition and encouragement.

His calloused palm shaped itself to her body, and Jake’s face crumpled in pain. “You don’t mean that.”

“I *do*. Tell me why, why can’t we have this? Because of Ava? Or your episodes? Or the Pack? I don’t care about any of that. I *don’t*.”

His thumb swiped a soft arc over her sternum, and Zorah hated how much meaning she wanted to take from that smallest and most paltry of gestures. But he merely shook his head in abject defeat.

“You’re worried about Hunter,” Zorah said, striving for a reasonable tone. “So explain it to him. You didn’t pursue me. You didn’t mean for this to happen, and I want this, too. He must be able to understand.”

Jake dropped the hammer with a bitter laugh. “Della and Cal tried to explain and look what happened to them. That’s how reasonable Hunter can be.” He pulled away from her and sat on the wood-chopping stump, looking so tired and weary that, for one second, Zorah almost doubted her conviction. “Being an Alpha hasn’t been the best ride for me, but I’d like to keep what’s left of me intact if it’s all the same to you.”

“That was different and you know it,” Zorah snapped. “Cal abducted Della, he stole her from her home in the middle of the night. This is a totally different situation.”

Jake’s shoulders curved inward. “I don’t think the Pack will see it that way. If Hunter doesn’t kill me, one of the others will. And what about your parents and your intended? What

about the relationship between the two Packs? What's the plan there?"

"I don't know! This was my plan! Find an Alpha and I thought I did that." Tears welled up as he finally raised his head look her full in the face. Zorah peered at him through a blurry haze, misery blanketing the warm golden glow of the bond as her words spilled out. "Why won't you fight for me? For us? You wished you had fought harder for Ava, so why are you giving up on me?" Salty drops streamed down her cheeks, and she didn't bother to wipe them away. "I'm *right here*."

"Zorah." His roughened whisper brimmed with pain and longing to match her own.

He reached for her waist, pulling her to stand between his knees. The sobs ripped out of her then. Big, ugly tears that shook her shoulders and overtook everything. Turmoil crashed over Jake's face as he rubbed at her hips, her arms, shushing and purring to quiet her sobs.

She leaned closer to him, craving his warmth, his comfort, his purr with every fiber of her heart, unable to believe that this might truly be the end. His roughened, work-dirty hands rose to cup her cheeks, and he pulled her close till their foreheads met.

"Sweetheart," he whispered, the moniker so soft and delicate, the susurrations of the trees echoed it like an approving chorus.

His breath fanned across her lips like so many of the sensual touches he'd given her over the past week, stirring arousal low in her belly with his words and hushed purr. This close, her skin hungered for his, all of her favorite parts of him coming to mind. Her fingers and lips ached to touch and taste and lick and nibble, all of them.

"No one's ever called me that but you." Zorah barely had the words out before she put her lips to his.

Jake sucked in a small gasp, the only indication of surprise, before he succumbed to the kiss, pouring all his ardor into taking her mouth with his own. With a groan, Zorah fisted his

shirtfront, hauling his body close and closer still. His tongue swept into her mouth, tickling against her own and bringing the pureness of his taste along with it.

The bond pulsed with a warm, approving light, stoking her need for him from a soft desire into a desperate frenzy. Zorah detached from the kiss, Jake's heavy breaths filling her ears as she mouthed kisses along his cheekbone and stubbled jaw. It felt different, this lust. Different from her Heat, where the need rode her hot and urgent, and her body demanded release after relentless release. This wasn't her body propelling her toward him. It was the bond. She licked at the salt on his skin and nibbled at his earlobe, wanting to consume every single part of him, wanting to claim every part of him the same as she'd claimed with her bite.

"Fight for me, Jake," she whispered into his ear as her demanding hands reached to extract his hardening cock from his pants. "Fight for us."

His cock hung heavy in her hand, utterly perfect with its velvety, unblemished heft. He groaned, either from arousal or emotion, but she didn't care which, her own emotions a mangled, exhilarating mess. Unable to resist, Zorah dropped to her knees and peered up at him as she gave his length a few introductory strokes. Jake's handsome face twisted in desire, and the war he waged with himself transmitted through the bond: his lust versus his anxiety about what was to come.

"This isn't over," Zorah insisted, tickling her tongue along the underside of his head. His thighs jumped in response, raising his hips off the perch. Her eyes cut to his, a salacious tint to the stormy green she knew so well. Fisting the waistline of his jeans, she dragged his pants over his hips all the way to his ankles, vowing, "I claimed you. You're my Alpha. Only mine. And this is mine, too."

To emphasize the point, she sucked the fat head into her mouth, laving the textured skin with wet, sloppy swipes of her tongue. Jake hissed, his hips bucking upward as his hands rested on her shoulders, and Zorah went to work in earnest.

It wasn't a hardship. Not when the taste of him sang in her senses, the briny musk speaking to her of early mornings and ocean waves and *him. My Alpha*. Drunk on the headiness of it, she shuttled her fist up and down as her mouth kissed and licked and sucked. She drew him deep, all the way, till he brushed the back of her throat, sparking one astounding instant where her entire existence narrowed to only this: the feel of him on her tongue and in her throat and in her palm, so full of him even air had no room to intrude.

His hands squeezed at her shoulders, and he voiced things that resembled words, curses buried between grunts, and Zorah knew he was close.

She walked her fingers down his length, cupping and cradling the heavy sack beneath since she knew now, after the long days of her Heat, that he loved that. And she loved that secret heat of him, loved the animal heaviness in her palm as she massaged in a careful rhythm. Knees spread wide, Jake's hips thrust into her mouth, and Zorah's fingers wandered. Gathering the saliva pooled at the base of his cock, Zorah's eyes rose to meet his as her fingertips grazed his balls and continued their journey to his dark, secret hole. Jake's eyelids drooped, and he widened his thighs, giving her silent permission and more room to rub the tight ring of muscle. Which she did, circling and pressing, all while continuing to lick her way up and down his cock.

Jake arched his back, his hands grasping the stump behind him to flex even deeper into her mouth, wholly consumed and unleashed by what she was doing. Her own arousal spiraled, and Zorah moaned around her mouthful, letting the tip of her finger breach his entrance to her first knuckle. She wanted *this*, too.

"Oh holy fuck," Jake burst out, and she went deeper.

She slid into that hot, smooth channel, impaling and claiming him in this new way. With care but also determination, she pumped the digit in and out in slow, inexorable thrusts, and Jake began to pant. Her gaze flicked to his, and their eyes locked, his greenish gaze so galvanizing it sent a tremor to her toes.

A rough, masculine curse spilled from his lip, and his cock swelled in her mouth in preparation to blow. Zorah sucked him deeper and thrust harder, but on the verge of his release, Jake pitched forward to grab her under the arms and haul her up to his lap.

Jaw tense and hardened with the fight to control, he growled, “Get up here.”

With a whine of protest — she had planned to finish him in her mouth — Zorah dropped her shorts, her sex already swollen as it made contact with his impossibly hard cock. Climbing atop him, she didn’t waste time, rolling her pelvis to settle him in the right place and throwing her head back as he speared her to the hilt. The sudden invasion took her body to the edge of fullness in a single instant, and she moaned into the sensation.

“Ride me,” he commanded, slipping his hands around to grab great, greedy handfuls of her ass. “Ride your Alpha.”

She did, rocking and bucking and whimpering, finding the spot where her clit rubbed against his abdominal muscles’ carved edges and made her eyes roll back. Sparks of every color imaginable exploded in the bond, its presence expanding behind her ribs, and she knew, *she knew*, the same thing happened in his.

Zorah grappled for everything she could touch: his arms, his chest, his neck, his hair. Tugging on his sweaty curls, she demanded his lips on hers. Opened so he swept inside and rubbed his tongue against hers. Desire climbed higher, each push and pull of her pelvis and each thrust and swipe of his tongue twisted together to expel every worry from her head. Jake’s fingers wandered, slipping down her ass to stroke against her wet sex as it spread around him. A shiver skated over her skin at the intimate touch, but it was the presence of those fingers circling her back entrance that had her eyes flashing open.

Dark intent laced his words as he gently massaged the muscle. “Feeling adventurous, are we?”

Their eyes locked in silent conversation. An unspoken request to go further, touch more, and with a wordless, shuddering granting of permission, the bond sang its approval. Zorah's movements slowed as the digit slid past that pleated opening.

Biting her lip, she gave herself over to the foreign sensation, the unusual invasion that, to her surprise, did not hurt but only heightened the swirling in her insides. As if all her nerve endings reset to this new, higher frequency of pleasure, she ventured another slow grind of her hips, happy to know she'd given him the same thrill only a moment before. The motion pushed his finger deeper, and she swallowed a groan at the feeling.

Oh hell, it was good, it was really good.

And she wanted more.

"Oh my god," she breathed, her hips picking up her pace to drive herself forward and backward, slipping and sliding over two hard intrusions.

Jake's eyes fluttered, and with more confidence this time, another finger inched inside. The breach made her gasp and worry, for an instant, that her body would refuse and rebel, but then the muscle gave way, and that gentle, stretching, widening pressure made her absolutely *combust*.

"Jake, oh god, Jake," she wheezed, the bond in her chest detonating in a supernova of euphoria that shot through her body from her spasming toes to the tips of her half-destroyed braid.

Her vision shattered and fractured into a thousand ever-changing patterns, interspersed with snapshots of Jake's handsome face as her eyelids stuttered between open and closed.

He thrust up from his seat, fucking into her faster and faster as her release rolled on and on. His mouth — his lovely, sensual mouth — twisted in a teeth-gnashing grimace, and Zorah wrenched her shirt to the side, baring her neck and upper chest.

“Do it, do it! Claim me!” she cried out, and Jake growled again, deeper, huskier, and somehow even more tortured.

His teeth flashed open, and he dove for her chest, his mouth a moist furnace against her skin, but he stopped there, his whole body seizing in a violent, shuddering finish. His knot throbbed against her entrance, and she wiggled down on it, her orgasm abating at last as his surged beneath her hips, and this time he didn't stop. Flexing upward, he slipped his fingers from her hole only to pull her cheeks apart and slam her body down on his expanding knot.

He cried out, the word smothered against her breast, and Zorah held her breath, trembling under the knot's pressurized invasions, bracing herself for the final pinch and tear of the claiming bite.

But it never came.

He didn't claim her, for the second time, but she tried to throttle her disappointment, listening to the bond and feeling for his emotions on the other side. Muddled and bleary, they didn't come through as one clear signal, maybe obscured by the receding climax or the headiness of the sex. But she felt it; she felt *him*, and the connection glimmered with new life. Her lungs began to work, expanding with the fresh, clean, rain-scented breeze, and for a few hallowed minutes, everything composed a tableau of utter perfection.

After a minute, Jake lifted his head. The lines of his face eased, the deep etchings of pain lessened from his usual scowl, and Zorah passed a thumb along his cheekbone, her body still warm and happy from the connection reaffirmed and reforged.

He inhaled and exhaled a long, deliberate breath. “I'll talk to Hunter,” he said in that soft, gravelly voice that made her belly flip flop. Zorah opened her mouth to ask when and how and if she could help or be there when he did it, but Jake lifted a finger. “Just give me a day to get cleaned up and get my thoughts organized. I want to be prepared for what I'm going to say to him. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes.” Zorah dipped her chin in a definitive bob, a smile spreading over her face.

Things were going to work out; she could feel it.

CHAPTER 33

Zorah

Zorah retraced her steps back to the Heat Hut, half walking and half floating on an invisible cloud. Jake didn't reject her; he'd been scared and overwhelmed by the mating bite. She could understand. Her entire life, she'd known she was an Omega, known that one day she'd mate an Alpha and exchange mating bites. But it was all new for Jake. Granted, he'd been an Alpha for over a century, but much of that he'd spent in a traumatic and drug-induced nightmare. In some ways, she felt older and wiser than him. How could she fault him for being nervous about what he'd stumbled into with her? It was all okay, it would be fine.

Triumphant, she tiptoed through the woods to the back door of the Heat Hut, realizing too late she wasn't alone. Her heart skipped a run of beats, and she froze like a startled bunny.

Her mother's prim, harsh face contorted in barely contained horror at the picture of a bedraggled Zorah emerging from the trees. All her euphoria from seeing Jake withered and the instinct to spin on her heel and run back into the protective shelter of the trees slammed into her hard. With a steadying breath, she forced herself to cross the barrier and step onto the path.

Ida spiked an eyebrow and commenced a deliberate perusal from her sex-messy hair, over her wrinkled and seasonally-inappropriate scanty clothes, to her muddy and scraped-up bare feet.

Zorah pasted a smile onto her face and leaned in for a hug. "Hi, Mama," she murmured, quickly embracing her mother's stiff body.

A choked sound tore from her mother's throat as Zorah pulled back. Nostrils flaring, her mother's eyes flashed to Zorah's face, cold, nasty accusation streaming out of them.

She'd been caught. The only thing worse would've been if her mother had walked in on her with Jake buried knot-deep in

her body. Not that it made much of a difference at this point, with Jake's seed dribbling onto her upper thighs, she had no illusion her mother failed to miss the scent. With a single sniff, Ida knew exactly what she'd been doing.

At Ida's elbow, a concerned-looking Grace ping-ponged her attention between the two of them and asked with forced brightness, "I take it your Heat is over?"

Twisting her fingers together, Zorah focused on Grace. "It broke this morning. I was just stretching my legs."

Her mother's spine snapped so hard Zorah wondered why she couldn't hear the bones cracking. Yes, she was lying, and yes, they all knew it. But what else was she supposed to do?

