



Beta Lies and Cursed Lives (Cursedblood Omegaverse #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Everyone I touch dies.

As an Omega and one of the Cursed, I am feared and outlawed.

Volatile magic surges through my veins—an anomaly, a danger.

That I've never experienced a Heat only makes me more of a defect to be purged.

The Beta Council has ruled the world, oppressing Alphas and Omegas for centuries.

Betas control everything: they decide our mates and even outlaw the packs our instincts demand we form.

Our lives are not our own.

After years on the run from the Council, I'm captured, torn from my father, and thrown into an elite military academy where the Cursed are forged into living weapons.

Were trained to kill

Then sold to the highest bidder.

I never expected to survive.

I definitely never expected to find three Alphas who could touch me without dying.

Raito — the kindhearted tech genius who shadows my every move despite always wearing a blindfold.

Colton — the cocky bad boy who hears every unspoken thought.

Aubrey — the ruthless, mute warrior who wants nothing to do with me.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

“They’ve found us. We have to go!”

Dad shakes me as his voice pierces my sleep-addled brain. I try to process his words.

They’ve found us.

No...

My legs swing over the side of the bed, body on autopilot as I stuff my feet into my sneakers, grab the packed bag from the floor, and sling it over my shoulder. I’m already fully dressed—every inch of my body covered in clothing save for my face—and I head for the fire escape in the dark, looking over my shoulder for my father.

“Go!” he hisses. “I’ll hold them off.”

“No!” I shout, against everything he’d taught me in the last decade. “I’m not leaving you behind.”

My vision adjusts to the darkness enough that I can see his frown. “They’re—”

He doesn’t finish what he’s about to say before the door bursts open, blinding light pouring in from the hall and the flashlight beams that dart all around the room.

“Run!” my father screams, and I don’t hesitate this time.

A sob catches in my throat as I spin around to the window and yank it open. The moment my foot touches the top rung of the metal ladder, the building begins to tremble; the ground rumbles and quakes.

My father growls, low and menacing, before letting out a bark that would bring the strongest alpha to their knees.

But I know it's no use.

"Dad..." My voice is an airy whisper, a pitiful plea in desperation.

Don't do this. Not for me.

Please, don't give up your life.

"He's one of them!" a man shouts.

I don't need to see him to know that he's a GBE soldier. They're who we've been running from all these years. Ever since I found out I was one of the Cursed.

Ever since I'd killed my mother.

I continue my downward climb as tiles fall from the roof, narrowly missing my head. The shaking grows so intense that the ladder whines as its anchors snap and fly past my head, and then it starts to bend away from the building, taking me with it.

My jaw clenched, I jump to the ground from two stories up, trying so hard to remain quiet and unseen, my knees bending when I land.

The soles of my sneakers hit the pavement the moment another, nearer voice shouts, "She's here!"

Fuck.

I know this alleyway like the back of my hand. Multiple daily drills conducted by my father and me ensured I knew exactly how to escape if necessary.

After slipping through the Global Beta Enforcement's fingers for ten years, I never thought this day would finally come.

I pivot on the ball of my foot and dash toward the chain-link fence to the north, reaching it and jumping as high as I can, grasping the links with both gloved hands and using all my strength to vault over the top in one fluid motion. I don't stop when my feet touch ground on the other side, running out of the alley and onto the street, heading east.

Multiple bodies crash into the fence behind me, the rattle audible over the pounding of my feet.

I cross the street, the blare of a car horn making my heart jump as a vehicle screeches to a halt barely a foot from me. But I don't stop.

I have to reach the subway.

The ground is still quaking beneath my feet, and I take solace in that fact. It means they haven't subdued Dad yet. He's still fighting for his life.

Fighting for me. For our freedom.

"Find her!" yet another voice yells, this one just north and to the west.

They're trying to cut me off.

Another block, and I head south, back toward where I came, and duck behind a couple of dumpsters in the alley. The scents wafting off the trash are excruciating but provide some cover, like the bins themselves.

I fight to slow my breathing and listen for whatever sounds come my way.

Unhurried footsteps. Idle chatter and a loud female laugh that echoes off the brick walls around me. Then pounding boots from the north.

They're coming. Of course, they are.

My options are limited. I could just keep running through the alleyways as long as I can and try to avoid capture. Or...

My eyes land on a fire escape ladder down the alley.

I hadn't heard any helicopters in the area, but that didn't mean they weren't coming.

I have to chance it.

Wincing whenever my sneakers audibly scrape against the wet concrete, I scurry to the ladder and hold my breath when I reach it, listening.

The boot stomps are closer now.

I grip the rung above my head and pull my body upward, propelling myself to the roof of the four-story building in three leaps.

Once at the top, I keep low in the dark. That's when I hear chatter from below.

"No one's seen the Cursed Omega yet," one guy says without any urgency. "That

Cursed Alpha is resisting.”

“I heard he already took out some of Blue Team,” the other informs him.

Dad...

Of course, he’s resisting. My father wouldn’t give up easily; he’d fight for his life and mine.

They won’t kill my father unless they have to, and he wouldn’t give them a reason to do so, not if there were a chance we could be together again. I know this with all of my heart and soul.

Besides, the Cursed are too valuable to the GBE. The capture and sale of Cursed nearly run our global economy.

If they catch me and find out what I’m hiding, though, they’d kill me right then, valuable Cursed commodity or not.

There are only a few places the GBE bring Cursed after capture, the most common being the Korezak Prison and the Cursedblood Military Academy.

The more you fight, the more likely you’ll end up in prison for “rehabilitation” before eventually being transferred to the Academy.

The GBE doesn’t hide what they do, either. They always create huge public showings of their captures to make an example of the Cursed and to serve as a warning to anyone who thinks about breaking the law and harboring one of us.

Once the soldiers below are out of earshot, I crawl along the outer edge of the roof, staying as quiet as possible. Another fire escape ladder is on the other end of the

building, but I can't chance moving on the ground again. Too many foot soldiers.

I need to make it ten blocks to the east and enter the subway system unseen. Down one of the tunnels is a safe house I can lie low in for a few days to plan my next move.

My father wants me to get as far away from here as possible, to keep running and stay safe. But there is no way in hell I am going to leave him behind.

I scan the surrounding rooftops.

If there is one thing I am naturally good at, it's leaping. So I plan my route and make a mad dash for the closest rooftop, squatting down and using every muscle to spring across the gap. When my feet pound the roof, I keep moving, running straight for the next roof on my route and then the next.

Almost every day for the last decade, my Dad and I would run, lift, spar, and push our limits in every way we could. He would never let me rest, always preaching vigilance.

I was beginning to think he was overdoing it, being too cautious. I had no idea how wrong I was.

I land on the rooftop of the building I have to descend to the street from when I'm suddenly jerked backward with such violence it draws an unbidden scream from my lips.

"Gotcha," a menacing voice declares from behind me.

I struggle against whatever is binding me, keeping my arms tight at my sides.

“Bind and collar her!” another voice shouts, getting closer.

“No!” I scream before I can stop myself, but not for the reason most others would.

The man behind me moves, and I see his bare hands holding a small device they lower over me. My body jerks to the side when he tries to touch the device to my neck, but it’s useless. The other soldier arrives and holds me down so the one who caught me can do what he’s been instructed to.

The instant his bare fingertips touch the skin of my neck and wrists, three things happen, and I don’t know which comes first.

The small device lights up, and a ring of pure golden light bursts from it, connecting behind my neck. Large enough for me to see hanging past my chin, but too small to pull over my head.

Something cinches my wrists together uncomfortably tight.

There is also a cracking and snapping sound, then a deep chill in the air as the hands of the soldier that collared me, the skin that touched me, turn to solid, clear ice.

The soldier who’d been holding me down curses and scrambles away from us, allowing me to roll away from the frozen one.

An ice sculpture. That’s what the soldier is now, like something you’d see at a fancy party. Only this was a living man up until seconds ago.

His entire body, his clothing, his weapons—everything that touched him while he touched me—turned to solid ice. Nothing living is left; no flesh, bone, or blood. Everything is snapped frozen and will remain that way until what’s left of him melts away.

I know this because I have to. My father told me how important it was to learn about my abilities, even though I never wanted to. I just wanted the power to go away.

We'd never have had to go on the run if I had never had this power.

But unlike when I was twelve and discovered my Curse at the expense of my mother's life, no pain or sorrow invades my senses at the sight of the soldier before me.

If I could, I would kill them all.

I hear clicking noises and know that there are guns trained on me now. How many, I don't know; I don't bother to turn and look.

The collar around my neck can't be removed. Officials always discuss the collars on TV and the internet; how they track the Cursed wearing them and have an explosive implanted in the device to blow off the heads of any who try to remove it or run from authorities.

They've shown demonstrations.

"What happened here?" a new voice demands from behind me. It's male, harsh, and authoritative.

"She killed Adams, sir!" the soldier who'd held me down sounds both angry and disgusted at once.

"How did it happen?"

"He collared her, and she turned him into that."

Footsteps circle around me until an older soldier, his tactical fatigues slightly different from the others I'd seen, stands before me and beside his icy subordinate. He examines the soldier briefly before turning stony eyes on me. "You only froze this man. Why?"

My jaw ticks. The explosive device around my neck compels me to respond. "He touched me."

His next question is measured. "Did you freeze him because he touched you, or did touching you cause him to freeze?"

My eyes widen a fraction. He's more clever than I'd give any bigoted GBE lackey credit for, but maybe that's why he's in charge.

Despite my racing heart and the ringing in my ears, there's no reason to even attempt lying. They're going to find out everything soon enough. Almost everything.

"The second option."

His stubbled chin dips in a single nod before he reaches down with gloved hands to grab my bound arms and yank me to my feet in a move surprisingly strong for a Beta. "Do you freeze everything you touch?"

I swallow hard. "No."

"Objects?"

"No." My voice is air.

"I am going to loosen the binds for a moment. Try anything, and we will detonate the charge in your collar. Understand?"

My throat too dry to respond, I nod in confirmation.

“Good.” He does as he says and loosens the bindings, easing some of the pain in my shoulders and wrists. “I’m going to remove one of your gloves and place your hand on a scanner. You are to stay completely still, or else my second-in-command will blow your head off. Is that understood?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

As the soldier who’s apparently his second holds a small device in front of him, his thumb hovering over the surface, the leader’s gloved fingertips glide across my wrist to lift my sleeve and find the edge of my right glove. He slides it off with care, certainly because he doesn’t want to die. I feel the cold, smooth scanner flat against my palm behind my back for a moment before there is an audible beep, and the device is gone. Once he’s fiddled with my glove and returns it to my hand, he pulls my sleeve back down, and the bindings are again cinched tight. But not quite as tight as before.

“Miranda Amato, twenty-two years old, born in Sector Two-B,” he states as he swings back around to face me. “Your family name...”

He continues to read the screen in his hand, the blue glow reflecting off his chiseled jaw, highlighting the salt and pepper stubble there and the slight cleft in his chin. His eyes flick back up to me, narrowed.

My heart pounds, racing. What did that scanner tell him? About my mother’s death?

Those hard eyes blink twice before his head swivels to look at the soldiers around us. Then he commands, “We leave now. This one is going to the academy.”

"This one" is, but what about my father?

No matter how much I want to shout and scream, demand to know what they've done with my dad, I keep quiet. There's no choice now. I'd only make things worse for him and me.

"Yes, sir," a new voice responds, this one female.

Before I can blink, a solid cloth is placed over my head, carefully maneuvered so as not to touch me in the process. The whirring of a helicopter in the distance I hadn't heard before draws closer. The chatter of the soldiers grows louder over the sound, and the air grows choppy, shifting the cover over my head enough that the bright spotlight from above peeks through the gap.

As I'm guided to the craft, my head pushed down to enter, my body and still bound arms wrapped in some form of harness to secure me, a new panic sets in.

They caught me. I'm going to the military academy.

I don't know where my father is being taken, and I don't know how I'm going to save him now that I have this infernal collar on.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

Time lost all meaning. The journey by helicopter transitioned to a large ground vehicle with a noisy diesel engine, then to some kind of airplane for the longest flight of my life, before I was stuffed into another ground vehicle for the last leg of the trek. Not once had the bag over my head been removed. I was both frustrated and grateful that the fabric was completely opaque but breathable. Never before had I wanted to both live and die with such equal fervor.

Being transferred to the Cursedblood Military Academy was only a temporary stop on the way to being sold like cattle to the highest bidder anywhere in the world and used for whatever the buyers wanted.

Being an Omega would usually make one a hot commodity. Rumors swirled heavily that Cursed Omegas were put into experimental facilities and forced into breeding programs to find the perfect combinations of curses. “Perfect” being another word for “most profitable.” Although the Cursed are feared, shunned, and disowned, everyone knows that certain abilities are deemed more valuable than others.

While these soldiers know that touching my skin is a death sentence, they don’t know the whole story. And that hidden knowledge would get me killed if discovered.

The world had been at war long before I was born.

Instincts and pheromones drive Alphas and Omegas. Betas are driven by logic and intellect.

They say that the Betas saved us all; that Alphas and Omegas had driven us to ruin, and Betas banded together, rose against the tyrant rulers, and took control for themselves to bring the world back from the brink.

They say that the curse that afflicts the five to ten percent of Alphas and Omegas is penance for what we'd put the world through a thousand years ago.

But I didn't do anything. My father didn't do anything. We don't deserve this curse or to be hunted for having it.

"Close your eyes." It's the gruff leader of this unit who speaks, a Major, if I overheard correctly.

Helpless, I do as he says a moment before I feel the cloth lifted from my head.

"Your eyes will take a while to adjust."

I open one eye a tiny sliver, and he's right, because even in the dark vehicle, the street lights outside are blinding after being in the dark so long.

The Global Beta Enforcement might enjoy making a show of their Cursed captures, but one thing they never do is disclose where the academy or the prison is. So, while I have no idea where I am, I can feel the cold air outside through the car door. The temperature is like a siren's song. It's nothing I've ever felt before.

Most of my life, I'd lived in inherently warm climates across the south of the United North America, and this...this all feels completely different.

It feels like coming home.

The thought is jarring, considering my captivity.

My eyes open the rest of the way, and I peer out the window into the night and find that it's snowing. Each snowflake that falls from the sky does so with a joyous song and dance that soothes my soul and elicits a wonder within me that I've never known.

When my logical brain kicks back in, I realize something. Although time had been lost on me during the journey here, we had to not only travel north to where it was cold but also change time zones. It's still nighttime many hours after it has any right to be.

"Where are we?"

I can't stop the question tumbling from my lips on an airy whisper, my breath puffing against the window and forming a cloud of condensation in its wake.

The major is quiet beside me for a moment, as if mulling over what harm it could do to answer. "Iceland," he finally responds. "Daylight lasts under five hours at this time of year."

Early January in Iceland.

I don't know why they don't bother to tell anyone where the academy is located when it's in such a remote location. It's one of the only remaining neutral territories.

Cursedblood Academy has been around for centuries. Why the Beta Council decided to build it in a neutral location, I wouldn't know.

"We'll arrive shortly," the major says. "We will escort you inside, where the headmaster of the facility will take over."

I say nothing, watching as the street lights grow fewer and farther between until there are none left in the direction we're headed, and I can barely see those left behind.

Just where exactly did they build this facility?

I don't have to wonder for much longer because lights appear in the distance.

I don't know what I was expecting; maybe something akin to a different prison, flat and uncharacteristic. Instead, I'm met by imposing walls surrounding what appears to be an enormous castle. As we get closer, I see everything is made of stone, from the perimeter wall to the building itself, with its pointed spires and stained glass windows illuminated from the inside, emitting a multicolored glow.

Guard towers flank the entrance gate, and conversations are had before we're allowed to enter, then wrought iron creaks loudly as the gate splits and swings inward. The SUV is back on the move, taking us up a curved pathway to the front entrance of the building.

"Wait here," the major tells me.

I do what he says, but crane my neck to look through his open door to get a better look of the building before he slams it shut behind him. It's only a moment before my door is opened and the major's rough hand grabs my upper arm, still bound and now completely numb, pulling me from the vehicle and dragging me beside him to the vast staircase that leads to the most beautiful set of ornate wooden doors I've ever seen.

I fight not to fall on my face as we climb the steps, my body stiff as pins and needles circulate beneath my skin.

When we reach the doors, I don't have time to admire them up close because the major pushes them open with enough violence that I jump despite myself. But any fear I had is abated by the vision before me.

The entryway is grand and bright, a mix of carved wood and stone. Curved staircases on either side lead four floors upward, with banistered landings at each floor. There are enormous decorative rugs strategically placed about, glass cabinets filled with treasures along the walls, a grand fireplace in the back, and an even grander sparkling chandelier above our heads.

Several people wander around the interior, all with glowing collars around their necks, but only a few pay any attention to us. It's as if they all have better things to do with their time than worry about the new arrival.

"Ah! Major Tomlin," an accented voice calls from above us. My head snaps upward at the sound to find a man, an obvious Alpha by his energy, maybe a decade older than me, descending the stairs. His hair is medium brown, and as he approaches, I see that his eyes are a deep green that pops against his pale skin. He's tall and slender and quite handsome. But the thing that stands out the most is the fact that he, too, is collared. "I wasn't expecting you for another few hours," the man tells the major. His accent is British, but not like the news broadcasters I've seen on TV.

"The weather was on our side," is his chilled response. He pulls on my arm. "This is the newest recruit. Ensure everyone is aware that she's tactile and uncontrolled."

The man with the accent narrows his eyes at my bound form and tsks at the major. "Release her," he demands. "Is she the only one?"

"Yes," the major says before there's a click and a loud scraping noise as the binds retract from my wrists. I involuntarily take a deep breath and shake out my limbs a bit to try and bring them back to life.

The Alpha with the accent smiles at me with a kindness that doesn't feel fake. "I'm Andrew Laurant, the Headmaster here. I coordinate the Cursed recruits, sort of like a mediator between us and the Betas in charge."

Us, as in Cursed.

“Laurant has proven useful to the Council and the Academy. You will listen to him and obey, as you would any Beta. Is that understood?” Major Tomlin’s tone is brash, and I give an affirmative nod in response. “Good,” he continues. Then, his posture changes as he steps away. “Well,” the major goes on with forced congeniality, “I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

Laurant’s head snaps back to the major. “You’re staying?”

That vacant smile remains on his face. “I wouldn’t miss this one’s assessment for anything.”

With that, the major strides past us and around the stairway, out of sight. A moment later, a door slams, and I’m alone with the headmaster in the entryway, not another soul in sight.

Laurant takes a moment to compose himself and clears his throat. “Allow me to give you a brief tour, hm? Then I’ll show you where you’ll be staying. I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

He turns on his heel and heads toward the stairs, and I trail behind him. The wood is solid beneath my feet as we curve upward, climbing until we reach the third floor and stop on the landing.

The Headmaster turns back to me, his smile equal parts sad and understanding. “Miranda, is it?”

I swallow hard against the roughness in my throat. “Mira.” My reply is airy and scratchy.

“Mira,” he repeats. “It’s nice to meet you. I wish it were under different circumstances.” A small frown. “Let’s get you something to drink.”

He leads me along a corridor, the floor lined with an ornate runner of deep red, gold, and black. There are solid wooden doors along the walls, most of them closed, all of them with some kind of electronic lock above the handles. The few that stand ajar reveal beds and desks and even some people inside chatting.

“This is the first floor of our living quarters,” the Headmaster explains, sweeping his arm about the hallway. “The fourth floor is also living quarters, and where the faculty resides, along with the youngest attendees who transition here from our sister campus.” He stops in front of a large archway carved into the layered stone wall and lined with a wood border. “This is the third-floor kitchen.”

I inch closer to peer inside to find a vast open-concept floor plan. The main part of the room is filled with tables and chairs, enough to seat at least one hundred people, I’m sure. To the far right is a counter that separates all the kitchen appliances from the main room, a door on the back wall.

It’s completely empty, making me wonder where everyone is.