"Your father and I just arrived, along with Nelson. They're both anxious to see you." She emphasized the word *both*.

Zorah's stomach curdled. Suspecting competition, Nelson had come to stake his claim, with her parents' consent, in front of the Morris Hill Pack, to show them who she belonged to and who she'd be leaving with. This was a mess, even without her mating claim on Jake.

"Zorah will want to clean up before she sees anyone," Grace said, hurriedly adding, "from her Heat. Clean up from her Heat." Color tinged Grace's cheeks, and she turned toward Zorah's still-seething mother. "Ida, why don't you stay here and catch up. I'll have Lars bring a tub and some hot water and get you a snack to tide you over. I'm sure you're both famished."

A tight nod was the only response her mother gave before punching the door open with the heel of her hand and striding into the Heat Hut.

With a worried glance and a squeeze of her arm, Grace whispered, "I'll be back soon. You gonna be okay?"

Zorah stared at the half-open door, dread sucking up her ability to speak. "I'll be fine," she croaked and went to face her mother.

CHAPTER 34

Zorah

“How could you?” Ida seethed, her face a stony mask of fury.

Zorah glued her back to the door, fighting her internal quaking. She’d known her mother was furious, but the level of rage on her face surpassed any state Zorah had ever seen, including when her father invited Nana to come live with them without consulting Ida first. Zorah closed her eyes, retreating into the golden orb that lived in her chest, seeking any comfort she could find from her mate. The bond was there, wavering and flickering lightly, a calming presence albeit a weak one. If only he were here to purr for h —

Smack!

The sound hit her ears before the pain torched her skin. Zorah palmed her cheek and gaped at her mother.

“I told your father this was a bad idea. Was that your plan all along?” Ida hissed, “To come here and whore for this Pack of heathen animals?”

“No! I —”

This time she saw her mother’s palm whip through the air before it struck her other cheek. But, unable to react in time, Zorah stumbled from the impact, reaching out a hand to steady herself as her face burned with twin fires of pain and shame. Coppery blood leaked onto her tongue, where one of her molars cut the inside of her mouth. She swallowed it with rising nausea. Her mother had never hit her like this. Never once, and that fact, more than the pain itself, gouged at her heart. Zorah slid to the floor, and Ida advanced, looming over her like an erupting volcano.

“Shut your filthy, lying mouth. I did not raise *my* daughter to be a disrespectful Omega *whore*.”

In an instant, slumped against the wall, she was Little Zorah. Put back in her place by the sheer overbearing presence

of her mother, now supercharged with the ferocity of Zorah's apparent betrayal of the family's plan for her life.

"You thought you were so clever, sneaking off with that Beta trash like I didn't know exactly what you were doing," Ida continued. "But I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to let an Alpha fuck you when you were promised to your cousin!"

The days of exhaustion and emotional upheaval crashed down like a waterfall directly on Zorah's skull. She felt paralyzed under it, unable to move or respond or even think clearly. Unable to speak, all she could do was withstand this torrent of hatefulness in numb silence.

Ida continued to snarl and rant, but Zorah tuned her out, realizing that she sat in the exact same spot she'd occupied less than a week ago, when she'd been plopped — sweating and shaking and cramping — in the Heat Hut. That memory floated through her mind, so distant now, like it had been another girl's naked body staring fixedly at the opposite wall, waiting for a solution to all her problems to come out of the woodwork. In fairness, later that night, Jake had come out of the woods to relieve her Heat.

She again groped for the bond and found it pulsing steadily but offering her no assistance or guidance. Could he feel her here? Trapped in this prison with her raging bull of a mother with all her decisions tumbling down around her? Did he know? Did he care?

Despair roiled through her numbness. If she told her mother about the mating bond to Jake, Ida would erupt, and given her current state of agitation, Zorah wasn't sure she'd make it out of here alive. Even if she did, if Zorah disclosed her connection to Jake, Ida would have no choice but to go to Zorah's father, who would go to Hunter, which would expose them in the worst possible way. She'd promised Jake he could talk to Hunter on his own. Telling her mother about him now would not only make a bad situation worse, but it would also make her break the first promise she'd made to her mate.

Too preoccupied sorting out their new relationship, she hadn't considered how she'd tell her family she and Jake mated. Maybe she'd assumed Jake would be with her when she had to confront them, that they would be able to meet him and see he was an honorable Alpha who would take care of her. She never anticipated being stuck in a situation where her tenuous bond couldn't protect her while her mate sat up on his ridge, summoning the courage to do what he had to do to be with her.

Ida crouched and pinched Zorah's chin in an unkind grip. "Your father and Nelson *cannot* know of this," she said, low and deadly serious. "You are going to scrub this Alpha filth off, and then you are coming to dinner. You are going to greet your cousin and look happy to see him, and then we are leaving this cesspool of an immoral village tomorrow morning. We'd leave tonight if that wouldn't raise Nelson's suspicions," she muttered.

Despair clawed at Zorah's insides, spurring a certain kind of desperate recklessness. "I don't want to leave. I want to stay here."

"That was not the bargain." Her mother's lips turned white at the edges. "You begged us to let you come here, you gave us your word that after this summer, you would return home and mate with Nelson. You gave your word." Releasing her chin, Ida stood, her spine ramrod straight, her temper abating the slightest degree. "You are a *child*, Zorah. You know nothing of the world. This going back on your word only proves that we should've never trusted you in the first place. But here's a nice taste of adulthood for you: you're going to live with the consequences of your actions, as you *promised*."

A soft knock sounded, and Grace's gentle voice slipped through the cracks in the heavy door. "I have some food, may I come in?"

Backing up a step, Ida straightened her sleeves. "Clean yourself up," she sniffed. "I'll go make your excuses to your father and bring you some" — she cast another dark look at Zorah's bare and dirty legs — "appropriate attire."

With that, she blew out the door, giving Grace a just-this-side-of-rude thanks on her way. She obviously believed Grace knew about and condoned Zorah's "whoring" and likely would not deign to speak with her again.

Ida was right. Zorah was immature and irresponsible, and she'd messed everything up, for herself, for the Pack that had been so welcoming, and for Jake. Jake, who only ever agreed to help her through her Heat. He never expressed any interest in a mating bond with her, but she'd gone ahead and forced it on him, thinking he'd want her as badly as she wanted him. Assumed he would be pleased by it, just like a child assumes that their worldview is the only one in existence. Sure, he feigned happiness and was kind to her when she'd stormed up the hillside to demand he accepts what she'd foisted on him. But that was only because he was honorable and good. His real feelings were revealed when he dumped her off at the Heat Hut this morning without even saying goodbye.

Grace squatted at Zorah's side and gasped, "Oh my god."

Zorah fixed her eyes on the floor. As if she couldn't feel worse, embarrassment picked through the scant remains of her dignity. "It doesn't hurt."

Grace made a low noise, an Omega mother growl, and Zorah looked up. "I shouldn't have left," Grace said tightly. "I shouldn't have left you alone with her. If I'd known..."

Grace's distress stung. After all, Zorah'd lied to and deceived her hosts while they'd done nothing but offer her kindness.

"Please don't be angry with me," Zorah said, her voice cracking. "I can't take anyone else being angry with me today."

"Oh, Zorah." Tears dangled on Grace's eyelids. "Come here."

Grace enveloped Zorah in the warmth of her soft, comforting arms, and Zorah fell apart completely. Water streamed from her eyes, stinging her abused cheeks and

soaking into Grace's shirt. She gulped shallow, shuddery breaths.

"I'm so sorry Grace, I'm so sorry I lied to you."

Strong hands stroked her back, as Zorah had seen the Omega do dozens of times for her children, always slightly in awe of such tender maternal outpouring. After a very long time, the comfort seeped into her bones, and her sobs quieted.

"I'm not a whore," Zorah said into the soggy shoulder of Grace's shirt. "But I messed everything up."

Taking her by the shoulders, Grace eased Zorah away to peer into her soggy face. "You didn't mess anything up. You're a young Omega who was in Heat surrounded by a Pack of healthy Alphas who would all kill each other to get you. I don't know why anyone would suspect anything different would happen."

Some of the tentative comfort drained away. Grace was talking about Zorah having sex during her Heat, not all the sneaking around she'd done with the swim lessons for the latter part of the summer before that. That continued deceit tore at her, but it didn't matter now. What good would it do to fess up to Grace? As far as Grace knew, she could've been with any of the Alphas for her Heat. Jake would be the last one anyone would suspect, and she owed it to him to keep it that way.

"Here," Grace said, suddenly businesslike. She reached for a canteen and unscrewed the top. "Drink this. All of it."

Zorah accepted the container shoved into her hand, startling at the warmth. She gave it a sniff. "What is it?"

"It will ensure you don't get with child." Grace scanned her face. "Unless that's what you want."

As if this situation couldn't get any worse, Jake had knotted her. Twice.

Zorah lifted the container and took a long, deep swig of the bitter liquid. She wiped at her mouth. "I didn't know such a thing existed."

Grace's hopeful expression darkened. "I'll show you how to make it before you leave. No one should be forced to have pups before they're ready."

"We're leaving in the morning," Zorah said between gulps, polishing off the canteen as quickly as she could.

Grace's jaw firmed. "Then, we better work fast."

CHAPTER 35

Jake

At suppertime in Morris Hill, the population of the Pack streamed into the mess hall to fill their bellies after a long day of hard work. Jake jammed his hands into his jeans pocket. The walk down from his cabin had done little to improve the barbed ball of anxiety living in his gut. All afternoon, he'd thrown himself into his chores like a near madman, his brain and body at war.

Mate.

She's your mate.

No sentence in his entire life had ever terrified him more. He didn't regret it, he just wished he had a better idea of how things were going to go with Hunter. He'd spent hours washing his clothes and airing his bedding — all of it smelling like Zorah and the primal, sexual need of her Heat — and scouring his brain for the perfect way to say what he had to say. No smart words or clever arguments came to him, so he'd landed on keeping it simple. He'd explain what had happened, straightforwardly, not making excuses or soft-pedaling it or going out of his way to justify his behavior. Yes, she'd given him her bite, but he was far from blameless in the series of events. He'd take responsibility.

“Hey.” Colt's hearty hand on Jake's shoulder caught him off guard. “Didn't expect to see you here tonight.”

Jake cleared his throat, scanning the growing crowd to see who was around, keeping an eye out for Zorah. Where was she? Was she okay?

The bond throbbed in his chest with a deep unhappiness he didn't understand. Was she unhappy with him? Unhappy with her choice to mark him? Uneasy with him fulfilling his promise? He wished he could talk to her, find out what was going on, comfort her. That seemed like what a proper mate would do. But honestly, he had no fucking clue what a proper mate would do.

Instead, he answered Colt. “A warm meal sounded pretty good after all the rain.”

Colt smiled and held the door to the mess hall open, gesturing for Jake to precede him inside. “How’d the roof fare?”

Jake stepped through the doorway. “Good enough.”

Inside the mess hall, once again, the scents and sounds assaulted him. The Alpha scents sharper and more threatening, the wisps of floral Omega aromas too strong and cloying, the shrieks of the children shriller, and the crowd noise more sinister and laced with foreboding. He wanted to crawl out of his skin.

“I planned on coming up later this week,” Colt continued, oblivious to Jake’s roiling discomfort. “Maybe we can work on the porch? Or start in on the hearth? The temperatures are gonna start dropping pretty quick here, and you’ll need heat if you plan to stay up there.”

“Yeah, sure. Any time.”

With another friendly slap on the back, Colt headed off in another direction, and Jake grabbed an empty seat at an unoccupied table, off to the side near the back. He surveyed the crowd, skipping from face to face, passing over the few scowls pointed at him, searching for Zorah.

He saw Hunter first, standing at the table near the front of the large room. Grim-faced, even for him, Hunt listened to an Alpha Jake had never seen before. The man stood an equal height with Hunter, with the gently aged skin of a mature Alpha, and he gestured to someone hidden from Jake’s view. Riddick stood to the side of Hunt, bouncing on his toes in unconcealed agitation, and Hunt’s eyes uneasily bounced between the two men.

“This is bullshit!” Riddick suddenly roared. Several Omegas visibly flinched, and the entire mess hall hushed. Riddick shoved past Hunter and put himself in the man’s face. “Is this her choice, is that what she wants?”

Several Alphas jumped to their feet, and, in the jostling, Jake caught a glimpse of a wan and horrified-looking Zorah, perched awkwardly on the lap of another male he didn't know. The Alpha — if you could call him that — was young, greasy-haired, and smug as he wrapped a proprietary arm around Zorah's waist and sniffed at the spot behind her ear.

Possessive rage flamed through Jake. Who *the fuck* was touching his mate? He dug his nails into the bench, feeling the wood splinter and dig under his fingernails. Jake wanted to drag both of them out into the yard and set them both on fire, Riddick and the oily bastard clearly enjoying what he thought was his prize. The cousin, that must be the fucking cousin.

“That's not how it works here,” Riddick continued loudly. “Omegas choose their mates. Is this what you want, Zorah? To mate this fucking guy?” Riddick spat, turning toward Jake's Omega.

Zorah's face paled, and the entire picture snapped into harsh clarity. The furious-looking man was Zorah's father, who'd come to collect her along with the *fucking cousin* — Riddick had that part correct, at least — they'd betrothed her to. On Zorah's right sat a rigid woman with cold, unforgiving eyes that bore into Riddick like she could peel his skin from his body with a look. Zorah's mother, no doubt. Zorah held herself stiff and unyielding in her cousin's lap, her eyes pointed at the ground. She looked as if she wanted to vomit.