“Over here,” Laurant says as he walks into the room, his shoes making dull thuds against the tiled floor, the first location I’ve seen without stone floors. He approaches the counter and pulls a card from his pocket, waving it in front of a device. A little beep echoes off the walls, and part of the countertop rises up as the cabinet below it swings inward.

I follow him to the counter but no further.

“Are you hungry?” he calls from inside an enormous refrigerator while grabbing a bottle of water and then placing it on the counter in front of me.

Am I hungry? After everything I've just endured?

The answer surprises me. "A little," I whisper.

Those understanding green eyes meet my gaze. "How about a sandwich? I make a mighty fine grilled cheese."

At his words, my eyes fill with tears, a few rogues slipping from them and dropping to my cheeks.

Grilled cheese was what my father would always make me when I was sad. It was my favorite.

The Headmaster looks alarmed at my reaction, but I utter a "Please," and he stands up straight, gives me a single nod, and gets to work.

Grabbing the bottle he'd given me with gloved fingers, I twist the cap open and take a long drink. The liquid is cold in my mouth and down my throat, and this soothes me, not just due to my scratchy throat but it also lowers my body temperature.

"So, Mira," Headmaster Laurant says as he rattles with a pan and some cooking utensils. "Will you tell me about yourself?"

The question catches me off guard. There's only one thing he could be interested in knowing about.

"Um...as the major said, I'm tactile. Any living mammal I touch turns to ice. It just happens, like snap," my middle finger and thumb slide together in a whoosh of fabric-on-fabric.

Headmaster Laurant stares at me, his brows drawn tightly. "That must be..." his

voice trails, and his head tilts. “That’s your curse. I wanted to know about you . Mira.”

“Why?” The word comes out before I can stop it.

A small frown forms on his handsome face. “I’m going to be honest with you, Mira. Most of the Cursed who come here have aged out of our sister campus for young children. They’ve been in this environment for many years. They stay at this campus until around your age, and then they’re...gone.”

Sold, he means.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

He nods slowly. “I thought as much. I’m thirty-five. I’ve been in the system since I was nine.” The skin around his green eyes pinches, and his jaw sets. “I am Headmaster in name only. I’m really the academy’s counselor. I have no real authority. It’s a token title bestowed upon me because the faculty and Council didn’t want to lose someone with my abilities to another country or army.”

My confusion must show because he lets out a self-deprecating laugh before continuing. “Everyone knows it. A part of me appreciates the protection this position provides.” He busies himself with buttering slices of bread and manning the stove.

I clear my throat, unable to help myself. “What is your curse?”

He looks up at me now. “I’m an empath. I cannot read thoughts, but I can feel the emotions of those around me. It makes me a handy tool for those in charge.” He says the last bit with an edge.

Does that mean he tells the authorities about the Cursed who are disgruntled? Those who are angry? Because I am definitely one of them, despite my exhaustion and shock.

“Ah, here we are!” he exclaims, suddenly chipper while he plates the sandwich. “Squares or triangles?”

I blink at him. Is he serious? “Triangles.” My voice is wary.

He cuts the sandwich diagonally and hands me the plate. “Let’s sit.”

In a daze, I bring my plate and bottled water to the nearest table and place them on it before sitting in one of the four chairs. Headmaster Laurant sits across from me, his hands folded atop the table. “A tactile with your abilities will be forced to train for the front lines.” He says it matter-of-fact.

I already knew this. My father had prepared me, had warned me, had ingrained in me the necessity to never get caught.

What a fucking failure I am.

His words don’t ebb my hunger, and I take my first bite of the sandwich, the scent of which had been invading my senses since he began cooking it for me. The flavor is delectable, and I let out a long sigh before scarfing the rest of the half in my fingers.

“Does it meet your approval?” He smiles at me in that disarming way of his that I’m already growing accustomed to.

Strange since I’ve never been around other people long enough to grow used to them, aside from my father. A part of me is frightened by this notion. Am I already defeated? Have I already given in to the fact that I’ll be spending years here before

being shipped off to universe knows where and used as a pawn until the day I die?

“It’s good,” I say, my tone devoid of emotion.

I sip from my open water bottle, and he does the head-tilt thing again as he stares at me. A second later, my bottle jumps from my grasp and tumbles to the floor, water pouring all around me and on my lap.

“Oh!” he exclaims. “One moment.”

He disappears behind me, leaving me completely frazzled. That bottle...I didn’t drop it. I had a firm grasp on it, and it was pulled from my hand by some unseen force. I swear it.

“Here we are,” Laurant says lightly upon his return, dropping towels to the puddle on the ground and placing two more on my lap. He gets down on his knees beside me, one hand placed on my covered forearm. “I’m sure you’re very jittery,” he says.

“ We are always watched. Always listened to.”

That...that was his voice in my head!

My body goes stiff.

“You’ll get used to things around here in time,” he says aloud.

“ Don’t react. Just listen.”

“I...thank you,” I whisper, responding to the words he’s spoken aloud.

“Of course!” His tone is jovial.

“ Always keep your guard.”

“After you’ve finished eating, I’ll introduce you to your roommate. I believe you two will get on quite well.”

“ She is trustworthy.”

“That...sounds good,” I reply weakly.

“You’re going to settle in before you know it.”

“ You can always come to me if you need to talk.”

Laurant taps my forearm once before getting to his feet. “We’ll have weekly counseling sessions in my office until you’re accustomed to our way of life here. Once that happens, we can determine the frequency of your sessions going forward. Now, you finish eating. I’m going to deal with the dishes, and when you’re done, we’ll go to your dormitory.”

Conversation over, that was precisely what we did.

Laurant leads me down the hallway and down a bend to a wooden door like all the rest. The number carved into the heavy mahogany and painted gold was 332.

He lifts his fist and knocks three times rapidly, and a moment later, the door swings open, revealing a beautiful young woman. Her skin is almost as pale as mine, but a bit more rosy in the cheeks and neck despite the golden glow of the collar dangling from her neck. Her eyes are a deep chocolate brown, framed by dark lashes and dramatic smokey makeup, and her wavy hair falls well past her shoulders, the color of fresh blood blooming from an open wound.

She tilts her head, much like Laurant had numerous times when in thought. She looks at him, not me, and there is something in the air—a sizzle or crackle I can't explain.

There is something between this Omega and the Alpha counselor.

Laurant clears his throat, and I catch him subduing a smile beside me. “Nyx, this is your new roommate, Mira.” He looks down at me, and the smile returns a bit, an attempt at comfort. “Mira, this is Nyx. She has been in the system for over a decade and knows all the ins and outs. I trust you two will get along swimmingly.”

“Hey,” she says, her voice a melodic alto. “Nice to meet you. Well...as nice as it can be.”

I nod at her in response.

“Nyx, I know tomorrow is your day off, but if you could show Mira around campus, that would be fabulous. She has her assessment in the morning and will begin training the next day. Mira, your schedule won't be set up until after your assessment. I'll be sure to bring it to you along with some supplies once everything is ready.” He nods in Nyx's direction. “Nyx will be able to tell you what to expect.” His hand grips my clothed shoulder. “Remember what I said,” he whispers in my mind.

“Oh, and Nyx? Would you please bring Mira to the infirmary first thing tomorrow for her suppressant evaluation before the assessment?”

The world around me turns dark, as if I'm in a tunnel that begins to spin all around me, dizzying and nauseating.

Suppressant evaluation?

“Well,” his hands clap quietly, “I'll leave you two to get acquainted. Rest up, Mira.

Tomorrow will be a busy day.”

With that, he turns and leaves us, not looking back.

I stand in the hall, an awkward feeling overwhelming me. Never before have I been around so many people in general, not to mention Cursed. And people my age? Not since I was twelve. It’s been Dad and me for the last ten years, keeping to ourselves and not socializing with anyone for longer than necessary.

But I suppose that is the least of my problems.

“Hey.” Nyx’s voice is quiet and soothing. When I look at her, the expression that meets me is one of compassion and concern. “Come on inside. I’ll show you your bed and we can chat for a bit, if you’re not too tired.”

Grateful for her understanding, I nod again, enter the room, and Nyx closes the door behind me. The room is small, which I expected, and bare, which I also expected. There are two small beds against opposite walls with two small nightstands, each with a few drawers and a lamp atop them. One small desk and chair on the back wall separates the two beds. The floor is stone-like the walls, just like most of the castle-like structure, so the warmth is surprising. There’s an area rug that nearly fills the room, and it matches the ornate runners in the hall, dark with accents of gold, silver, and blue.

“That one’s yours,” she says with a gesture to the one bed that’s pristine. The other bed is wrinkled and disheveled. “They came by and changed the sheets before you arrived. One of the other faculty told me to expect you.”

My brow is tight as I sit gingerly on the edge of the bed and look around like I expect to find something of interest.

“Not much of a talker, are you?” she asks with a small smirk. “Or are you in shock?”

I look at her, and there’s no malicious intent on her face, despite the blunt words. I swallow hard and breathe, fighting to loosen my shoulders. “Shock, I think.” My words are a croak.

This is the most I’ve spoken aloud in years, always keeping quiet, off-radar, and out of sight. Hiding.

She nods slowly. “Where’d you come from?”

“United North America. They caught me in Sector Eighty-Nine F.”

She frowns. “Old Florida, huh? When was that?”

My head shakes slowly. “Yesterday, I think.”

Her chocolate eyes widen, almost comically. “Wait, wait, wait,” her hands fly up. “You’ve been out all this time? Your curse must not be too bad.”

I scoff before I can think better of it and frown at myself.

“You’ve been on the run?”

I nod in confirmation.

“How long?”

Remembering what Laurant had told me, both about taking care with what I say where and that Nyx could be trusted, I hold up two hands, all fingers spread.

Her surprise grows. “Wow,” she whispers. “That’s...wow...” She shakes her head like she’s ridding it of thoughts. “Well, things in this place aren’t too bad once you get used to it and learn how to navigate everything. They prepare us for life in the military, yet treat us pretty well. We never know where we’re going to wind up in the end, though. You just getting here probably means you’ll be here a while. I’ll show you the ropes.” Her expression turns thoughtful. “Tomorrow’s first major order of business will be your assessment. You’re going to go to Training Ground One and basically give a demonstration of your Curse for the GBE and faculty members so they know where to place you.”

A demonstration of my curse? What could they possibly make me do?

I must go ashen because Nyx hurries over to my side, worry surrounding her. “It’s going to be okay,” she tells me, her bare hand covering my gloved one. “It’s a quick show of your curse, and then you’re done.” She pats my hand before removing it. “Before they assess you, I’ll have to take you to the infirmary for your suppressant evaluation. It’s pretty standard, so you don’t need to worry.”

That darkness returns to the edges of my vision.

I have no idea what a suppressant evaluation entails.

What am I going to do?

There’s a faint scratching noise at my side before something taps my hand. I look down to find a paper there, writing upturned. I grasp it and raise it to my eyes.

I know what you are. I will help.

And then, she hands me a syringe.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Aubrey

It was the divine scent of roses and myrrh that drew me to the academy's entrance, but it was shock that kept me there, slinking in the shadows like a creep, watching her. The petite young woman with ivory skin, hair the color of a raven's wing, and eyes so pale they were nearly transparent from so far away.

She's magnificent.

And that is a problem.

"I knew I'd find you here." The familiar voice is filled with mockery and laughter, and my jaw clenches at the sound. "You smell that too, huh?"

I turn to Colt, all blond and arrogant and looking like a surfer, even in the frigid environment we're stuck in. His eyes, one green and one blue, sparkle with mirth as a smirk plays on his lips. "We're about to get into some deep fucking trouble. And I am so here for it."

I give him a warning look, which he laughs at. He taps his temple. "I know what you've been thinking over here in the dark, you pervert."

I growl in my mind, something I've perfected over the years just for this asshole.

He laughs at me. Nothing new.

"Look," he says, sobering just a bit, "our time's almost up. We might as well go out

with a bang.”

“Speak any louder, Colton, and the entire academy will hear you.”

And there’s the other one.

I look over Colt’s shoulder to find Rai, his snow white hair a mass of disheveled elegance, the ends falling beautifully over his black blindfold. “Tell me about her.”

“She’s hot,” Colt offers, unhelpful as usual.

I roll my eyes and turn back to her as she follows Andrew Laurant up the stairs.

“Hot” doesn’t begin to describe her, and I wish for the first time in many years that I could communicate directly with Rai.

Colt sighs with impatience. “Go on. I won’t editorialize, I promise.”

I look back at him, doubtful.

“I promise,” he reiterates, more sober this time, his hand rising in promise. “You’re always better with words anyway.”

I nearly snort, but instead, acquiesce.

As I sign, Colt translates for Rai in a quiet, almost reverent tone. He keeps his word and doesn’t add commentary.

“Her hair is flowing waves of ebony down to her hips, her eyes are silvery ice. She’s petite with curves you should be glad you can’t see. They’d compel you to do forbidden things.”

Rai lets out a slow sigh and keeps his voice just above a whisper. “It doesn’t matter if I can’t see her. I smell her. I can follow that flowery combination of rose and myrrh anywhere.”

“Totally,” Colt nods, his brows raised, his voice equally low. “Dude, I was all the way in fucking Training Ground Seven and made a mad dash here the moment I caught a whiff of her.”

I frown again. It doesn’t matter, I sign.

Colt lets out a loud “Ha!” and shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter, huh? Let’s see how long you keep thinking that.”

“This has to mean something. Right?” Rai’s soft voice carries in the otherwise quiet alcove. “I’ve never scented an Omega like this before. Have either of you?” His covered gaze flits back and forth between Colt and me in that unsettling way of his. He can’t see us, but like the new girl, he’s able to scent us above all the other scents around.

It’s always been that way. It’s probably the only reason we’re friends.

But I watch Colt frown, his brows drawn in thought, and I know that like Rai and me, he’s never scented an Omega like this either.

Meaning is meaningless in a hellhole like this, though. If these bastards discovered something was going on, that one of us, not to mention three Cursed Alphas, were drawn to a Cursed Omega, they’d kill us all.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

“This is the infirmary.” Nyx gestures to the open doorway beside her. “Remember what I said,” she whispers as I pass.

There’s no way that I would forget her instructions.

“Doctor Gayle!” she calls as she takes the lead.

The room looks like an ordinary hospital ward, far separated from the ancient stone and wood where we just came from. White floors, pale blue walls, about six beds with drawn curtains in dark blue. In the back of the room is a desk where a woman sits, her attention on her computer monitor. Her hair, nearly all gray, is pulled up high on the back of her head, and her dark blue eyes peer around the side of the screen before she smiles kindly at Nyx.

“Nyxeris!” The doctor rises from her chair, and a strong floral scent floats my way. This is an Omega, but her lack of collar indicates she’s not Cursed. When she turns her smile to me, her head inclines. “I’m Gayle Jónsdóttir, the nurse in this facility. You must be Miranda Amato.”

Despite pronouncing her surname like a native Scandinavian, she doesn’t speak with a discernible accent. She could have been born and raised down the street from me in UNA.

I nod in confirmation, and Gayle’s smile turns consoling.

“I can’t begin to imagine how overwhelming this is for you, dear. I promise to make this visit as swift and as painless as possible.” She gestures to the nearest bed. “Take a seat, please.” She reaches for something on her desk as I sit on the edge of the bed. When she returns to my side, she holds an electronic tablet. The screen is clear glass, and the information that lights it up appears backward on my side. A photo of my face, some basic information like my age and height. Her fingers dance across the screen nimbly, and the information scrolls as she begins to ask questions.

“You’re an uncontrolled tactile, yes?”

“Yes.”

“All right, and when was the last time you administered a suppressant?”

I swallow. “Just before...I came here.”

She doesn’t look up from her tapping. “Excellent. I’m going to draw some blood and do a few tests. This will only take a moment.” She looks at me then. “If you would, please, unzip your sweatshirt and expose one arm.”

I do as she says while she puts on gloves and grabs some other instruments from a nearby table. Before I know it, she’s put a tourniquet on my upper arm, drawn a few vials of blood, removed the tourniquet, and put a bandage around my elbow. I put my arm back through the sleeve and zip up while the doctor takes my blood to a machine across the room.

Nyx stands beside me, like she’s lending me strength, while we wait. For what, I’m not entirely sure until minutes pass and Doctor Gayle is back on her tablet, tapping away and scrolling. She smiles up at me, her face illuminated in the screen’s blue glow. “We’re all set here,” she says. “I’m assigning you a date to return for your next suppressant dosage, which will be on the tablet you’ll be given before lights out. All

your other tests look good. You're in perfect health." Her smile is wide and kind.

I let out a long breath and am suddenly aware of the heightened anxiety that had been flowing through me. When I slide off the bed, I land on wobbly legs but feel physically lighter.

It worked.

"Thanks, Doctor Gayle!" Nyx says, sounding chipper. She places her hand on my back and guides me out of the infirmary and into the hall. "Good job," she whispers. "Now that's over, it's time for your assessment."

Training Ground One is an indoor facility, vast with mostly glass walls and a solid domed ceiling.

Nyx walked me all the way and then went off on her own, assuring me she'd see me that evening.

Now, I stand alone in the center of this vast room, strangers, mostly in military uniforms and lab coats, standing along the far wall. Headmaster Laurant is there, too, as is Major Tomlin.

Oh, and something tall covered in a sheet is just a few feet to my left. I don't know what it is, but it's square at the top.

The discomfort invading my senses raises my anxiety.

One of the men in a white coat steps forward and says in a loud, commanding voice, "Remove the sheet."

I look around to confirm that I'm the only one around the thing.

I am.

My feet move slow and rigidly closer to the object, and I grasp the sheet, slowly pulling it from what it's obscuring.

I can't even react to what I find. My brain kicks into overdrive because I know...I know exactly what they intend me to do.

Beneath the sheet is a cage atop a pedestal. Inside the cage is a small, white rabbit. It looks at me with dark, frightened eyes, that fear surely reflected in my own.

“Remove your gloves and touch the animal.”

My head whips to the lab coat guy with the white hair and thick glasses, the same one who commanded me to remove the sheet.

He's out of his fucking mind.

“No.”

The word leaves my mouth before my brain catches up, but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what they do to me or threaten me with. I am not going to kill a defenseless animal to sate their curiosity.

I just killed a full-grown man, for the love of the universe! They know full well what I am capable of.

The man frowns, his electronic clipboard tight in his grasp. “This is not a request. It is a requirement. If you do not comply—”

“Leave us.” Major Tomlin's tone leaves no room for argument, although the lab-

coated man looks severely outraged.

Everyone files out the door, save a couple of soldiers who remain just inside the facility guarding the doorway. My heart rate spikes as the major approaches me, his expression neutral.

There's no telling what he wants. Betas can't be trusted, especially those in the GBE.

His next words surprise me.

"I'm an animal lover myself." He looks over at the cage and the snowy white hare within, a small frown playing on his otherwise stoic face. "I told them not to do this, but I find that scientists care very little for life." His stony eyes land on me, and my heart skips with fear. "Regardless of predator or prey, animals are innocent by nature. People are not."

He stands before me now, leaning in just enough for me to hear his whispered words. "There's something I must tell you, Miranda. About your father."

My body goes rigid at the mention of my dad, fear washing over my senses. What's happened to him?

"He fought hard. So hard that a call was made I don't see often."

I look him square in his eyes, my brow drawn tight in question.

His voice becomes softer, quieter. "They didn't send him to Korezak. They sent him to Tenebrosa."

As the room spins, I go deaf, and then a distant, high-pitched whine pierces my eardrums.

I'm going to faint right in front of these monsters.

Tenebrosa...the facility they send Cursed to who are never heard from again. The facility where the Cursed are experimented on in an attempt to figure out why we are the way we are. A place, rumor claims, that Cursed are tortured in ways unimaginable.

Major Tomlin's airy voice breaks through the whine in my ears. "The Beta who made that call is here."

Everything stops at his words. I look back at him now with a bubbling rage. "You?" I whisper-spit.