Fuck! *Fuck!*

“Riddick,” Hunter warned, loud enough for the entire mess hall to hear.

“And who are you to make demands of my daughter?” Zorah's father countered. “You believe you have some claim on her? What's going on here, Hunter?”

Hunter wrapped a hand around Riddick's shoulder and tugged him, but even in the back of the room, Jake could see Riddick's balled fists and read the violence brewing in his body. What kind an idiot was he? Zorah was right there! If he threw a punch, she would undoubtedly get hurt no matter where it landed. Jake swore to himself. If any violence

touched her, Jake would kill Riddick before the night ended. Pure and simple, he would be a dead man.

“Was this some kind of game to you?” Riddick turned his attention toward Zorah. “Were you just toying with me?” He flung an arm in a wild gesture toward the crowd of Alphas. “With all of us?”

Riddick obscured his view of Zorah, but Jake felt the miserable clanging in the bond when Zorah said flatly, “I never promised you anything, Riddick. The decision has already been made.”

The sentence clanged like a death knell in his head. It was like she spoke directly to him. *The decision has already been made.* He could hear it for the apology that it was, “*I’m sorry Jake, but the decision has already been made.*” She’d made a mistake. With him, with Riddick, with all of them, because here was her unhappy selection right in front of his eyes. She could stand up, right now, with the full support of the Morris Hill Pack, and publicly declare everything she’d told Jake in all those quiet conversations. But that wasn’t what was happening. There was no argument to be had, no protest to lodge, because the choice had already been made.

Zorah’s father pushed between Riddick and his daughter but kept his blazing eyes on Hunter. “You gave us your assurance that no harm would come to Zorah in your care, and now we hear there has been some kind of covert attempt to matchmake our daughter in your Pack? Is that what goes on here?”

“Nothing like that, I assure you,” Hunt said with careful patience, clearly trying to corral the situation back into something civil. He motioned to Colt and Duncan, who stepped forward to extract a still-seething Riddick from the altercation. “We have no intention of interfering in your family’s” — Hunt’s jaw tightened — “business.”

“Stealing an Omega is a serious breach of trust,” the Alpha said with ponderous condescension. “Your Pack would no longer be welcome in River Bend. For trade or anything else.”

Riddick exploded. “It’s not stealing if she wants to stay!” He pushed at Zorah’s father and spoke to her over his

shoulder. “Is this what you want, Zorah? *Is it?*”

Every Alpha leaped to his feet, Jake included, the room erupting in a mess of moving bodies and furniture. Too many Alphas crowded forward, limited by the narrow aisle between the two tables where this whole drama was playing out. Colt and Duncan wrestled Riddick away from the fray. He didn’t fight them, but he didn’t go peacefully, either.

With a smirk, the cousin slowly got to his feet, keeping a hold on a defeated-looking Zorah. The sight of her blank, expressionless face cracked something in his chest. She watched the proceedings with a distant detachment, all her normal vitality and spirit now absent. What had they done to her in the hours since she’d left his cabin?

“What kind of a life would she have here?” the cousin sneered at Riddick. “Taking care of your snot-nosed pups and living in these filthy little shacks?” He spat on the floor, and an answering growl from multiple Alphas shook the rafters, the disrespect not going unnoticed. “In a few years, I’ll be Alpha of Alphas of our Pack, and Zorah will have the best of everything. Her own house, with running water, windows, and more than one room. What have you got to offer her, pup?”

Static roared in Jake’s ears, the activity around him slowing to a blur. He’d had no idea what she’d be giving up to be with him, and he cursed himself for never even asking. If their mating came to light, would Jake be cast out from this Pack? Possibly. Probably. Given the scene in front of him, Zorah would certainly be cast out from hers, and if not, Jake would never be welcome there. The two of them would be on their own, and then what? Go back to OT? Go somewhere else? Where? And do what?

He had no idea. He could work if he found someplace to do that. But what if they had to live rough? He couldn’t hunt to keep her fed and he could count on one hand the number of fish he’d caught in his life. They would have to find shelter somewhere, be forced to live on the periphery of whatever kind of Pack or town that would accept them, forever vulnerable and under threat.

A terrible proposition. A wretched, horrible life.

Compared with being mated to a Pack leader and living in a house with running water? No contest. Jake stood in the back of the mess hall, inert and unmoving, as Hunter and Zorah's father continued a tense conversation and Riddick, restrained between Colt and Duncan, shouted insults at the cousin. Jake heard none of it. He fixed on her big, amber eyes, willing her with his entire body to look at him as their future together vanished like a forgotten dream. His heart gave a heavy throb, as if trying to hold itself together from the tearing pain.

He was never going to be able to give her anything close to what she deserved, and she must've realized it. *The decision has already been made.* How could he have entertained the possibility otherwise? Had he forgotten what he was? A weak, pathetic, irredeemable waste of a human. Here he was, cowering in the back of the mess hall while *fucking Riddick* fought this fight. Pathetic. The Brethren had been right: he'd only been good for one thing, his brute strength and ability to follow directions, little more than a mutant, overgrown animal.

You're her Alpha. She is yours, his inner Alpha snarled.

But what did that mean? What did that mean, she was his? His to have and possess, like an object? Like a doll to sit on a shelf and admire every time his eyes fell upon her? Or, worse, to own and use for his sexual needs, a warm place to bury his knot?

Did that make any sense? That he'd condemn her to a life of struggle and hardship and uncertainty just so he could fuck?

Or did it mean something else entirely? That she was his to care for and to protect. To provide for and devote himself to. To put first and sacrifice for. To ensure she had every comfort she deserved, and more.

To do everything for her that he hadn't been able to do for Ava all those years ago, and to do that — his stomach bottomed out — he had to let her go.

As if she could hear his thoughts, the bond wailed in sorrow. Jake braced himself against it, silencing his own breaking

heart. He needed to shield Zorah from this, too. From across the room, obscured by dozens of hulking bodies between them, he caught a glimpse of her precious face and tested an experimental push of reassurance down that golden thread. *It would be okay*, he tried to say. *It would be okay.*

Maybe he imagined the slight flutter of her lashes and the softened curve of her cheek, but he didn't think so. So, he did it again. Released all the love and affection he had for his smart, brave, beautiful girl, even as his own heart shattered.

CHAPTER 36

Zorah

“You haven’t been yourself lately.”

Zorah slopped tea over the teacup she’d been pouring. For one beat, maybe two, her heart bucked before settling back into its usual rhythm. She ignored it, not sure why her Nana’s comment stole through her deadened spirit, but an instant later, the numbness enveloped her, and she welcomed it.

Riding away from Morris Hill, every step ripped her to smaller and smaller ribbons. Slicing and slashing, rending and rupturing, the Zorah who’d flourished in Morris Hill died. Like a butterfly that crawled back into her cocoon, the Zorah who’d braved the woods alone in the dark, laughed on the beach in the sunshine, and kissed a moonlight-gilded Alpha in the silvery water ceased to exist.

The first day or two, a small hope kindled. She’d kept the small wooden fish hidden, and at night, she’d slot her thumbnail into the grooves, trace the etched lines of the Z, and doubt herself. Maybe she’d left too soon for their whole plan to play out. Maybe she could go along with her family’s plans, to not make the situation worse and be ready. Jake would talk to Hunter just like he promised and then come and rescue her.

Miles after miles on the road, dull reassurance flickered through the bond; it gave her an inkling of hope, probably for far too long. But then hope turned to worry. Had Hunter made good on his threat to kill Jake? Had her mate actually died? Surely, she would’ve known if he was dead, wouldn’t she? Or had the Pack harmed him in some other, less final, way? Had her family found out and done something to him? Had he gotten lost in the wilderness trying to find her? Outrageous, improbable, preposterous scenarios paraded nonstop through her mind.

When weeks went by and he never turned up, worry turned to disillusionment. She’d squeeze the fish until her bones ground against each other, frustration and mounting despair roaring in her veins. Had he lied? Had he changed his mind

and stayed in his cabin, hiding from the world? Had he decided she wasn't worth the risk?

Then she questioned herself. Maybe she'd been unfair, foisting this choice upon him, forcing him to choose between her and his Pack. She'd heard her father threaten Hunter with trade agreements; she understood what was at stake. Could she really demand that Jake jeopardize the entire Morris Hill Pack, limit their ability to get food and supplies, just for her?

Disillusionment turned to anger. Anger to shame. Shame to grief. Grief to nothingness.

One by one, emotions curled up and went into deep hibernation. Pain. Hope. Fury. Fear. Agony. Longing. They shriveled away, like threads fraying from an overtaxed rope, disentangling themselves from the tarnished bond in her chest. That too, after keening and aching with every step away from Morris Hill — from *him* — finally put itself to bed, as if it too gave up on her. On them. Her inner Omega went mute.

Too sad for tears, she stopped carrying the wooden fish in her pocket as she went about her days. Banished to the bottom of her closet, underneath her pile of nesting supplies, she endeavored to forget it even existed. But there was no hiding from the stark cruelty of her situation: she'd messed up. Recklessly chosen the wrong Alpha, given her mating bite to someone unworthy. Someone who could not — or *would* not — return it. It confirmed the scorn her mother rained down on her in the Heat Hut. Little Zorah didn't know. She'd chosen and she'd chosen wrong.

Pressing the heel of one hand to her breastbone, Zorah dabbed up the spilled tea with the other. It was better this way, this nothingness. She could face the world and tolerate sliding back into her life, doing things like making tea and bringing it to her beloved Nana. That was simple. Easy.

Zorah handed over the teacup and saucer without lifting her face to the elderly Beta, who spent much of her day in bed.

“Just tired,” Zorah mumbled, turning to gather the tea supplies and return downstairs, where her mother chattered with other Omegas about Zorah and Nelson's upcoming

mating ceremony. Several times a week, her mother hosted a tea on the same topic, the same arguments and discussions going round and round about how best to celebrate what was sure to be the event of the year. It wasn't every day the Alpha's heir got married, as her mother liked to say.

It was a testament to Zorah's success at total shutdown that even the thought of formally mating Nelson failed to rouse even a single visceral or emotional response. Her stomach did not curdle. Her fists did not ball. Her eyes remained dry.

The bond remained silent. Like a shout over a cliff that didn't echo back, she knew what ought to be there; the outline of it, the space it took up, the blaring emptiness yawning back at her.

Nothing. She felt nothing.

"I don't think that's the problem." Nana peered at Zorah over the teacup rim for a long minute before setting the teacup on her bedside table. She patted the quilt next to her thigh. "Come sit."

Zorah obeyed. Of course, she did. That's what she did now. Obeyed.

Nana tucked Zorah's hand between her own, her fragile, papery skin a soft tickle. "I hear you up there" — Nana pointed at the ceiling to Zorah's small room — "every day, you come in, close the door, walk over to the window, and then stare out for a while, then you go to bed, and I don't hear you move for hours and hours." Nana's finger moved, tracing the circuit Zorah made around her bedroom.

Nana was right. She retreated there more often now, whenever she could. Ironically, with her mother preoccupied with the mating ceremony, she paid Zorah even less mind, especially as she went out of her way to not cause any further friction in the family.

The blowup in the mess hall had been the final straw. Nelson, too arrogant or too stupid to truly suspect Zorah would consider any Alpha other than him, never even questioned her. Never once looked at her with suspicion. She'd caught the

Alpha, his father, Harold, giving her the side-eye once or twice, but if River Bend's Alpha could keep his thoughts to himself to keep the peace, she would do the same.

Nana's gentle hand cupped Zorah's cheek, leaning close to search her face through her hazy, cataract-clouded eyes. Like most Betas, time wore on her grandmother's body. The aging process and life expectations got all mixed up after TheEnd. Not nearly as advanced in age as transformed Alphas like Jake or Hunter, yet Nana's aging progressed at a much faster clip. It wasn't clear how much longer Nana would live.

The old woman's mouth tipped up in a crooked grin, sporting the black holes of a few missing teeth. "Why don't you tell me about him. Or her, I suppose."

Zorah's gaze fell to the worn quilt across Nana's lap. "What?" The word scraped over her dry throat.

"I know you, Zorah." Nana wagged a thin finger in her face. "You don't think I do, but I do. And unlike your ridiculous parents, I'm not so caught up in bullshit that I can't see what's right in front of my face." Zorah's mouth considered twitching. Ida hated it when Nana swore. Nana surveyed her, her rheumy gaze mystical and weirdly piercing. "You've lost something, sweet girl. Something important. Some part of what made you Zorah." Nana leaned closer and dropped her volume to just above a raspy whisper. "Where'd you lose your heart, my dear? Who didn't care for it the way they should?"

The world went still. The chattering Omega voices downstairs fell away. The yells of the kids playing outside vanished. Even the room seemed to darken, as if a cloud shielded it from the sun's rays.

All she heard was the thundering of her heart, a beating, a deep *whomp-whomp* pounded into her eardrums. From an underground fault line buried beneath layers and layers of hardened rock, the quaking started.

"He taught me to swim." The words slipped past her lips, sounding foreign and muffled in her ears, and all the memories rushed back in. Jake, pumping life back into Nico's inert body. Jake, defending her against Xavi. Jake, splashing water in her

face, grinning. Jake, tenderly cleaning between her legs and bringing her food and water during her Heat. Jake, his eyes full of adoration and devotion as he promised to talk to Hunter at what would be their fateful last conversation.

The weight of it bore down on her, like the pressure at the bottom of the ocean. Jake had told her all about it. How the pressure was so great it could crush a man's bones, the darkness so dense it was unimaginable, yet somehow life existed there. Creatures that knew nothing of the world but that pressure and darkness. Were they content with their lot, or did they suspect there was more?