His head shakes in a negative response. "The one who just commanded you to kill this innocent creature. I will bring him back in here. To you."

"For what?"

A fierce anger flashes across his gaze. "The Council has given him far too much power. He lives in lawlessness." His words are spat like quiet bullets. "I loathe the man. He doesn't deserve the authority he's been given." Tomlin's eyes narrow on me. "He came here only because you are your father's offspring."

A jolt passes through my bones. "Why—?"

"He wants to know if you're as powerful as he is, of course." He lets that sink in a moment before continuing. "If he wants you in his facility, Miranda, I cannot stop it from happening."

Fear blazes in my soul. "How would bringing him here—?"

“One touch from you,” he cuts me off, “I get what I want, and you get revenge while proving your power to the faculty.”

“They’ll kill me.”

He tsks and shoots me a dubious look. “Have you ever killed before the solider who captured you?”

I don’t answer, but he knows the truth. I must give it away with some facial twitch.

“On purpose?”

My head shakes no without me meaning to.

“You will be forced into battle soon enough, Mira. Your abilities mean you’ll be a melee combatant, looking your enemies in the eye as you take their lives. And you will do it. If you don’t, it will be your life that’s forfeit.”

Acid forms in the back of my throat, scratching and irritating the flesh.

What he says is true. I’ve always known it, and yet...

“Allow me to give your first purposeful kill meaning.” His head tilts as he looks down at me. “This scientist’s cruelty is only surpassed by those on the Council. He’s defenseless without his security detail, and that detail answers to me.” The smile that stretches across his face is twisted. “Once he is gone, I will persuade the Council to instate one of mine as the head researcher at the facility. They’ll have no choice. Do as I say, and I will have your father transferred to the prison as soon as possible. A far better fate than awaits him now, and the possibility of future release into the armed forces. If he behaves.”

My back shoots up ramrod straight. There's no way I can trust this man. Can I? Yet he seems hellbent on this Beta dying.

"Why can't you do it?"

"If I did it, my loyalty would be questioned. I wouldn't be able to put someone I trust in charge of the facility."

I give him a disbelieving look. "And me doing your dirty work would make a difference?"

"Would you prefer your father to stay in Tenebrosa?" his tone is harsh. "Experimented on for the rest of his life, which will end prematurely, I promise you." He takes a step closer, so close that I lean back out of habit to avoid possible contact. "This man cuts Cursed open, removes organs and limbs. Without anesthesia."

That acid fills my mouth now, forcing me to spit on the floor before gulping for air.

I can't let my father endure that. Not when I have a chance to possibly save him from this fate.

"I see you understand now." He steps away from me, his hands clasped behind his back. "Do this, Miranda. Help us both. Help your father."

I must be out of my mind because I believe him.

But can I purposely kill someone?

Visions of my childhood flash in my brain: of my mother shouting at me in anger because I wouldn't go with her to the store without my father. Of me screaming that I hated her. Of her hand coming down to slap my face. The moment it connected with

my skin, that unmistakable crackling as she snap-froze before my eyes, right in the middle of my bedroom. How my father came running into the room at the ruckus, finding me there, mute and gaping at the ice sculpture that was once my mother. The look of fear in his eyes as he assessed what had happened. How I screamed at him not to touch me and backed away when he tried to embrace me.

My father, who gave up his entire life to keep me safe. Out of love. Out of guilt.

How could I not do this for him?

Tears swim in my vision as I look at Major Tomlin, my jaw set with decision and rage.

I say nothing. There's no need to.

Tomlin gives a slow affirmative nod and turns to the soldiers guarding the doorway. "Bring in Dr. Ness. No one else."

One soldier claps his heels and salutes before leaving. He returns only a moment later with the old man with the hook-nose and glasses in the white lab coat. His severe face goes more sour at the sight of Tomlin beside me.

"What's the meaning of this, Major?"

"I've convinced the subject to give you a personal demonstration of her curse."

This brings an odd glimmer to the old man's eyes, and I know instantly that everything Tomlin has said is true. The cruelty there is something I have only ever seen on TV when the Council gives their bloated speeches and tells the world how they're keeping us all safe from the vile Cursed.

“Is that so?” As he approaches, he pushes his glasses up his nose and grins. He fucking smiles like a sadist.

Tomlin looks at me and asks, “Are you ready?”

His question holds meaning the scientist isn’t privy to. The moment he finishes speaking, my gloves are on the floor, and I rush the old man with all the power my legs can give after the emotional duress of the past couple of days. I double-fist him in the gut so hard he flies backward with a silent cry, the air pummeled out of his slight frame.

I want him to suffer. For what he wants to do to my dad. For what he likely wants to do to me. For what he has already done to countless others. But somewhere in my enraged brain, my self-preservation still lives on. I can’t allow him to alert anyone of what’s happening until it’s already done.

I give Dr. Ness no time to recover before I’m on him, my bare hands wrapped around his scrawny neck in a vice-grip that’s wholly unsatisfying since his body does what everyone’s does at my touch: snaps to solid ice in a blink.

My breath comes ragged and fast as I seethe down at the clear face below me, little delicate glasses still somehow on his nose after the initial blow I’d given him.

I’ve never been so angry, yet so elated.

And that scares me shitless.

“Excellent work, Miranda,” Major Tomlin says as my gloves land on the floor beside me. “Bring in the rest of the faculty,” he calls, I assume to the soldiers, as I climb off the block of ice that was once a vile bastard.

I don't look at the doorway or the people returning as I hear their footsteps. I glove my hands, my heart beating hard and fast.

Am I a monster? I can't be any worse than that doctor was, can I?

"What the hell is going on here?" a female voice shrills. "What has the subject done?"

"What I commanded her to do." Tomlin's voice booms through the building, met with silence.

A part of me is surprised that he told the truth. That same small part of me that was sure he would send me to my death after doing his bidding. But he stayed true to his word, for now.

"You may examine the late doctor's body and find your answers. The soldier's body turned to puddles within a few hours, so document and take your samples quickly." The major approaches me and grips my upper arm with far more delicate care than he had last night. "Laurant," he calls, and the headmaster's stricken face looks up at him. "I have things I must attend to immediately. I want you to take Miss Amato to release the hare into the wild."

My head snaps to Tomlin's face above me, pure shock coursing through me. He's allowing me to set the rabbit free? Why?

His lips get dangerously close to my ear as if he could hear my unspoken question. "I told you I love animals." He straightens then as Headmaster Laurant approaches us, his expression still shellshocked and also worried. "I have promises to keep," Tomlin says cryptically as he steps away.

A moment later, I'm holding the caged creature as Major Tomlin exits the building

with his soldiers, leaving me with the faculty, security, headmaster, and whirling thoughts.

There's no way that this plays out exactly as Tomlin promised. Right?

Laurant's hand touches my forearm. "Come with me," he says aloud before saying in my mind, "Speak freely in the car."

As he leads me to the doorway, I feel eyes on me while everyone else clamors around the doctor's body, swabbing and photographing and doing whatever it is these people do. When I raise my gaze to find the source of heat on my face, I'm met with a sight that steals my breath.

A young man with snow white hair, straight yet wild about the top of his head and falling over his forehead into his eyes, which are wrapped tight with a red blindfold, the tails cascading over one of his shoulders. His skin is creamy, his frame tall and lean, wrapped in all black clothing. Despite the covering on his eyes, it's as if he can see me clear as day.

It's when that thought strikes me that my senses are overloaded by the most glorious scent, like smoky cherry blossoms, something I have never encountered before.

The young man's head follows the headmaster and me as we pass through the door, and I find myself craning my neck to keep looking at him until I'm unable to.

The sense of loss is...concerning.

"Raito." Laurant says the word in my head I jolt back to attention. "His name is Raito."

Raito...

I'd never heard the name before, and to say I was intrigued was an understatement. What I didn't know was why.

I clutch the cage tighter to my chest and try my best not to jostle the small rabbit within.

The headmaster releases my forearm and says, "This way," gesturing to our right when my feet touch the paved walkway.

It isn't long before we reach an open lot with several all-terrain vehicles, many of them new and glossy in the sunlight. I follow him to a smaller SUV, and when he opens the back hatch, I gently place the cage inside. Laurant uses a tie-down to secure it, and a grateful feeling wells inside me.

I still can't look at him. This kind man who I just met...what he must think of me now.

He gets behind the wheel, and I climb into the passenger seat.

The roads we traverse in silence are narrow but paved until we reach a dirt path that diverts off the main road.

Laurant stops the vehicle, and I follow him to the back, where he opens the hatch and lifts the cage before handing it to me.

"This way," he says, gesturing to the denser woods ahead.

I follow again until he stops and says, "This looks like a good place."

I look at him then, his profile, as he looks into the trees, a near-wistful expression on his face. There's a touch of longing there as well. For freedom lost, I think. And I

understand that more than I can express.

I may not have been in the academy longer than a day, but my life has never been my own. Not even before I was on the run.

I look at the little rabbit behind metal bars and wish I could feel its fur beneath my fingertips. To know, just once, its soft, silky feel before we part ways.

But it will never be.

With great care, I lower the cage to the ground and gently place it there, the door facing away from me.

“Okay, little guy,” I whisper as I grip the clasp with my fingers and pinch it, then pull it open. “Be free, my friend.”

The hare stands there a moment. Once I rise and step away, it scampers out of the cage and dashes off into the woods, obscured by the tall grass there.

Loneliness strangles my heart once he’s gone. The little guy was in my life less than an hour, but I felt a kinship to him. Captured, caged, used...but I was able to set him free.

If only I could do that for others like me.

“Tell me what Tomlin said and did.”

Laurant’s voice draws my attention back to him. I pick up the cage to busy myself as I respond with a question.

“Was Ness the head of Tenebrosa?”

He doesn't answer right away, and I look at him, his expression switching from surprise to suspicion. "Yes."

A little of the weight on my chest is lifted to learn Tomlin had at least been honest about that.

So, I tell Laurant the rest. How my father, also Cursed, was captured and sent to Tenebrosa. How Tomlin hated Dr. Ness and intends to replace him with someone under his command. How he told me to kill him so that could happen.