Zorah had been like those mysterious sea creatures. Before Morris Hill, she'd known nothing of the world beyond River Bend's borders, all that ignorance and constraint within her natural environment. She'd known nothing of being seen for who she was, rather than what she was, or how she might be used. Known nothing about possibility. Or love.

Overcome, Zorah slumped into Nana's lap, her body shaking as the story flooded out. At some point, the tears started, slow and relentlessly dribbling down her face to soak through the quilt as Nana petted her head. Zorah had the odd sensation of being there and also not there; her mouth formed the words while, at the same time, she was back inside the memories, inside every excruciating, heart-rending detail.

The numbness had ceded its hold. The fragile shield faltered at the first opportunity, at the gentlest inquiry from someone who cared enough to notice.

"So that's it, then?" Nana asked into the snuffling quiet. "You're going to mate with Nelson and forget all this ever happened?"

Zorah lifted her head and wiped her nose on a shirtsleeve. "I'll never be able to forget. I thought I was grown enough to choose an Alpha, but I made a mistake. The worst mistake an Omega could ever make."

Nana's head tipped to the side. "Well... you haven't picked an easy path for yourself, that's for sure. But knowing what

you did at the time, and how you felt about him, do you really think it was a mistake?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m here; he’s there. We’re not together and we never will be.”

Nana expelled a long, long sigh, like she was gathering all her strength. “Being an adult isn’t making perfect choices, it’s living with the consequences of the choices you do make.” Zorah winced at the repetition of what Ida had sneered at her in the Heat Hut. “But at the first hiccup, at the first sign of trouble, you zipped your lips and hid behind your parents. You ran away just as much as he did.”

“But my parents —”

“Fuck your parents,” Nana snarled. “If they know what’s best for you, why are you walking around like a ghost, and they refuse to see it? They want what’s best for *them*.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Zorah said, full again of resignation. “Even if I confess everything, declare I’m already mated, and throw everything into an uproar, Jake isn’t here, he didn’t come for me. He isn’t coming for me.”

Nana’s thin lips pursed. “Maybe not. But look what *you* did. You went out into the world and had an adventure, and you chose him as your mate. After all that, are you really going to slide back into your old life and accept someone else?”

Zorah toyed with a loose thread on the quilt. “I don’t know.”

It was the truth. She didn’t know if she could go through with it, if she could hold her tongue and mate with Nelson. Not just through the mating ceremony, but for the rest of her life?

“You’ve been focused too much on what he did or didn’t do,” Nana said, patting her hand. “You have some choices left, Zorah girl. Maybe think about what *you* can do.”

CHAPTER 37

Jake

The air was cold. Not brisk, not nippy, not chilled. Fall made its spiraling descent into winter with no hesitation. It was fucking cold, and he didn't feel a thing.

Shirt off, bare-chested and sweating, Jake wiped this damp hair from his eyes. He needed a haircut. A shave. A bath.

He needed a lot of things, the most important of which was gone forever.

It had been a month. One month since Zorah had ridden out of camp and back into her real life. Like the coward he was, he hadn't even watched her leave. He'd slunk out of the mess hall through the kitchen and gone back to his hermit life on the ridge.

Those first few weeks, the bond blared with Zorah's pain, inescapably urging his Alpha instinct to do something, *anything*, to comfort his Omega. He'd fought it. Harder than he'd fought his imprisonment, harder than he'd fought the night they'd taken Ava, harder than his fight for survival after he escaped, harder than he'd fought addiction and its alluring oblivion. He fought himself, repeating Zorah's words like a mantra, "The decision has already been made. The decision has already been made."

The days of her Heat, in the midst of a storm, had been a fever dream, a halcyon delusion, driven by her biology, his loneliness, and two primal natures colliding. In the still hours of the night, he convinced himself it was all a beautiful, terrible dream of moonlit kisses and pine-scented passion. Resistance had been futile, but he could never argue it was sound decision-making with an eye toward what was best for the Omega.

If it weren't for the bond, he wouldn't believe it even happened. But then, like a hand stroking over a bruise to gauge its tenderness, he would seek her presence through their connection to see if he could detect the slow breaths of her

slumber. She was there, tethered to him, diminished and withdrawn, and so very far away — both there and not there. Strangely, a memory coalesced in his mind, the experience of hearing someone wordlessly answer a phone call, knowing they were listening, yet saying nothing. A limbo, a perpetually open line of communication without any actual communication.

At times, the bond felt like a lifeline, the last thing tying him to her in any capacity. At other times, it felt like a cancer, gnawing on his soul and slowly digesting whatever good parts of him remained.

“Hey.” Leading a horse piled high with supplies, Colt crested the rise and reared back at the truly ridiculous amount of newly-split firewood at Jake’s feet. “You’ve been busy.”

Jake buried the axe head in the stump and reached for his water. “Figured you could haul it down to the village and add it to the pile. Temps are dropping.”

“Yeah, sure. Came up to see if you needed help —” Colt’s eyes pinned to the mating bite blazing on Jake’s left pectoral, shock splattering across his face. “What the fuck is that?”

Jake’s blood ran cold.

Since Zorah left, he’d been careful to keep his torso covered around Colt. Colt had seen him without his shirt enough times during the summer, so Jake figured he’d notice the most recent scar in his vast collection if given the opportunity. Emotional exhaustion and sleep deprivation had him forgetting to cover up when the Second’s footsteps trudged up the rise. He silently cursed himself for a fool.

Unable to summon a denial of the obvious, he stood there, pinned by the consequences of his actions. He couldn’t deny it, and he didn’t want to. He wasn’t ashamed that Zorah marked him. She’d done nothing wrong. He faulted only his cowardice and unworthiness.

He raised his eyes to Colt’s stunned and gaping face. “What it looks like.”

“But — wh — *who?*” Colt’s stammering almost made him smile.

Colt had come closer than anyone to discovering them that night under the dock, yet he remained completely unaware of the depth of their involvement. A testament to his sly little Omega’s sneaking skills.

“Zorah.” Her name took flight from his tongue, the first time he’d uttered it aloud in the month she’d been gone. The bond in his chest, dull and emaciated by the weeks of neglect, gave a lifeless twitch in watery recognition.

Colt tripped backward. Literally stumbled under the surprise of the revelation and bumped his shoulder into the packhorse at his side.

“You’re lying,” he said with more wary precaution than suspicion.

“Why would I lie?” Jake asked with no emotion.

Colt stared for a long minute, regarding him with neutral curiosity. Jake felt no shame returning the gaze, watching Colt wrap his head around the fact that, of all the Alphas in Morris Hill, Zorah chose *him*. A strange kind of relief laced through his petrification. There was no more hiding; it was all out now.

“Just so you know” — he brushed his fingertips over the mark — “this was all her doing. She marked me before I had a chance to stop her, because I would’ve. I would’ve stopped her. And, for the record, I didn’t return the bite.”

Befuddlement deepening, Colt’s brows wrinkled. “Then it’s not a real bond.”

Jake’s temper snapped like a dog at the end of a too-short chain, surprising him with his vehemence. “It’s fucking real.”

Colt, lips compressed in a tight line, slung the reins over a low tree branch and closed the distance between them. “You were there that night in the mess hall, weren’t you? You know her parents arranged to mate her to that piece of shit they brought with them.”

“Yeah.” Jake pushed his fingers through his hair, catching on the snarls of his unwashed and uncombed curls with cruel, savage satisfaction.

Colt lifted his chin in challenge. “I don’t know any mated Alpha who would let their Omega walk out of their village without a fight, let alone give her up to another Alpha. Why didn’t you say something?”

Jake’s shoulders slumped in shame at the unsubtle criticism in Colt’s question. “You heard what she said to Riddick. He asked if that’s what she wanted and she said the decision had already been made.”

“Yeah.” Colt thrust an angry index finger at Jake’s chest. “By her. *That* was her decision.”

The decision has already been made.

Oh fuck. Jake felt his universe shift on its axis. Had he misunderstood this entire time? Had she been referring to *him*? His head spun so fast he grew dizzy and lowered himself to the tree trunk, right where she’d gazed up at him and sucked his cock with pure, undiluted *possession*. They’d agreed, right on this stump, that he would talk to Hunter and that she’d give him time to do so. Had she... had she been honoring their agreement by not fighting her family and the stupid betrothal? Had she expected him to come to her rescue, and he just... didn’t? He’d abandoned her to her controlling family and that greasy shit.

Nightmare scenarios painted themselves in his mind: the cousin’s hands on her, his mouth on her, his cock in her. And not because she wanted it but because *he’d* made some bullshit, martyrish, pseudo-self-sacrificing, realpolitik executive decision about her future? Doubting his worthiness, he’d undermined her choice. He was no better than her parents. Jake lifted his chin to the sky, watching the tips of the pine trees sway in the frigid breeze, like judging witnesses to his cowardice and idiocy.

“*The decision has already been made.*” Yeah, it had, by *her*, and if the tiniest part of him deserved to be her Alpha, he needed to honor it. Closing his eyes, Jake steeled himself for a

fight he should've had weeks ago. It was well past time for him to stop wallowing in self-pity and do something.

Jake got to his feet, grabbing his shirt and throwing it on his body. "I need to go. I need to go now."

An upswell of restlessness scraped under his skin. Near frantic, he cast his eyes about his worksite, cataloging things he'd need. How far was River Bend? A week? A week riding or a week walking? Either way, a trip like that required gear, supplies, food... *God dammit*, he didn't have a week!

His eyes fell on the horse idling behind Colt. "Which horse is that? Can I take it? Can you tell me how to get to River Bend?"

Colt backed up a few steps, placing himself between Jake and the animal. "Woah, slow down. You can't just tear out of here."

"I need to go," Jake said, his chest tight with urgency. "I need to get to her before they —" The thought of what he'd left Zorah to face made him ill.

Jake clenched his fist hard, his lip lifting in a sneer. No one gave his Omega away to some sniveling, unworthy Alpha. Even if they did, he would get her back, no question. But she would be harmed in the interim, and he'd never forgive himself.

No. He needed to go. *Now*.

With a frustrated growl, Jake turned his back and stormed into the cabin, grabbing his knapsack and stuffing it with a change of clothes. He swept his sleeping bag off his bed, inhaling a remnant gust of Zorah's scent in the process, letting it fuel him as he charged back outside and down the steps.

"Jake! You can't just take off like this. You don't know the way," Colt protested, putting himself in Jake's path. Without slowing, Jake side-stepped the obstruction, but Colt stopped him with a firm grip on his shoulder. "What are you going to do, go in there alone? And what about Hunter? What about the Pack?"

Jake made to shrug him off, but Colt held firm and shoved him into the side of the cabin. The dull impact, while not painful, made rage roar in his ears. He dropped his supplies, fists balled and ready to go to blows if the Second stood in his way.

Fuck Hunter and fuck the Pack. At this point, he didn't care what they did. They could chase him down if they wanted to, but he was done acting like a beaten Beta dog. He and Zorah would start over somewhere new. They'd go to the coast, to the ocean, they'd go wherever she wanted, but they didn't need to be here.

Breaths coming short, legs braced for a fight, Jake looked into Colt's serious face and sized him up. Only to find nothing but sympathy shining in his dark eyes. No malice, no answering aggression, just simple, plaintive concern.

"You walk into River Bend and claim their Omega, they'll beat you to death while she watches," Colt said calmly, jostling his shoulder in emphasis. "What about the promise you made Hunter? You don't give a shit about your friend anymore? And what am I supposed to do? Let you ride out of here? Physically stop you? Go tattle? You're not stupid, Jake. You know you can't do this alone. You won't even make it there without help. Slow down and *think*."

The angry haze cleared from Jake's mind. Not much, but enough for Colt's words to filter through his fevered lather and douse him in reality. Love and determination would only get him so far, probably not even all the way to River Bend, if he was truly being honest. Colt was right, if he had any hope of getting his girl back, he needed help; but to get it, he had to face the music and deal with the promise he'd made to save his life.

Jake lowered his chin and fixed Colt with a resolute stare. "I need to talk to Hunt. Right now. And I need you to round up the guys who were there that night. The night I abducted Kess."

Hunter and Kess lived in the biggest cabin in the settlement, but six Alpha and two Omega bodies occupied every available square foot. Simon and Matteo lounged against the walls on either side of the door. Cal sat near the hearth with Della perched on his knee while Colt stood on the opposite side with his shoulder propped against the mantle. With the exception of Colt and Della (who refused to be left out of anything that involved her mate), only this small group witnessed Jake's promise to stay away from Omegas under pain of death.

Now, months later, Jake needed to thread the needle on a difficult task: convince Hunter to rescind this vow without losing face in front of his Pack in the process. To do this, Jake needed the group's acquiescence and, hopefully, their help. Or, if not, then they'd bear witness to Hunter fulfilling his promise from that chaotic night. In truth, it could go either way.

Hunter gave nothing away. Sitting in his chair, hands folded, elbows braced on his knees, with Kess at his side, the Alpha of Alphas resembled a tortured medieval king on a primitive wooden throne as Jake told the whole sorry tale of his doomed love affair.

Impatience simmered inside him at a barely contained boil, and he paced the floor in abbreviated steps as he spoke. Nonetheless, it felt good to talk about Zorah. It calmed him to say her name out in the open. Not hidden in the shadows or under cover of night, but to declare, in the unforgiving light of day, that he loved this girl from the top of her head to the tips of her toes and every freckle in between. So much braver and bolder than him, she'd gone after what she wanted, which, astoundingly, was him, no matter how unworthy or undeserving he thought himself to be. He told the story and fell in love with her all over again.