Laurant doesn't look upset or angry, more confused. "What is he up to?"

The words are just above a whisper, almost carried away by the cool breeze.

"We have to get back," he declares with sudden haste.

As we make our way to the vehicle, I can't help but notice that Laurant isn't horrified that I've murdered someone, nor is he judging me for listening to Major Tomlin, who he doesn't seem to get along with.

There is more going on at the Cursedblood Academy than I know, but I intend to discover every little secret. And then, I will do whatever it takes to save my father.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

AUbrEY

A nother day, another combat training session.

Most of the Cursed here train only hand-to-hand, or melee or ranged weapons, depending on their curse. Lucky me, however, trains in all forms of combat. Today is a Krav Maga session to hone our physical defenses.

At least they have the sense to break the sessions up so I'm not physically overexerted.

I'm not the only one who has to learn various martial art styles and how to use both melee weapons and ranged, but the only other person I care to communicate with who goes through what I do is Colt, who told me he wouldn't be here today. Psyche evaluations are a constant for him.

"Front and center!" Lieutenant Yarr shouts over the clamor of incoming students and commands us to stand before him. Once we're all lined up, me in the rear third row, Yarr begins to pace the front line, his hands clasped behind his back. Like the rest of us, he's in his usual workout gear: Black sweats and a gray tee-shirt. Most military instructors here like to stand out and wear something more flashy than those they teach, but not Yarr. Part of me respects that.

"We have a new student joining us today, and we will whip her into shape posthaste. Enter, Miss Amato!"

That scent hits me before I see her; faint roses and myrrh surround her frame and

invade my senses.

She's wearing the same sweats and tee as the rest of us, only beneath it is a skintight black bodysuit that covers her arms and neck. She wears a pair of black gloves as well. Her mass of deep brown hair is haphazardly wrapped up atop her head. Those pale silver eyes are wide, like a frightened doe as she approaches us all.

I fight a growl that threatens to escape my throat as something shifts in my chest, a creature that demands no one else looks at her. But it calms when I scan the group and find no one else paying her much attention. I'm both soothed and confused.

I hadn't seen or even scented her all day yesterday, and now she's here in the same room, and I find my hands clenching and opening with nerves.

"Modumo!"

My head whips toward the Lieutenant when he shouts my name.

"Since Walker isn't here today, I want you to pair up with Amato. Show her the ropes and spar. I'll be assessing."

My brow tightens but I give him a firm nod in agreement. What else can I do?

This is not at all what I wanted. I need to stay as far away from this Omega as possible. For both our sake.

Fuck Colt and his fucked up mind keeping him from class.

"Get to work!"

My jaw sets as the rest of the class disperses. I make my way slowly toward the

young woman and tower over her small frame once I'm near.

When she looks up at me, something flashes in her eyes I can't discern before they narrow. She stands upright, her chin up. "Touch my skin and die," she says, her tone hard as stone.

Her words surprise me, my brows rising a touch despite myself.

I've seen all forms of curses in the eleven years I've been in the system, and I know enough not to question when someone gives a cryptic message like that. Plus, it would explain the bodysuit and gloves.

She's not the only one in the academy who wraps their whole body up in that fashion, and she won't be the last.

I give a curt nod and motion to the last remaining empty mat toward the doors. She leads the way, and it's all I can do not to pounce on her back along the way.

Anger and frustration build inside me.

She isn't even walking in some seductive way. The sway of her hips isn't exaggerated, and the long tee completely covers her ass.

I shake my head in a quick, jerking movement, trying to rid these unwanted thoughts and feelings from my mind. I've never felt this way about anyone, and these thoughts...these emotions...they're more dangerous than most know.

This has to end.

She turns when she reaches the far end of the mat and looks at me expectantly.

I don't think the Lieutenant thought this through. It's not like I can instruct her on what to do.

But it isn't a moment later when Yarr approaches the mat, tablet in grasp. "We'll start with light offense," he advises. "I want Amato to advance, and Modumo, you defend." He tosses a pair of padded training gloves to the Omega, and she easily catches them. "Modumo can't speak, but The Tank is our best combatant in this academy."

The praise does nothing for me, but the beast inside is oddly smug. I get the feeling it's because it wants to impress the Omega.

"I'm here to assess your stance and ability, Miss Amato."

Yarr steps back, the light from his tablet dancing across his upper body and face. It's common practice for sessions to be recorded for assessment over time, and I'm sure that's what he's doing.

I face the Omega, who seems to be mulling over what the Lieutenant has said, her eyes squinting at the mat beneath her feet. She rubs her knuckles absently and frowns a moment before she pulls on the padded training gloves and winds the attached wraps. She's obviously sparred before.

Wiggling her fingers, she readjusts, likely due to the full gloves she already has on. But it isn't a moment later that she turns her body so her left side faces me and raises both fists in the air, right hand lower than the left. I barely have a moment to appreciate her stance before she's on me.

She jumps, and her right heel meets my solar-plexus in a spinning back-kick that sends me sliding backward on the mat at least three feet. Although there's a decent amount of power behind her strike for such a small thing, the blow doesn't hurt

much. There's a reason I'm called The Tank.

"Well," Yarr says, his tone smug. "How about that. You train to fight, Miss Amato?"

"My father taught me," she says softly.

Yarr nods, a frown tugging the corners of his mouth. "You were on the run a long time." He doesn't ask; he states it. The tone of his voice is deceptively soft, more so than I've ever heard it, and I've known him for years.

He clears his throat and is back to business when he looks at me. "Modumo, grab the pads." He looks at the Omega as I make my way to the back wall where additional equipment hangs. "Jab the pads for a bit, then we'll move on to throws."

Two hours. For two heart-pounding, sweat-inducing hours, I spar with the Omega. Every move she makes flings her delicious scent right up my nose, the battle to keep my dick limp just as difficult as keeping from sinking my teeth into her flesh. The beast inside me growls with approval every time she moves. When she finally sends me to the mat, it coaxes me to perform a reversal and flip us over so my body grinds hers into the mat, but I refuse to do it.

I could never.

Fighting the beast's desires becomes more and more difficult with every reset of our stances until a wild thought races through my brain. A way to put an end to this madness, ensure this Omega stays far away from me.

As the beast inside me roars in protest, I send my fist to the Omega's gut, knocking the wind from her before she drops to the mat in a heap.

"Modumo!" Yarr shouts, anger evident. "What the fuck are you doing? Hit the

showers!”

Breath heaving, I walk to the locker room, not looking back, no matter how much I yearn to.

I can never have her. My desire puts our lives in danger.

It's better she hates me.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Colton

“I t’s been a few months since you needed to go into solitary. How have you been feeling?”

You know exactly how I’m feeling, you empath douche.

Andrew Laurant, Headmaster and academy counselor, is the bane of my existence. He makes me do things like share my feelings and express myself. It doesn’t matter if I want to or not. I’d rather be in lockup than have to talk to someone about my life, or my curse.

But I don’t have any control over said-life, such as it is.

So here I am. Thanks a lot, Mom and Dad.

“Fine,” I say, stretching my legs out in front of me as I lean back on the couch. It’s actually comfortable. Maybe more comfortable than my mattress.

Laurant sighs. “Look, Colton, I know you don’t want to be here. I don’t need to use my curse to see that; you make it painfully obvious.”

I let out a snort.

“But you have a problem that will never go away. You’ve been in the system for eight years, and you still have instances of overload. Have you even tried the exercises I’ve suggested?”

I tried them. I've tried every single thing he and all the shrinks in the loony-bin told me to, and nothing has ever worked. Even now, when Laurant and I are the only ones on the entire floor his office is on, thoughts that don't belong to me whisper in my mind.

Laurant's: "He may never get this under control. Then where will that leave me?"

Random people in classes throughout the academy:

"Universe, her hair looks so ridiculous."

"I miss my mom..."

"I'm gonna bash that dickhead's teeth in."

"It's better she hates me."

That last one...that was Aubrey. He and I arrived around the same time and were paired up in our dorm when we were of age to leave the juvie campus. I'd recognize his inner voice anywhere. It's the only place I've ever heard his voice.

Then a voice rings clear in my mind, familiar, but I can't place it. Male.

"If they head any further north, they're going to find them."

Laurant clears his throat, and I let out a frustrated sigh. "Nothing works," I relent. "I've tried it all. The only time I don't hear others' thoughts is when I'm drugged up to sleep. I can barely concentrate in large classes—"

"Which is why we ensured you were in the smallest classes possible," he cuts in.

I frown. “Yeah.”

“Listen, I’m reading a few research papers right now that may be helpful. I’ll have some more information next week.”

“Right.” I stand up and stretch my arms above my head and make my way to the door. “See you.”

“We still have five—”

I slam the door shut behind me, cutting off his voice but not his thoughts. “Dick.”

I cough out a laugh, and as I near the stairway, then stop short when that voice I’d caught earlier floats through my brain again, clear and crisp.

“ Three hundred fifty clicks north-northwest.”

My brows draw in confusion. Who is this guy?

“ Old city. Rebellion.”

The thoughts fade, the man they belong to likely moving out of my range. But his thoughts had been loud and...strange.

My stomach growls, and I give it a pat before making my way down the stairs to the third-floor cafeteria for lunch. Usually me, Aubs, and Rai grab the table for four in the back corner, so it’s my intention to do just that when a lovely scent stops me in my tracks. My mouth waters and my teeth ache, facts that scare the shit out of me.

I’ve been surrounded by Omegas for my entire life, and never have I wanted one. I’ve found some attractive, but I’ve never been drawn to another person before, aside from

Aubrey and Rai. But they're my bros. This...this is entirely different.

I scan the lunch crowd surrounding the cafeteria entrance but don't find her. The thoughts of those around me begin to flood my brain as more and more people file into the hall, ready to eat. My head throbs, the cacophony of thoughts makes my pulse hike. The room begins to tilt, and I gasp to breathe.

I haven't had a panic attack in almost three months, and the last time I did, I was sent to solitary.

That thought makes everything worse, and I lean back against the wall, squeezing my eyes shut.

"Are you okay?"