Chin angled to the floor, Hunter peered up and asked, "You really know how to step in it, don't you?"

Jake winced and gave a weak shrug. "YOLO, I guess."

Hunter's mouth dropped open, quickly followed by a deep, raspy laugh that shredded the tension saturating the air. The corner of Jake's lip twitched, appreciating the traces of a

younger version of Hunt, one who once smiled and laughed a lot more than he did now. With his story told, Jake forced himself into a chair across from his old friend, daring to hope that this version of Hunter could see past the pact they'd made that crazy night. Besides his need to rescue Zorah from her Pack, Jake didn't want to burden Hunter's life with the act of killing his former best friend.

Hunter wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. "I don't know, man. I feel like I'm on my fourth or fifth life at this point." He gave Kess's knee an affectionate squeeze. "But I think I'm okay with where I landed."

Kess's full lips pursed in a suppressed smirk, and Jake could've sworn he saw the golden glint of their bond shimmer in the air. After what happened in OT, Jake never ventured so much as a side-eye at Kess, let alone to be in a room with her. But, seeing her now, Jake had one more thing to clear up.

"I never apologized to you, Kess." Kess's wary attention slid to his face, followed by a watchful Hunt, who was no longer laughing. In fact, the entire room seemed to hold its collective breath. Jake continued, "I'm very sorry for what happened that night. For taking you, for scaring you and for... hurting you the way I did. I'm not gonna make excuses, but I lost someone special to me, a long time ago, and between the darkness in that alley and general mess of my mind, I thought you were her." He chewed on his lip, gathering his thoughts. "No, that's not quite right. I didn't lose her. She was taken from me, deliberately, on purpose, for no reason other than cruelty and control. And, the night it happened, she screamed and thrashed and fought, just like you did. And in my jumbled-up head, I was back in that moment, thinking we were running from our captors and you were upset by what they'd done to you." A stillness settled on Kess's face, nothing moving except emotion swimming behind her glassy eyes. "So, whatever Hunt and the others decide to do here, I needed to say that. Don't need your forgiveness, not asking for that, just know that I'm sorry for what I did."

Jake couldn't interpret her expression — didn't know her well enough to — so he wiped his sweaty palms on his pants

and shut his mouth.

Kess's throat bobbed in a swallow, and she reached for her mate's hand. "Thank you for saying that. I suppose if any good came out of that night, it brought you to our Pack. I doubt we would've found you otherwise, and I'm glad we did."

The poignancy of her words, the "we" and the "our," with the implied collective acceptance, struck a chord deep inside him. Jake wasn't stupid enough to believe everyone in the Pack accepted him, or that they ever would, but sitting in this room, at least for a few minutes, he felt it for the first time in as long as he could remember.

Jake cleared the ball from his throat. "To be honest, ma'am, I doubt there would've been much left to find. I have that to thank you for too." He glanced between Kess and Hunt. "Both of you." Jake flicked his gaze to Colt. "You too. I was a dead man; coming here brought me back to life. Well, and my Zorah had a large part of that too, and I know it may be too little too late, but I gotta go get her. Or at least try."

A soft throat clearing came from the hearth. "That's all very touching," Della said, "but there are larger concerns than you and Zorah at play here. Our relationship with River Bend, for example."

Cal patted Della on the thigh. "You're getting ahead of yourself, darlin'," he said gently. "First, Hunt has to decide if he wants to hold to his original vow as to what he'd do with this one if he ever talked to an Omega again." His mouth twitched in a semblance of a smile. "And I'm guessing he did much more'n talk to her."

Della's head whipped toward Hunter, sending her copper and silver strands flying. "Hunter, you can't be seriously considering..." Her eyes flew to Kess, then Hunter, and finally to Jake, alarm shining through the steady blue.

Matteo shifted his weight against the wall, folding and refolding his arms. "Jake agreed to the terms —"

Simon cut in, tossing Matteo a dark look. "Jake's the only Alpha here who *didn't* spend the entire summer dogging

Zorah's heels, and you know it. If he says he tried to stay away from her, I believe him."

Unswayed, Matteo lifted a shoulder. "But the vow —"

"Fuck the vow," Simon said.

"Stop interrupting me," Matteo snarled, low and menacing, and the two exchanged a few heated fuck offs and shut the fuck ups before Simon raised his usually soft-spoken voice.

"That night was crazy," Simon asserted. "We were blackout drunk, Kess was distraught, and Hunter was ready to kill anyone he could get his hands on. He threatened to kill Jake right then and there if he didn't agree." Simon thrust a palm in Jake's direction. "What choice did the guy have?"

Cal's chin dipped in a nod. "He couldn't have known he'd find his mate here. Fate works in strange ways." Cal slid an affectionate glance at Della and then caught Hunter's eye. "It's fine with me, Hunt, if you don't hold to the agreement. It was made in the heat of the moment, maybe we can take it with a grain of salt."

"Or a whole fucking quarry," Simon muttered and resumed his slouch against the doorframe.

Jake flashed him a grateful look. Maybe he should've tried harder to get to know the guy earlier. If he lived through this and got his girl back, he'd make a point to correct that. He glanced around the rest of the room, his heart swelling with the support voiced for his position. Kess. Della. Colt. Cal. Simon. None of them had any reason to offer him consideration or grace, yet, unbelievably, they had.

Jake lifted his eyes to the still-scowling Matteo. The Alpha had been one of Zorah's more persistent suitors, so he came by his sour grapes honestly. "What say you?"

Matteo tossed a dismissive shoulder. "I'm not one to hold a grudge; if Cal and Simon are okay with it, then I am, too."

Relief percolating, Jake turned his attention to their leader, the moment so close to being over, so close to being able to focus on getting back to Zorah. "You were ready to burn a city to the ground to find your Omega," Jake said quietly. "You

would've done anything to get her back" — Hunter's blue eyes turned to ice with the memory — "why would it be any different for me? Nothing's gonna keep me from her, Paul. So, if that's gonna be a problem, you might as well kill me here and now because I'm not gonna give up on her. Not now. Not ever."

Jake shut his mouth, awaiting judgment. He'd used his friend's old name, the one he'd used when they were much younger men in a much different world. That world was far from this one, but the Paul Hunter that sat by his side, drinking cervezas and eating fish tacos, wasn't different from the man in front of him. Jake wasn't the enemy, and he trusted Hunter could see that truth as well as he could.

With a wry tilt to his lips, the Alpha of Alphas quirked a brow at his Second. "I gotta stop making pronouncements about what Alphas can and can't do around here. Every time I do, the whole thing bites me in the ass and I look like an asshole who doesn't know shit about anything."

Della snorted. "Maybe that's true."

The group exchanged an easy chuckle at the barb, and Jake drew a breath, renewed impatience skating under his skin. "So... you're not going to kill me?"

Hunter lifted a brow. "Not unless you want me to. Is that what you want?"

"It's not," Jake said firmly. "And I'm not just saying that to save my own skin. I know you, dude, and I'm not sure you could stand yourself after doing something like that, no matter how nice your life is now."

Hunter's face softened, and he gave a little bob of his chin. "Della's right, though. This is bigger than me and you and Kess. I ain't gonna kill you, but you need to do one more thing: take it to the Pack, convince them this is a good idea."

CHAPTER 38

Jake

“It’s a huge risk.” Duncan, finished with his remarks, sat down and tipped his head toward Cal for a quiet exchange.

Side conversations continued in every corner of the mess hall, every Pack member present and possessing their own opinion on the proposition to retrieve Zorah from River Bend. The debate raged, unabated, for the better part of an hour with no signs of slowing.

Wedged between Hunter and Colt, Jake bounced his leg in unrestrained agitation. He’d given his bare-bones explanation of the situation — Zorah was his mate, he needed to retrieve her, and he could use the Pack’s help — but this circling discussion was getting them nowhere. He stared out the window and grimaced at the fading daylight. At this rate, even if they decided to help him, between organizing the group and gathering supplies, they’d never get on the road today. Every lost minute was a glass shard inserted under his skin.

Near ready to implode with impatience, Jake folded his fingers over his palm, using the other thumb to crack each scarred knuckle in grim sequence. Colt slid him a quelling look, but he continued to pop his joints, pointedly looking again to the fast-falling dusk. Why had Hunter insisted on this little community meeting? Like Jake had said in the cabin, he’d made up his mind, so if the Pack didn’t have his back on this, he’d sneak Zorah out *Mission: Impossible* style himself. If he acted alone, Morris Hill could disavow any knowledge and keep the peace with River Bend. An imperfect solution, but one he would turn to in a heartbeat. One he was ready to turn to right fucking now.

From a nearby table, Xavi rose from his bench. “Look, I got nothing against Jake, or Zorah, for that matter, but the fact remains, we’ve got more Omegas, more pups on the way, and we’re rolling into winter with a pantry not as stocked as it should be. Making a claim on River Bend’s prize Omega will

definitely cut off our trade with them and may even start an outright war. I'm not sure we can handle that right now."

"Come on, Xavi," Colt said smoothly, without any ire. "They're so pampered in their little enclave, they wouldn't know how to start a war with us if they wanted to."

"We dispatched the last pack of assholes," Sloan piped up from the back of the room. "Let 'em try and see how well it goes."

"We were lucky," Xavi said, narrowing his eyes at Sloan before sitting again. "You really want to try our luck a second time?"

Jostling at another table drew his attention as Grace got to her feet. She was a diminutive woman, yet the group quieted as she handed off her smallest child — the baby squirming in Zorah's arms that first night — to her mate. None of the Omegas had spoken yet in favor or against. Even Della had uncharacteristically held her tongue, but he intercepted the worried glances she threw in his direction throughout the discussion.

"Mate or no mate, we never should've let Zorah go," Grace said. "Those people are" — her lips turned white with repressed outrage — "horrible, to put it mildly. The women aren't allowed to have opinions or wear pants, for pity's sake. Zorah didn't even know how to stave off a pregnancy."

A few stifled, feminine gasps peppered the air.

"But how are we gonna replace what we get from them?" Logan levered halfway out of his seat. "Not just food, but glass and nails and clothes... all kinds of stuff."

"I don't know," Grace snapped. "But you think fucking *nails* are more important than an Omega's life? Her freedom to choose her own mate?" A chagrined hush fell over the crowd, and the baby began squalling for her mother. Without breaking Logan's gaze, she accepted the child back into her arms, bouncing gently to settle her. "Jake and Zorah saved Nico. We can't forget that. So, in my opinion, we owe them both to set this right."

With a dignified nod, Grace took her seat. Lars bestowed a kiss on her temple first, then on his Omega daughter's. Jake's heart squeezed at the display of familial affection. He didn't want to wish for it; he didn't want to tempt fate or risk getting his hopes up only to have them dashed again. He could wrestle down the blind hope, but the longing... The elemental yearning for stability and comfort and peace swept through him like the strongest undertow in the entire Pacific.

In his chest, the bond fluttered with dull, tarnished energy, a weak reflection of the strong feeling coursing in his veins. Could Zorah feel this? Feel his agitation and resolve? Or was it too late? He needed to get out of here. He couldn't listen to another second of discussion around trade issues, not when his Omega's fate hung in the balance. Jake knit his fingers together so tight the bones creaked and filled the bond with solace. *Just hold on. I'm coming. Soon.*

With a harshly expelled breath, Jake shoved his chair away from the table. The clattering scrape cracked through the room like thunder. Every eye turned to him, shooting his blood pressure up into the thousands. Being enclosed with so many people was tough, and all those eyes on him at once made him want to crawl under a table, but he'd had enough of this dithering.

"I understand the risks involved, but the thing is" — his throat tightened till his words came out like a harsh scrape — "after TheEnd, I spent years confined against my will, forced to do things I didn't want to do, live ways I didn't want to live. I *know* what it's like to be controlled, and yet I let those" — he pointed in the vague direction of River Bend — "*fucking pricks* haul my mate out of here like she was nothing more than a sack of potatoes." All over the mess hall, eyebrows shot up at his display of vehemence. But he was well past caring. Jake blew out an aggravated breath. "So, yeah, I fucked up, and that's my burden to bear. But I'm going to get her," Jake said quietly, "or die trying regardless of what happens here. The question in front of you all is, knowing what you do now, are you going to make the same mistake I did or not."

A loud throat clearing came from the back of the room, and Jake looked, surprised to see Riddick standing, the always-present grin absent from his smug face.

“Jake’s right, he fucked up,” he said simply. “But this is about Pack. One way or another, Zorah’s a part of our Pack, and we let her down by not standing up for her when they took her away. And we let Jake down when he didn’t feel like he could count on his brothers to back him up on this.” He planted his hands on his hips. “If we don’t fix this, we let ourselves down, and I don’t even know how we call ourselves a Pack anymore.”

Around the room, Alpha heads bowed in embarrassment. Jake regretted every nasty word or thought he’d ever had toward his one-time rival. The Alpha might be smarmy and over-confident, but he argued for Zorah that night in the mess hall, and he did so again now. For those reasons, whatever happened, Jake would be grateful forever.

“I know I haven’t been here long,” Jake said, drawing the Pack’s attention back to himself, “but this Pack has not only opened its doors to people who’ve made mistakes, flawed people like me, but it also fought for them and gave them second chances. This Pack takes care of each other and cares about Omegas, and not as things or possessions. What I’m asking is for you to really consider what one Omega’s freedom is worth. Not for me, but for Zorah.”