The voice is soft beside me, that scent overwhelming all of my senses, a feeling of calm envelopes me like nothing I've ever felt before.

I peel my eyes open and look down into the most beautiful silvery eyes I've ever seen, framed by raven-wing lashes that match the damp hair she pushes off her concerned face. It's barely a microsecond before her gaze deflects to my clavicle, and she begins to fidget.

"I..." I stare down at her, my brows drawing together tight.

Her thoughts. I don't hear her thoughts.

In fact, the other thoughts around me are quieted. Still there, but not so loud.

It's like an old radio left on a channel that doesn't come in. The static is nearly as soothing as her scent.

I clear my throat against the lump that's formed. "I'm okay. Thank you."

Her head bobs up and down fast and nervous. "Great. I'm glad." She coughs, and oh boy, her fidgety behavior is doing all sorts of crazy things to my insides. "I'll be going then."

She turns toward the cafeteria, and my mouth runs before my brain catches up. "You should eat with me and my friends."

What?

She turns to me with an expression that matches my shock, her eyes deflecting from mine to focus on my nose. "Why?"

Because I don't want you to leave.

Because you being near me soothes me.

Because I want to stay by your side.

Because I want you to look at me, dammit.

"You're new, right? May as well get to know some of us." I lean in a bit closer. "Some of the cool ones, anyway."

Holy shit. This girl has turned me into a complete dork.

Her eyes do a little rapid blink thing as her brows knit, but she gives me an affirmative nod. "Okay."

Yes!

“Come on,” I say, ushering her inside the cafeteria. “You like mac and cheese? They actually make a pretty good one here. And the pizza’s not bad either. Oh, man, and the pies! I don’t know where they get them or if they make them here, but they are delicious.”

I need to shut the fuck up. It seems relief turns me into a jabber-jaw.

She peers at me—or at my chest—from over her shoulder with a raised brow. “You like carbs.”

Well, yeah. Who doesn’t like carbs? People who stay away from carbs aren’t doing it out of hatred.

I give her a shrug and keep my mouth shut as we get in line and grab trays.

I grab two slices of pizza, a coffee, and a slice of good ol’ apple pie.

She hesitantly takes a turkey sandwich and a bottle of water before pausing at the dessert station a moment. I grin like a madman when she picks up a slice of chocolate pie with lots of whipped cream on top.

One thing I can say for this place is that they treat us well when it comes to food. I’m sure that’s Laurant’s doing. We won’t be treated anywhere near as well once we’re sold and shipped off to wherever-the-fuck.

“This way,” I tell her and gesture with my head to the back corner, where I see Rai is already seated. As we walk, I say, “I’m Colt, by the way. What’s your name?”

“Mira,” she says over the clatter of voices in the room. The dulled thoughts around me try to permeate my brain, but that subtle static still keeps them mostly at bay.

I don't have much time to consider why before we reach our table. "Rai, this is Mira. She's going to join us for lunch."

Rai was already seated with his back ramrod straight before we reached the table. His nostrils are flared, a sure sign that he'd scented her before our approach.

He wears his usual Mandarin-collar black shirt and pressed black pants. The wrap around his eyes is also black, making his snowy hair stand out in stark contrast, his bangs hanging over his eyes as always.

"Hello," he says, all stiff and uncomfortable. Not abnormal for him, but maybe a bit more than usual.

I sit beside Rai, and Mira sits beside me, making me grin like an idiot. Like she chose me or something.

Get over yourself, idiot. You're probably one of the only people she's talked to.

"So, Mira," I begin as I remove the cover of my coffee cup and add sugar before the cream, "we don't get many older intakes here. Where are you from?"

There's a loud bang as pain shoots up my shin. I shout in pain and glare at Rai, the obvious culprit, who looks calm and collected, if not stiff as a board.

What's wrong with asking where she's from?

"I, um..." she trails off, staring down at the half of her sandwich in her gloved grasp. "UNA, Sector Two-B," she finally finishes.

"I grew up in Fifty-Two A," I tell her. "Rai, here, was from One-A. Right?"

Rai nods slowly. "I was born there. My family is still there now."

"Were..." Mira hesitates. "Were you close? With your family?"

Rai's body relaxes a bit. "Very," he whispers. "I miss them every day. My older brother was here with me until..."

He doesn't have to finish. I can see that Mira understands. Kiyoshi was here a few years before Rai, and he was sold off to some unknown army about three years back. Rai had been inconsolable.

I frown at the memory and at how jealous I'd been when they were together. Brothers who were best friends, caring for and helping each other. With a family back home that never wanted to let them go.

I will never forgive myself for how selfish I'd been. It isn't their fault their family loves them, and mine would rather see me dead than acknowledge my existence.

There is a loud, booming thought in my head that doesn't belong to me.

"What the fuck?"

Aubrey approaches our table at my back, and he is not happy about Mira's presence.

Too fucking bad.

"Aubrey!" I sing sweetly and smile up at the hulking Alpha as he sets his tray down.

"Nice of you to join us. This is Mira," I tell him, a toothy smile set on my face.

"We've met," she says from beside me, and my smile vanishes as my head whips to look at her.

“Oh?”

She nods, an odd look in her eyes. “We sparred today. He knocked me out and left.”

“What the fuck, bro?” I snarl at the same time as Rai slams his fist on the table.

“That is most unacceptable, Aubrey.” Rai is more aggravated than I’ve ever heard him.

Aubrey bares his teeth like an alligator ready to strike before digging into his food.

“Getting close to her is a mistake.”

Now that errant thought of his that I caught earlier makes sense.

Gaze narrowed, I assess my friend and roommate. About six and a half feet tall, muscles atop muscles, the smoothest mocha skin a man had any right to have, lips full, jaw strong, black hair buzzed to nearly nothing, and clear, almond-shaped hazel eyes, the likes of a beauty queen.

And he can be an absolute asshole.

Even Rai is beautiful. Not as tall as Aubrey or me, but lean muscles, smooth-shaved porcelain skin, slightly puffy lips, and that pure white hair that always looks like he was just caught in high winds yet it settled in an elegant mold. I would bet if he could remove his blindfold, his eyes would be gorgeous, too.

Dick.

I’m just...me. A blond dude with two different colored eyes who’s so fucked up in the head that he’s spent almost as much time inside institutions as he has outside of them.

It says a lot when you're not even in contention against a guy who can't see and another guy who can't speak.

Who am I kidding? There is no "contention." Thinking like this could get me killed. All of us.

My head shoots up at Aubrey knocking on the table. He gives me a strange look and tilts his head to one side before signing, "What's up with you? You didn't hear me."

He must have been trying to speak to me through his thoughts, and I couldn't hear him over my own thoughts. So, I can hear his loud, shouting thoughts, but not his more calm ones.

This is all Mira's doing.

I look at the beautiful young woman beside me whose gaze bounces from Aubrey to me and back again.

"Uh, he said he's sorry for being a complete dick earlier," I offer.

She gives me a disbelieving look as Aubrey's eyes bore holes in my soul.

I couldn't care less.

"So, Mira," Rai begins, "who are you rooming with?"

"Her name is Nyx," she responds.

"I know her," I say. "Smart. She's in my history and Advanced Military Tactics classes."

“She’s been nice to me,” she offers simply before focusing on her chocolate pie.

I grin again as she takes a bite. When she lets out the smallest moan of delight at the taste, my entire body goes rigid, and I am not the only one. I can feel the tension around the table, and for the first time in my life, I miss my curse. I want to know what Aubs and Rai think and if their thoughts are like mine.

The desire to take, to claim, to knot.

Fuck. I’m not used to these feelings. They’re dangerous beyond belief.

Most of all, I wish I could read Mira’s mind. She looks so unaffected by us that it’s almost infuriating.

Something inside my chest snarls at the thought of her not noticing me. Not wanting me.

Look at me.

Frightened eyes shoot up to mine, and my heart races, pounding like a hammer against my sternum.

Did she...hear me?

No. No way.

Aubrey bangs on the table again, directing my attention to his glowering face. His eyes are filled with a level of rage I’ve never seen before. And one glance at Rai, his covered eyes are focused on me in that eerie way he has, his lips forming a straight line.

I am definitely missing something.

“I should get going,” Mira says with haste, grabbing her tray and water bottle as she stands. “Thank you for inviting me to eat with you.”

Before I can open my mouth to protest her departure, she’s gone.

In her place, a roar of thoughts fills my head. I let out a growl of frustration and pain, clenching my fists to my temples.

There’s the scrape of chairs before Rai says, “Come,” and takes my arm to lead me from the cafeteria to one of the quietest, least populated places in the entire academy.

The library.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Raito

“Why can you not hear our thoughts?” I demand softly after Colton, Aubrey, and I are seated at one of the library tables.

“I can now,” he responds with a whine.

I feel the movement of Aubrey’s signing.

“I don’t know, man,” Colt responds to whatever Aubrey signed.

Usually, he translates for me automatically, but I don’t intend to press him while he’s under duress.

“No,” Colt continues, “that’s a lie. It was her. Mira.”

My body stills at his admission.

Aubrey signs again, and this time, I ask what he said. This is too important a discussion.

“He wants to know if it’s her curse that suppressed mine.”

“No,” I say immediately. I feel them both turn to me, question in the air. “I was there at the end of her assessment yesterday. She turns living things into solid ice at the touch of her skin.

We're all in silent thought a moment. If her curse wasn't responsible, how did she stop Colton's curse?

"Tell us, quietly, what happened."

I feel the table shift as Colton leans in. "First, I thought I just couldn't read her mind. It was all static. But then I realized that when I was close to her, the thoughts around me were muted. I almost couldn't hear them. And I think..." He trails off, then shifts his body again. "I think the longer I was near her, the more my curse backed off. And as soon as she left, it came back in full force."

I frown at both what he's described and his complaint that she left. "Perhaps if you hadn't demanded that she look at you like some caveman, she would have stayed longer."

I can feel Aubrey's nod as Colton turns into a statue beside me.

"What is it?" I ask.

"You...you heard that?"

"I'd be surprised if the entire cafeteria hadn't heard you," I say, feeling movement on my other side as Aubrey must agree.