“This is bigger than one Omega’s freedom,” Xavi said carefully after a tense beat of silence. “The trade issues —”

“Oh fuck the trade issues,” Riddick spat, having none of it. “Are we so weak that we’re beholden to those soft excuses for Alphas? For fucking nails, Xavi? For socks, Logan? For buttons? Screw them and screw their trade. Morris Hill is a stronger Pack by a whole hell of a lot, and we ought to start acting like it.”

A choir of enthusiastic Alpha support echoed up from every corner of the room. Jake met Riddick’s eyes, gratitude cramming his throat. He dipped his chin in acknowledgment

of Riddick's support, and Riddick gave him a curt nod in return.

"Can't believe I'm about to say this" — on Jake's left, Colt ambled to his feet — "but I agree with Riddick. If the trade falls apart, I volunteer to go find some new connections. I'll ride up and down this side of the Cascades. Or beyond. Whatever's needed."

Jake shot him a speaking glance of appreciation. Colt gave him a lopsided smirk and a firm clap on the back.

Hunter raised his hand to stop the low-level mutterings. "I want to be clear about one thing. Winter will be tight, but we're going to be okay. There's more of us now, and while that means more mouths to feed, it also means more brains to solve problems. We'll need everyone's help going forward, but we'll figure it out. Together. As a Pack." He looked around the room. "Do we need to take a vote, or are we agreed?"

Hunter rested a supportive palm on Jake's shoulder, and Jake breathed out a long sigh as a chorus of "agreed" filled the room. Hunter flashed him a wry, self-satisfied smirk, as if the bastard knew how this was going to go all along. Jake glanced around, making eye contact here and there with all these people who knit the fabric of this community.

"Thank you," he said thickly. "I don't take any of this for granted." Jake's head pounded, and his stomach housed a solid lump of lead, but for the first time, his impatience began to coalesce into an actual plan. "So, who wants to help me get my mate?"

CHAPTER 39

Zorah

Someday, all this sneaking will be behind me. Just a funny story to tell my kids. Holding her breath, Zorah pulled the door shut behind her and stepped into the dark night. *But that day is not today.*

With a harsh breath of the bitterly cold pre-dawn air, she steeled herself against all the regret and indecision that circled through her mind on a never-ending loop. It was well past time for wavering; she'd made her decision, and it was time to go. Hoisting her pack higher on her back, she kept to the dewy grass rather than the paved sidewalks. It was still too early for River Bend to be fully rousing, but if someone heard her footsteps and came to investigate, her whole plan would unravel. A trading caravan had departed yesterday, and after some generous bribes shoved into his palms, Zorah convinced the Beta man in charge to let her tag along. If her Pack came looking, he'd promised to hide her in one of the covered wagons. The caravan planned to follow the river west all the way to OT and agreed to wait for her to catch up later this morning. She'd take a canoe and meet them several miles down the river. Not a terribly sophisticated plan, but it was what she could piece together in a short amount of time.

Life in OT was an unknown, and as an Omega, she'd always be vulnerable, but she would put the word out she was trying to get to Morris Hill and wait. The Morris Hill Pack regularly made trips to the outpost; someone would eventually come, and she'd demand they take her back. No one got to tell her where her home was, not anymore. Jake or no Jake, she'd felt more at home in Morris Hill than she ever had in River Bend.

At the mention of her Alpha, the bond gave a strangely pleased wiggle. It had grown more active in the last week, bumping and flashing with an odd, hopeful cadence Zorah didn't understand. At times, she could nearly feel him on the other side of it, thrumming with expectancy, as if he knew something she didn't, something that was about to happen. At

other times, she could swear a message came through, a simple wash of reassurance. *Just hold on*, it whispered.

Hold on? She wanted to shout back at it. Hold on to what? All she had was herself and this cobbled-together plan, but the quietly buzzing bond spurred her on nonetheless. For the first time in weeks, it was a sign. A sign that she needed to do *something*, and leaving seemed her best option. The chance of it all coming together was scant indeed. So many things could go wrong, and the thought of being hauled back to her village to stand, shame-faced, in front of everyone, for running away, *again*? She couldn't bear it. Honestly, she'd drown herself in the river first.

Harder to do that now that she knew how to swim.

No one here knew that, though. That fact laid the groundwork for the idea: take a boat, float down river, disappear into the Beta caravan, set the canoe free on the water, and never be seen again. If they ever discovered the missing canoe, they'd assume she'd drowned and never come looking. At least, she hoped.

Regret that she hadn't been able to say goodbye to Nana hung on her shoulders. Nana was no dummy, though, she'd figure it out and might be a little proud. If there was a way to take Nana with her, she would; but she couldn't think about that. Maybe someday she'd return and get her, if Nana lived that long... A shiver snaked down her spine at the thought of returning with only a grave marker left in Nana's stead, but Zorah packed it away; she was getting ahead of herself. First and foremost, she needed to get herself out of here.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. First off, with the nonstop rain, her boots sank into the mud up to her ankles. Every step became a laborious battle against the suction that seemed intent on keeping her exactly where she was. A quick trip inland to find a dry spot to leave her knapsack while she got the canoe ready turned into an extended squishing endeavor, which she'd have to repeat once it was time to load up.

Second, the canoe was heavier than she remembered. Tipped over to keep the rain out, she didn't need to bail water from the inside, but it was still long, heavy, and unwieldy. Oh, and also stuck in the mud. On her first heave, the oars clattered out, making such a racket her heart stopped in her chest. Fearing the worst, she squatted near the canoe's sidewall, trying to tuck herself out of sight if anyone looked in the direction of the noise. But in doing so, she managed to drag the entire bottom half of her skirt into the soggy mud.

Time simultaneously dragged and flew, and by the time she got herself and her knapsack in the water, the sky had paled to a dingy blue. Voices from the village reached her ears as she took the first few swipes with the oars, and she didn't dare to survey the shore. That would be too much tempting fate. Instead, she pulled in the oars, removed her muddy shoes, and lay flat in the canoe. The current was slow, but it would carry her until she could sit up and row without being spotted.

On her back in the cold, drifting canoe, Zorah watched dawn break and spread across the sky.

I'm doing it. I'm really doing it.

Freedom waited behind a series of obstacles and worries. Would the Beta caravan wait for her as they promised? Or would they take the bribe and leave without her? She'd promised them the other half of payment on arrival in OT, but they could always change their mind.

Change their mind. Like Jake had changed his mind. Because he had, hadn't he? The hurt ground into her very bones. Zorah laid her dried mud-stained palm over her breastbone and sought his presence. The connection bounced and glimmered, overfull with an energy she hadn't felt in weeks and didn't understand. And... she could've sworn it *reached* for her. Golden tendrils snaked between them, knitting together the ragged pieces of their strained connection. Each pulsation like an accessory heartbeat, one that pumped warmth and affection into her body rather than blood.

The feeling, so ripe and tender and *near*, caught her breath short. Her fingers fisted the layers of shirts she wore, trying to

still the shaking she couldn't control. Shaking originating from deep inside her chest, from the growing strength of the renewed light too immense to contain.

Zorah. Zorah.

It wasn't whispering now. It was bellowing, calling for her, clamoring for her, frantic and loud. What was going on? Why was this happening?

“Zorah! Zorah!” Not a whisper, a shout. A shout laced with worry and impatience. Not like someone wondering where she was, but someone who expected to find her and didn't. “Where is she?” the voice demanded.

Male. Angry. Demanding. Achingly familiar.

The bond surged incandescent, and Zorah scabbled for the side of the canoe and peered over the edge at the scene on the shoreline. A half dozen horses, some with riders still mounted, formed a half circle at the back of two familiar figures, although she only had eyes for one.

“Jake?” Zorah struggled to her knees, the canoe rocking and fighting her every move. She clutched at the sidewall and screamed back. “Jake!”

His wild gold and silver curls whipped in the wind, and from across the water, Zorah saw the relief in his eyes. His gaze unwavering, he shouldered checked Nelson and strode past her father to approach the water, stripping off his jacket and tossing it to the ground before bending to his boot laces.

He was going to swim out to her? Her heart overflowed, and a wide grin spread across her face.

Like hell she would let him do that.

“No!” she yelled. “I'll come to you!”

Jake's head shot up, already shaking a “no” but she didn't care. Her muddy boots already off, Zorah ripped layers of shirts off her head and dropped her skirt to her feet, ignoring the gasp of horror from the River Bend residents at her exposed legs. Cold air snapped at her skin, and she knew the first splash of water would steal her breath, but she didn't care.

The heat in the bond — coursing hot and urgent — would keep her warm, and on the other side of the river, waited her mate. Who'd come for her. Finally.

From the corner of her eye, Zorah spotted her mother charging down the hill from her house, skirts flying and face an angry scowl, yelling something Zorah couldn't make out. With a final smirk, Zorah took the plunge.

CHAPTER 40

Jake

A shocked uproar exploded from the crowd at his back, accented by Zorah's near-hysterical mother screaming, "Zimmer! She can't swim! Do something!"

In the long seconds between when Zorah dove in and when her little bump of a head emerged, Jake mused that the woman picked a funny time to suddenly care about her daughter's life. Or maybe she didn't care at all but was keeping up appearances.

"Yeah, she can," he murmured, still tugging off his boots as Zorah hit her stride with long, fluid strokes.

Each smooth slice brought her closer to him, and his entire body went on high alert at the prospect of holding the reckless little fool in his arms again. As it was, she'd be soaking wet and freezing as they rode out of here. She'd need dry clothes and boots and something warm to drink. How long would it take to get a fire going? Had he packed enough extra blankets? He pushed the worries to the back of his mind, things to be dealt with later. Much later, once he looked deep into her eyes and heard it from her lips that she would have him.

Their connection sang in his chest, as bright and clear as a morning bell, pulling him toward her like a compass pointing north. Pant legs hiked up, he waded into the shallow edge of the slow-moving, ice-cold river to wait. More raised voices and outcries joined the gaggle behind him, but he never turned, his entire life focused on the figure drawing ever nearer.

Twenty yards, then ten — his heart did somersaults — then five, and she got to her feet, splashing through the knee-high water. Jake ceased holding himself back. Two steps forward and he scooped her up at the same time as she jumped onto him with a force that nearly knocked him off balance. With one arm braced around her back, the other caught under her bottom, and Zorah's legs squeezing his waist, Jake sighed a prayer of gratitude.

“You’re here.” Her cold nose tickled his neck as she panted hot gusts of air into his ear. Freezing water sluiced off her clothes and soaked into his, but all he felt was the heat blazing between her body and his own, the bond glowing supernova hot. “You finally came.”

All the words he’d wanted to say, the ones he’d spent the last week rehearsing, flew out of his head at that forlorn “finally.” It was all he could do to grunt out, “Sorry it took so long.”

A shuddering sob rocked down her body, and he squeezed her tighter. “I’m still mad at you,” she said, her arms locked so firmly around him that her muscles shook with the strain.

“I know,” he said through a half-closed throat. “I fucked up and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he said again. He’d say it a million times, and it would still never be enough. Never enough to make up for what he’d done, what he’d failed to do, all the ways he’d let her down. “I’m so fucking sorry. You...”

Zorah unstuck their bodies and leaned back to look him square in the face. Brows and eyes, and freckles and lips, all her feelings laid bare in her perfect face and glowing in the incandescent bond. His chest ached with the bigness of it all. His feelings so huge, so vivid, so close to the surface, he felt both old and new in the world, and all the best parts of both.

Jake’s lip quirked up, the half-smile well-greased and easy now, thanks to her. “You fight so hard. You fight to shape your life the way you want it to be, and... and it shook something loose in *me*. It’s more than the mate thing, more than the bond, it’s *you*. Like, if you could fight, being young and an Omega and all the things against you, what excuse did I have? You’re *magic*, Zorah. You healed my broken soul and brought me back to life.”

Jake dropped his voice so only she could hear. “And then I doubted you. I doubted your choice in me. But that was *your* choice to make, I see that now. I was wrong to second-guess and think that I knew better, but I swear to you, it will never happen again. *Ever*. You deserve to make every decision and every mistake and do whatever or be whoever you want to be,

and I *swear*, I will do everything in my power to support each and every one of those choices. I promise, I will never get in your way again.”

Tears welling on her eyelids, she parted her plump lips. “Jake...”

“I love you, Zorah. I’ve never wanted or needed anything in my life the way I need you.” Clutching her shirt, he tipped his forehead to rest on hers, getting a lungful of her sunny, beautiful scent. “Whatever you want, we’ll do. You want to see the ocean? We’ll go. You want a house with windows? You’ll get one. Whatever you want, *whatever* you want, there won’t be a single day of my life when I won’t wake up thinking about what I need to do that day, that morning, the very instant I open my eyes, to make your life what you want, what you deserve.” The words, now unstoppable, poured out of him. “Do you believe me? Will you let me try, sweetheart? I know I don’t deserve it, but please, *please*, at least let me try. Please.”

Jake had long ago forfeited the bulk of his pride, but in this, he had less than none. He would beg, he would plead, he would prostrate himself at her feet in front of the entire Pack and be glad to do it. But Jake knew his girl. Zorah would never demand such a thing, it wasn’t in her nature, but he wanted her to know, to really *know*, that she could have it if she wanted. She could have that, and so much more.

Zorah’s cheeks rounded, and she gargled out a soggy laugh. She cupped his cheeks with her palms, holding him fast so he couldn’t look away. As if he ever could. “I just want you. I want us to be together, and I want to go home. That’s all I want. Just take me home, okay?”

Relief flooded through him, and Jake leaned in, ready to take her lips when the commotion behind them reached a fever pitch. A screeching voice shattered their reunion reverie.

“Put her down this instant!” Zorah’s mother barreled across the beach with her angry-looking father in tow. “You let that girl go, you miserable dog!”

Colt and Simon stepped to intercept them while Matteo, Alek, Dev, and Duncan slid off their horses, readying themselves for a confrontation. Jake carried Zorah back onto land, and she slid down his body to regain her footing. Matteo handed Jake a thick blanket that he wrapped around the soaking wet and shivering Omega, rubbing briskly at her arms until she gave him a sweet, lopsided smile.

Satisfied he'd prevented impending hypothermia, Jake tucked Zorah behind himself, not minding at all when she plastered her front to his back. He hadn't been paying much attention, but the shouting and accusations had grown. Jake's Pack brothers had gotten involved in some posturing and threats with a contingent of Alphas storming into the crowd. The noise swarmed his head, but he only had eyes for her parents.

"This is unacceptable!" Zorah's father's face turned white, then pink, then red. "I told Hunter that stealing an Omega —"

"Not stealing her." Jake raised his voice above the clamor. "Seems pretty clear she's happy to go."

"But... she..." The man sputtered, too outraged to even form an argument.

"She's a *child*," Zorah's mother hissed.

Jake's ire cranked up a notch, and he stared the woman down. "You treat her like a child; that doesn't make her one."

Scoffing at his answer, the woman craned her neck to find Zorah with flames in her eyes. "What were you doing in that boat, hmm? Running away?" Zorah tensed beside him, and Jake found her fingers with his own, linking them in a supportive clasp. He shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, ready to pounce, ready to react, yet he kept silent. He would defend her from anything, but this was Zorah's moment. "Sneaking away in the middle of the night? Is that the decision of a grown woman?"

Slipping around his back, Zorah faced off with her mother, her voice as flinty as cool fire. "I told you I didn't want

Nelson, I've *never* wanted him, but you don't listen. What was I supposed to do?"

Her mother gave a nasty cackle. "Is that what this is about? You've attached yourself to a no one, a low-ranking Alpha of a nothing Pack who has less than nothing... simply because he's not Nelson?"

As if on cue, a massive, pissed-off-looking Alpha, who was surely the Alpha of Alphas of this Pack, shouldered his way through the crowd. The large man, with a hard face and a serious bearing, possessed a wary intelligence in his dark eyes that was entirely absent in Nelson's entitled, tantruming face.

"That's my Omega." Nelson pointed a nasty finger at Zorah, and her flinch made Jake want to rip the man's finger clean off, along with a few other digits.

He didn't want this to degenerate into violence, but if it came to it, he wouldn't refrain from defending his Omega or his Pack.

"Let's keep things civil." Palms up, Colt addressed the older Alpha. "Harold, there's no need for this to get ugly."

"I am *not* yours," Zorah practically spit at Nelson. "I would rather *die* than be mated to you." She straightened to her full height, shoulders back, and jaw tight as she turned back to her seething parents. "The decision has been made. By me."

Nelson continued to protest, gesticulating ill-formed demands to his father and Zorah's parents and the crowd in general, who all, to Jake's wry amusement, ignored him.

Whirling to face Jake, Zorah flew into action, unbuttoning and yanking at his shirt. She didn't even look at him, her expression stony and focused. He would fight for her — Nelson, her father, Harold, whoever — and if it came to it, the Pack would do the same, but he understood that she needed to take this stand on her own.

With a triumphant final shove of his bunched-up shirts, she stood aside, baring the brazen mark of the mating bite for all to see. A stifled gasp rose from the crowd, and Zorah's father let out a rude curse.

Glaring at her mother, Zorah raised her voice above the clamor. “All I ever wanted was a *chance*. A chance to be my own person and make my own mistakes. But you robbed me of that. You knew that you had to make me feel small and uncertain so you could shove me into Nelson’s bed simply because you want to be in Harold’s.”

Sheer outrage pinched the woman’s face inward. Her mouth grew so small and tight it nearly disappeared in the white tautness of her skin. Her eyes shot daggers at her daughter as the entire village quieted, likely considering this tidbit of information, many of them shifting suspicious glances between her and the Alpha of Alphas. Zorah’s father rotated an incredulous face toward his mate, but she didn’t even look at him; Harold, for his part, stared straight ahead, his body stiff and unmoving except for the restraining grip locked on Nelson’s shoulder.

Undaunted, Zorah continued, her tone softening by a small degree. “Maybe you did it on purpose, or maybe you convinced yourself you were protecting me, I don’t know, but it was wrong.” She laid her palm flat against the mating bite, and the bond throbbed in recognition and greeting. “*Jake* trusted me. He listened to me. He believed in me. And he *loves* me, without any expectations or conditions, and with everything he has, and that is *not* nothing.”

Pride, simple and undiluted pride, swelled his chest. This beautiful woman, smart, sweet, reckless, and bold, he loved everything about her, and never more than in this moment.

Thin lips peeled back from her mother’s gums. “You will live to regret this decision, girl.”

Zorah didn’t flinch. “Maybe I will. But it’s my decision to regret. Not yours, not yours, and not yours.” She punched an index finger through the air like a needle into a balloon, pointing at her parents, Nelson, and even Harold in quick succession.

A collective breath-holding fell over the crowd at this obvious disrespect to the Alpha.

Jake shifted his eyes to Harold, daring him to react to the provocation. Giant, intimidating Alpha or not, he could come for Jake's Omega, but it would be the last thing he ever fucking did.

The quiet stretched and expanded, claiming the space where all the shouting and accusations vacated. The only sound came from the jangling of the horses and the rush of the river.

But the Alpha did nothing.

Satisfied with her victory, Zorah gave her family her back, rearranging Jake's shirts to cover his chest and abdomen again.

He raised his hand, thumbing over the soft curve of her cheekbone. "We done here?"

She leaned into the caress with a small tilt of her head. "I'd like to go now."

Jake dropped a kiss onto her forehead and gathered her close to keep her warm against him. "You got it."

Colt glanced over his shoulder, catching Jake's eye. Jake dipped his chin in a subtle nod. Time to go.

"Apologies for the disruption," Colt said, addressing the Alpha. "I think it's clear to everyone here Zorah's not being coerced or stolen. Wouldn't you agree?"

Jake bit his cheek to hold back a smirk. Getting Harold to state, in front of his own Pack, that they weren't doing those things would diminish the chances of Nelson or his buddies stirring up a pitchfork-wielding mob to come after them later. It was essentially getting the Alpha's tacit permission to take Zorah. Not that they needed it, but for the sake of peace for Morris Hill, it was a smart move by Colt.

"Yeah," Harold said roughly. "I think we're done." He angled his head toward Zorah. "Get that girl some dry clothes and get out of here. I don't want to see any of your faces ever again. Morris Hill ain't welcome. You can take your trading someplace else."

"This is bullshit!" Nelson sputtered and gnashed his teeth. "You promised me I'd have an Omega. You can't just let her

walk out of here. What am I supposed to do?”

“I’d suggest you start by acting less like a needy man-baby and more like someone a woman might actually want to be around,” Jake said, drilling holes into the younger Alpha’s skull.

“Hey, fuck you.” Nelson’s hands balled into fists, his chest puffing up in a caricature of male anger.

Jake gave him a long, cold look. This guy didn’t know how good he had it or how quickly that could change. As painful as it was to confront, Jake saw his younger self reflected back. Maybe not quite as obnoxious but entitled in his own lazy way. Jake couldn’t stand the guy, but he also felt sorry for him. Nelson hadn’t yet learned the lesson that nothing was guaranteed in the AfterEnd. Every day was a chance to lose everything all over again. Without appreciating the tenuousness of their entire existence, he couldn’t fully appreciate anything.

Jake smoothed his palm down Zorah’s blanket-wrapped back. Nelson couldn’t understand that sometimes, if you got lucky, you might have a shot at something wonderful, and even if it only lasted a little while, that little bit of something made it all worthwhile.

“You have a pretty nice life,” Jake said softly, “sheltered by your daddy and all these people sucking up to you all day long. But Alpha or not, this life doesn’t owe you anything, and everything you have, you can lose. The sooner you realize that, the better off you’ll be.”

A vein throbbed in Nelson’s forehead, and his fists clenched to white, but he made no further moves. Jake hitched his shoulder in a “suit yourself” shrug. Likely that puffed-up peacock wouldn’t have any idea what he was talking about, but he’d said his piece, and he was ready to get out of this snake pit. With an arm around Zorah, he led her away from the crowd back to his waiting horse, elated beyond reason.

“Now.” He smiled down at her. “Where do we get you some damn clothes?”

CHAPTER 41

Zorah

Fresh from a bath, wearing clean, warm clothes, with a full stomach and her legs reacquainted with the ground after riding horseback for the week, Zorah was ready for one thing and one thing only: getting plowed into next month by her mate. Which, in the days that had passed, had not yet happened.

After the confrontation with her parents, they hightailed it out of River Bend without any delay. Jake's arrival in the morning had been strategic, she later discovered. They anticipated the importance of putting distance between River Bend and the newly freed Zorah and figured they'd need some daylight to do that. Colt explained they didn't want to spend the night nearby, in case anyone felt tempted to change their mind and come after her. She, for one, was grateful for the foresight, and the trip home had been uneventful. Which had been fine with her because she had Nana to worry about.

Zorah felt a redoubled rush of relief and happiness at having her grandmother out from under her parents' roof. All it had taken was a question, first to Jake and then to Colt: could her Nana please come with them, too? Thankfully, Nana could still sit a horse, and her small, withered frame made it possible to ride double with Colt or Simon or even the mischievous Matteo. Zorah worried over Nana's ability to withstand the trip, but surprisingly, the old gal perked up once she got a hint of a new adventure. She made fast friends with the Alphas; several of them, Zorah learned, had Beta mothers and needed no prompting to fuss over Nana's comfort the entire way home. Nana, for her part, soaked it up, teasing and flirting and playfully scolding the much younger men at every opportunity. Zorah'd never seen her so happy.

When the group finally rolled into Morris Hill, an honest-to-goodness sense of coming home enveloped Zorah as strongly as Jake did at every opportunity. Grace, Lars, and their ecstatic children welcomed her back with shrieks and sticky hugs, and she got a very tight embrace from a relieved Rue. Rue, bless her gentle soul, took charge of Nana and volunteered to set her

up in the Omega bunkhouse, a solution for a problem Zorah had been too apprehensive to contemplate. There were no other Betas in Morris Hill and certainly no other elders for Nana to live with, but none of that turned out to be a barrier. Zorah had left a contented Nana chatting with Della and Kess in the mess hall at dinner.

Everything had gone swimmingly. Almost unbelievably so. Except for one, small, highly significant detail: Jake refused to re-consummate their reunion while on the road. The urge rode her hard the entire way, and she had no doubt his need mirrored her own, yet he'd been resolute. There was no privacy to be had while traveling and Jake could not tolerate relaxing in uncertain surroundings or putting either of them in a vulnerable state. Not until they returned to the safety of Morris Hill and the privacy of his cabin, he'd insisted. Also, as he murmured under his breath to her in their bedroll that first night, "I'm not about to share any of your hot little noises with these fuckers. Those belong to *me*." The growly timbre of his voice nearly provoked one of those lewd noises right on the spot, but she'd bit her tongue and suffered in frustrated silence.

Patience, though, had worn thin. When Jake made their excuses in the mess hall and guided her out the door to jeers and cheers, she'd secretly rejoiced that the time for alone time had finally arrived. The entire trek up the ridge, anticipation roared to life between her legs, her thoughts awash with all the filthy things she wanted to do to him, yet the burst of pure, wholesome comfort she got when the cabin came into view nearly buckled her knees. It would never be as elegant or modern as any house in River Bend, but the rustic structure held more positive memories than an entire childhood under her parents' roof.

Outside the door — a real door, with hinges! — Jake stooped to tug off her boots. Zorah lifted one foot, then the other, in silent compliance.

"Gotten a lot done up here," she said softly, tangling her fingers in his windblown curls.

He grunted. "Wait'll you see the wood pile."

She passed a thumb over his temple, hearing all the unsaid words in that admission. “You haven’t been sleeping.”

“Not much.” Boot and sock removed, he dusted his fingers over her ankle and bent to plant a humid kiss right on top of her foot. Zorah released the smallest of sighs as he lifted his face toward hers. “It’ll be better now.”

Gazing down at him, at the open vulnerability and absolute trust, turned her insides to a quivery mess. She’d dreamt of a Prince Charming, an Alpha with endless charm and unassailable virtue. Jake wasn’t that. He wasn’t rich or powerful or charming. He was flawed and wounded and working so hard every single day to hold himself together. But he was brave and pure of heart, and she loved him. She did. So, so much.

She cupped his smooth, freshly shaved cheek. “I love you, Jake.”

His eyes welled, and he turned his head to press a kiss to her palm. “Love you too, Zorah. Welcome home.”

CHAPTER 42

Jake

He smelled the fire before he stepped through the door. If he hadn't been so wrapped up with his beautiful Omega, he might've noticed it sooner.

"Oh!" Zorah released a surprised gasp, her hand coming up to cover her mouth at what she found inside.

Besides the fire, neatly stoked and waiting for them in a finished stone hearth, the cabin had been transformed from a primitive floor and four walls to a cozy single-room living space. A bedframe (and mattress), piled with clean and plush-looking bedding, replaced his rough bed. A small feast of bread, cheese, fruit, and preserves along with a jug of fresh water, rested on a small side table. Even a tied-rag rug covered the floor by the bed, perfect for protecting newly awakened toes from the frigid morning air.

"Did you do all this?" Zorah asked, lovingly running her hand over the pile of blankets.

"No." The sight of his girl, his Omega, in such close proximity to an honest-to-goodness bed got his motor more than a little hot. But he tore his eyes away to survey the room again, still in disbelief over what he was seeing or how to even understand it. His voice cracked as he said, "Whoever did it must've snuck up here while we were eating supper."

The Pack had done this. The Omegas probably organized it, but they'd surely needed Alphas help to carry the furniture. They'd gone out of their way to take care of him — of them — and that fact socked him right in the gut. The back of Jake's throat burned, tears of gratitude and deep feeling fighting their way to the surface. With a brusque wipe, he dashed the wetness from his eyes. Happy tears or not, now wasn't a time for crying.

"Jake, come to bed," Zorah said, her voice soft and husky and overfull with implication.

His head turned so fast he almost made himself dizzy.

But there sat his Omega, golden skin and bare shoulders peeking out from underneath the covers. Somehow, in his processing about the room, she'd managed to disrobe and crawl into the pristine bed and now regarded him with a sultry, half-lidded look that sent blood rushing to his groin.

He stalked toward her, pulling off his coat and yanking his shirts over his head as fast as he could. His fingers found the button of his pants, and he got rid of those, too, his skin prickling with the need to warm itself against hers. Placing a knee on the mattress, he paused to let the cold air of the room nip at him, knowing that in a moment, the raging inferno in his body would rise to the surface and heat them both to boiling. That bed wouldn't be pristine for much longer.

"Did you decide?" he asked, gently pulling back the cover and slipping in next to her. "About the mark?"

"Maybe," she said, sighing gently as he pulled her into his arms.

The swell of her smooth belly brushed against his already-hard cock in a womanly caress. *Fuck*, she felt good. Soft and warm and all his.

Her lips spread in a secret smile. "I may have an idea or two."

"Tell me." Jake bent his head, taking those smiling lips for his own.

He tasted her, citrus and sunshine, swallowing the soft groan she made as if he could drink the answer from the source. Her tongue slipped past his lips, licking into his mouth with hungry greediness. She clutched at his shoulders, her tiny hands and dull nails biting into his skin and sending arousal roaring through his body. They'd waited so long for this. Too long, and now the need demolished every plan he'd had for slow and sensual reunion lovemaking. Next time. Next time would be slow.

For now, his Omega wanted this, wanted *him*, just as much as he wanted her, and with that thought, suddenly, he couldn't slow. His hands were everywhere: holding her breasts, teasing

her nipples, massaging her ass, hiking her thigh over his hip to spread her hot little sex open and wide for his impatient dick.

At every clasp and pinch, she met him in kind, her back arching into his touch and her hips angling and bucking to grind her slit against him. She clutched at his back and grabbed his ass, pulling his cheeks apart and sliding a finger down his cleft like the dirty sex monster she'd become.

"*Fuck,*" he groaned, his head falling back on the pillow. "Don't do that, or I'm going to come right now."

He rolled to his back, bringing Zorah up to perch on top of him so he could look at her. She was a fucking sight: all glassy eyes, dark with blown pupils, flushed cheeks, and puffy, kiss-abused lips. Breasts, large and heavy, stared him straight in the face like two mouthwatering cakes he wanted to take a bite out of. Long, dark hair, shiny and perfectly tousled, fell over her shoulders and tickled the tight points of her nipples.

He reached up, rolling those hard nubs between his thumb and forefinger till she shuddered and her pelvis rocked forward.

"You're so far away," she pouted and reached for his shoulders. "I want you closer."

"Whatever you want." Jake maneuvered himself to sitting, his back braced against the headboard, with Zorah's legs straddling his lap and his aching cock poised and pulsating right outside her wet heat. The position, given their height difference, brought them almost to eye-to-eye. He kissed her again, murmuring against her lips, "Where do you want that bite, sweetheart?"

"Here." Zorah clutched his hand and brought it up to her right breast, the mirror image placement of his own.

Face to face, the bites would line up, yet another level of beyond-perfect connection.

He mouthed over the spot, sucking it and pulling blood to the surface.

Zorah moaned, and her head fell back between her shoulder blades, which arched her torso harder into him. Wiggling her

ass in his lap, the tip of his cock caught her entrance, and with no hesitation, she slid him inside.

Pleasure shot up his spine, and he grabbed onto her thighs in a small panic. “Hang on, hang on,” he begged, grinding his back teeth together. “Give me a second, or I’m going to go off.”

Chuckling softly, Zorah scratched her fingers over his scalp, the sensation delicious and distracting. “My poor Alpha,” she teased, rolling her hips in a minute, but very noticeable, circle.

“Zorah,” Jake warned.

He thwacked his hand on her rounded ass, the sharp crack louder than the blow.

Zorah jumped and, laughing, ground her hips in a deliberate repetition. “How about now?” she said, a slight whine infusing her tone. “I don’t want to wait.”

Taking firm hold of her thighs, Jake bent forward and licked up the space between her breasts before tracking over to pull a wide, brown nipple into his mouth. A firm suck, deep into his mouth, stopped her complaints. He brought his hand to lift her breast, hefting and plumping it as his tongue lashed at her swollen and sensitive nipple.

Apparently fed up, Zorah began to move, sliding up and down on his dick, the movement rendered smooth and easy and excruciatingly lush by the thick layer of slick pouring from her. Jake pulled himself off her breast with a wet pop, groaning into her skin.

Pleasure barreled, fast and hard, along his veins. Jake looked up, capturing Zorah’s eyes as they gave themselves over to the building peak.

“Touch me,” she breathed, snagging his right hand and dragging it to her center.

With a growl, Jake sought her clit. The swollen pearl, wet with her fragrant slick, felt firm and needy beneath his thumb. He made tight, gentle circles, delighting in Zorah’s shuddering sigh.

Her full lips parted, hot breaths gusting and quickening against his face. “Yes, yes, just like that. Oh *god*.”

Jake watched her, drunk on the turned-on glow that played across her face. “That feel good? You gonna come for me?”

Zorah made a high-pitched whimper as his own climax gathered at the base of his spine. Jake eyed the spot where he’d sink his teeth and complete their bond. Saliva pooled from his gums.

“Oh god, yes. Yes! Just like that, I’m going to... I’m going to —” Zorah flung her arms around his head and hauled his face to her breast.

Jake was ready, his teeth sinking deep just as the pulsations began deep within her body. Zorah screamed, pleasure and pain mingled, and Jake’s jaws closed tighter. The first spurt of blood sprayed across his tongue and ran down his throat. The bitter, coppery taste an accelerant to his release. Without releasing the bite, he grabbed her hips to slam her body deep and hard and fast on his cock. Release geysered up from his sex, seed shot into his Omega’s hot and perfect pussy, claiming her body as his own both inside and out.

With a dark curse, he unclenched his teeth to look deep in Zorah’s sated eyes. Emotion swam between them, expanding and growing as his knot swelled tight inside her, and the golden tether rooted in his chest threw off light like a newly formed star. It wasn’t different from what he’d felt before, it was the same, only stronger and purer in an indescribable way.

“We did it.” Zorah smiled, bright and beautiful, and laid her hand over the fresh wound. “It’s finished.”

Heart full to bursting, Jake cradled her cheek in his palm and looked deep into her eyes. “No, sweetheart, this is just the beginning.”

EPILOGUE

5 years later

Jake

The California sun blazed every shade of crimson, magenta, and saffron as it stole over the horizon and tucked itself to bed. The sky darkened and the air cooled, but he made no move to leave. With a smile, Jake set aside the project he'd brought along to work on — a fish carved out of beechwood with a long tail that looped into a complete circle. Made at Zorah's request, it would eventually become a teething toy once he got it sanded to flawless smoothness. It was a joke he'd even brought it to work on. How could he concentrate on whittling when the scene on the water filled him with such perfect contentment?

Toes dug into the silken wet sand, Jake reclined on his palms and watched his mate stretch out and float on wave over wave. Arms spread wide, her naked body lifted and fell as she squinted into the setting sun, her skin glowing in shades of burnished bronze and toasted almond. An insanely erotic sight if he'd ever seen one, he couldn't tear his eyes away from the rounded contours of her enlarged breasts with their darkened nipples or the expanded curve of her belly that swelled above the water, hoisting its precious contents to the sky.

"I like feeling weightless in the water," she'd explained the first time she stripped down to nothing on the beach, "without clothes sticking to me."

"You've turned into quite the free spirit," he'd teased. "Too much time in California."

She'd given him a perplexed, nose-wrinkled look, reminding him, once again, that while they were in the land that had once been the golden state, few remnants of that time or place remained.

Nonetheless, they'd made the trek from Morris Hill to these sandy beaches three times in the last five years. When the constraints of the Pack, with its growing population and the constant press of people, turned from supportive to

smothering, they'd slip away. Some regular trading routes had become more reliable and more heavily traveled, making the journey less dangerous than maybe it once had been. They'd hook up with a trusted caravan and tag along until they reached the scattered beach towns that had reestablished themselves on the reshaped shorelines. Some towns had started to vaguely resemble the sunny vacation spots he remembered from his youth, and it was in those towns they'd lingered, forging friendships with people of all varieties, Alpha, Beta, and Omega.

It was easy enough to integrate as, Jake discovered, there was always work for a strong Alpha who knew construction. The near-continuous expansion of Morris Hill had honed his knowledge and skills even further. While he worked in trade for food or whatever passed for money, Zorah took odd jobs: childcare, mending, and even waitressing at an open-air restaurant or two, including one that served nearly perfect fish tacos. She'd joke that Jake ate away all of her earnings, stuffing his face with them, but he knew she loved to see him sated and happy.

Tonight, they'd strolled down to the beach to enjoy one last sunset before starting the long journey north in the morning. Ever since Zorah had become pregnant, Jake planned to have her back in the protective confines of the Pack before she delivered. She would need other Omegas around, and he would feel better with Hunter's doctor skills nearby in case anything went awry. They'd already delayed too long, and the trip would not get easier as she got bigger.

Travel weighed heavy on his mind. The world hadn't become entirely safe since his dark days in OT, but parts of it trended in that direction, as people remembered, or discovered, the freedom that a safe society provided. As he well knew, it was hard to make a full life hunkered down, cowering against every potential threat every minute of the day. In his darkest, most secret thoughts, he might've been tempted to live that way, to hole up with his Omega and never fully integrate into society. But he loved Zorah too much to keep her from anything and everything she wanted.

As he'd promised on the riverbank in River Bend, he awoke every morning with the overarching goal of making every wish or whim of hers come true. She wanted to see the ocean? Done. She wanted to work doing something other than childcare? No problem. She wanted a home with more than one room, in the village proper, near the other mated Alpha-Omega pairs? He made it happen. She wanted a child of her own? Well... okay.

That last one had been the most fraught. Memories of Ava rarely surfaced now, but it took effort — *a lot* of effort — to stifle the anxiety that linked a pregnant woman with danger and grief. The fear, that despite the trappings of civility around them, that this child, one he already loved with his full heart, would be somehow denied to him. But he dealt with it. Breathed through the panic, soothed himself after the nightmares, and looked into Zorah's perfect face, and knew he would endure anything rather than deprive her of this wish.

"Hey!" she called, done floating and now bobbing in shoulder-deep water. "Aren't you going to come in? One more time?"

Without hesitation, Jake dropped his shorts and waded nude into the sun-warmed salt water. When he reached a deep enough spot, he took a shallow dive under the waves and swam to his waiting mate. Finding her shapely legs, he trailed his fingers upward, earning an adorable wiggle of her hips to the ticklish caress. He broke the surface, water sluicing down his face and dripping from his hair.

With a dazzling grin, she slipped her arms around his neck and snuggled close, or as close as she could get with her bulging belly. Warmth from the curve of her abdomen seeped into his skin, a luscious contrast with the refreshing water.

"I could hear you brooding clear over here," she said with a knowing glint in her eyes. "There will be plenty of time for that once we're on the road."

Jake laced his arms around her back and stroked up and down the pronounced furrow of her spine and the pregnancy-exaggerated lumbar curve. "You think so?"

“I know so. Besides, everything is going to be fine.” She smoothed a hand over the top of her firm baby bump. “This little Alpha is going to be strong and healthy and perfect.”

“Little Alpha, is it?” Jake raised a brow. “You feel sure about that?”

“No. Could be an Omega, too, and she’ll be just as strong and healthy and perfect.”

“Like her mama.” He swooped in, dusting her with a kiss as soft and gentle as a summer wind.

Zorah hummed a pleased note, her lips warm and sweet against his own.

Breaking apart, Zorah cocked her head to the side. “I never asked you: do you care? Boy or girl?”

“Not a bit,” he said with absolute confidence. “All I want is a healthy baby and my healthy mate on the other side.”

Her plump lips spread in a stunning, heart-stopping smile. Framed by freckles and lit by the orangey, golden rays of the setting sun, she looked like an angel. Maybe she was. At times like this, it felt that way, like she’d been sent from some pitying god to reach inside his barely-beating heart and breathe him back to life. He didn’t know how many years he’d have, or how many lifetimes he’d survived, but he understood what Hunter had said all those years ago: despite it all, he was pretty happy where he landed.

THE END

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Got heart-eyes for Zorah & Jake?

Sign up for my newsletter at <https://www.marloweroy.com/> for an exclusive Zorah & Jake bonus scene, plus character artwork, sneak peeks, and more!

Want to return to where it all started?

Read Kess & Hunter’s story in

[The Alpha’s Salvation](#)

and enjoy Jake's villainous character introduction.

Want to know what happened with Cal and Colt and that missing foot?

Read Della & Cal's story in

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xo, Marlowe