"But..." his breathing grows shallow and fast. "But I didn't say that out loud."

My lips part to protest, but the clock tower chimes for our next class.

"Shit," Colton whispers, mirroring my sentiment.

"Let's meet tonight." I rise to my feet, sidestep my chair, and push it back in.

“Yeah,” Colton mumbles absently.

I turn to make my way to my History of the Alpha Wars class, using, as always, memory, sound, and my sense of movement around me to navigate.

Mira Amato. I must speak with her again. I must learn about her.

I didn’t need to wait long to encounter Mira again.

Her sweet, fresh rose and earthy myrrh scent envelops my senses a moment after I sit at my desk at the back of the classroom. And, as luck would have it, the only empty desk in the room is right beside mine, and the professor instructs her to be seated there.

If I believed in fate, I’d attribute her close proximity to it.

She is quiet on her feet, something I’d already noticed. When she settles into the desk, her soft, velvet voice whispers, “Hello, Rai.”

That she remembers my name pleases me beyond expression. That she speaks to me elates me even more.

“It’s good to hear your voice again, Mira.”

It’s like I can feel the heat radiating from her face. But I couldn’t have made her blush. That’s just the newfound hubris rising in my chest.

“Yours as well.” Her voice is still quiet, but I hear it clear as the bell that tolls the start of class.

When the Beta professor pairs me with Mira in a study group, I can barely contain

my joy. But I do my best, fighting against the smile threatening to stretch across my face.

“I’ll move closer.” Her voice makes my ears twitch and my neck heat. Something moves beneath my ribs that has me scratching my chest.

I don’t know what is happening...but I like it.

Once the shuffling of all desks in the classroom dies down and I feel Mira close beside me, I ask, “Have you studied the Alpha Wars before?”

“Not formally,” she replies. “I’ve seen some stuff on TV about it. Documentaries.”

The corner of my lip ticks up. “That could be helpful. We’re only a month into the semester, so we’re all just learning this part. We’re at the end of the Second War when Alpha Morozov slaughtered the eastern villages of Old China before expanding westward. Section Four of the course text.”

“Okay.” Her quiet response holds a bit of question. “Um...do you get a physical textbook...with braille?”

A small laugh escapes me before I shut it down. “I do receive course printouts, but I’m not blind,” I explain. “My curse keeps me from uncovering my eyes around anything technological. I read and write alone in my dorm where there’s no tech.”

“Oh!” Her surprise is apparent. “I understand.”

I’m sure she does. She cannot touch anyone. That builds up similar barriers.

“I have excellent memory recall, so don’t worry about me not pulling my weight.”

I feel the slight surprised jerk of her body, and before she can protest, I say, “I’m only teasing.”

A soft exhale and her body relaxes.

I’ve never wanted to look at someone as badly as I crave to see Mira. I want to see her face, watch her body move, look into her eyes. I know she’s beautiful. To me, at least. This sense overwhelms me.

As I cannot look at her, I frown instead, and we get to work reviewing the details of the section until the bell rings again to signal the end of class.

Another first: I’ve never wanted to stay in class this badly.

To stay with her .

“Have lunch with us again tomorrow,” I blurt.

She pauses gathering her things, then says, “I’d like that.”

Tension leaves my body that I didn’t realize had been there. I give her a closed-mouth smile, turn and leave the room, and Mira, behind.

I can almost taste the approaching danger.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

Rai makes me feel things I've never felt before. Exciting and frightening things.

But so does Colt.

And, despite my disgust, even Aubrey.

What the hell?

I've been around Alphas and male Omegas my entire life, even on the run. And Betas, not that I ever looked at them for long. None of them have ever attracted me before. I've never even scented any of them.

But these three...

Rai with his cherry blossom and vanilla aura, Colt enveloped by fresh-cut grass and cool rain, and Aubrey with his frustratingly mouthwatering mixture of juniper and chili pepper...

Whenever I'm near them, it's hard to think straight.

I'm sure I sound like an absolute fool whenever I speak to them.

How embarrassing.

"Mira!"

My back goes straight at the sound of Colt's voice from down the hall before his soothing scent wraps around me. I turn to find him jogging toward me, an enormous grin on his face that elicits happiness a moment before the heaviness of despair weighs on me. The urge to caress his jaw with my bare fingertips is so strong that tears sting my eyes at the impossible thought.

"Hey!" he says, that beautiful smile still playing on his lips. But then it falls into a frown as concern draws his brows together. "Are you okay?"

I swallow hard and nod, not trusting my voice.

He scrutinizes me for a moment, then tilts his head. "Where are you off to?"

I clear my throat. "My dorm."

"You're finished with classes?"

I nod in confirmation.

"Come on." Colt's white teeth shine behind his enormous smile before, with a hand on my back, he steers me in the direction I'd been going.

We walk along the hall, down to the main floor, and out the back door into the cool midday air.

The sun is low on the horizon, already setting at just before four in the afternoon. I've only been in Iceland for a couple of days, but daylight lasting all of four to five hours this time of year is unsettling. Probably because I've lived in sunny places all my life.

Colt leads, and I follow without question, although a voice in my head tells me I should be cautious of everyone in this place. But I'm not. I trust him, and I don't

know why.

The entire walk, he is silent, his hand never leaving my back as we traverse the grounds, giant floodlights turning on with an audible clank as darkness sets in. The grounds closest to the academy have a wide open patch of dead grass at its center and various training dummies on the outer rim made of all different materials.

Colt leads me behind an enormous tree about fifty yards from there and slowly, maybe even reluctantly, removes his hand to motion for me to sit on a clean-cut stump.

I do as he wordlessly commands, and he sits on the ground in front of me, his long legs folded in a lotus style. As he bends his elbows and rests that chiseled chin on his fists, he stares up at me with his beautiful mismatched eyes.

The floodlights cast darkening shadows all around us, but Colt's face isn't at all obscured. I try not to look in his eyes, but the memory of him demanding I look at him in the cafeteria rings in my mind.

I hadn't been frightened by it. Instead, the demand had set my mind and body ablaze, desiring his attention as much as he apparently desired mine. But I can't help myself now and peer into one pool of green and one of blue...like his scent of grass and rain. His dark blond hair has fallen over his forehead, making him appear far younger.

This urge within me takes hold, and all I want to do is comfort him like he's a lost child, although he doesn't appear to need it.

His boisterous attitude is subdued now as his lips part to say, "Tell me about yourself."

My brows hike a fraction. He wants to know about me? I guess it's natural to want to

learn about the newcomer. But what can I say out here?

“Keep the volume low, and we’ll be fine out here,” he says as if reading my mind.

“I’ve...been on the run for about ten years,” I tell him quietly. “My father and me.”

“Your father helped you?” he sounds very surprised by this.

I frown and nod. I suppose there’s no reason to withhold the information now. “He’s also Cursed.”

At this, Colt’s hands drop to his lap with a smack, his lips part, and brows knit together. “Your father...?”

I nod slow. “He was able to hide his curse. But I guess that’s obvious.” My gaze falls to my knees where I’ve rested my tablet. Seeing it makes me think of Rai, and part of me wishes that he was here with Colt and me.

I enjoy talking to Colt, regardless of the solemn topic, but Rai does something to ease my soul. A pure kindness that reaches out and envelops me.

When I look back at Colt, he’s scrutinizing me, but absently, almost as though he’s looking through me. Then his gaze snaps to my eyes. “Will you tell me about your time on the run?”

I find myself nodding. “I was twelve when my curse manifested. My mother...” I let out a deep breath, my head falling, so I’m looking at my lap. “My birth mother died when I was born. My father re-married when I was an infant, a sanctioned pairing. She was a Beta.” I look back up at him. “She and I were fighting, as usual. But for some reason, she was hellbent on me going with her to some store, just the two of us. I didn’t want to go without my father, and I protested until we were screaming at one

another.”

I peer skyward. “She was so angry; more than I’d ever seen her before. I saw something in her eyes that, even as a child, I knew wasn’t right. Something...just wasn’t right.” I swallow and look back at Colt with a frown, my voice even quieter. “I shouted that I hated her. That she wasn’t my real mother. She snapped and swung back to slap me across the face.” A pressure in my chest causes me to grasp at it. “The instant her hand touched my face, she turned into solid ice.”

Tears start to drip down to my jaw and tap my chest as they land on my shirt. “It was...” I take a deep breath. “I didn’t know what to do. I just screamed like I’d never screamed before, and my father came rushing through the door. He saw my mom, and the look on his face.” I choke now, shuddering. “I knew then I was a monster,” I breathe. “I love my father more than anything, and I loved my mother too, even if we didn’t get along. She raised me! She was my father’s wife! And I killed her. I killed both of my mothers.”

My head dips, and I fight the sobs battling to escape my body.

“My father rushed to my side, and I was so scared I’d hurt him, too. I screamed at him to get away from me and ran. He called to me, and when I wouldn’t stop, he showed me. Showed me that he was Cursed, too. He made the ground quake as he shouted for me to stop running. And I did.” I lift my head again. “I remember looking at him with wide eyes, feeling relief and betrayal. Not only had he kept his curse from me, but he was responsible for mine. His blood runs through my veins, and it’s his blood that made me this.” I raise my gloved hand into the air, that old anger returning, though not as strong as it had once been. “His genes are what doomed me to this life of living on the run, living here in this place, living a life of never being close to someone.”

My jaw sets, and in the light cast across Colt’s face, I can see his eyes are glistening,

his expression full of...understanding.

And suddenly, I feel like a complete fool. A selfish fool. I'm not the only one who has been through trauma or anger. I'm surrounded by Cursed who have been through similar, or worse.

Somehow, Colt asking me about my past made me pour my heart out without hesitation.

I wipe my face with my covered fingers, sniffing like a child, vowing no more . I can't behave like a spoiled brat. I was always on my own, never around others like me. That's changed now. I need to change, too.

"What happened to your father?" Colt's voice is soft, kind, and I sigh.

"Major Tomlin told me that he'd been sent to Tenebrosa."

Colt goes white at the name of the facility. I'd known next to nothing about it, but he must be familiar with it.

His gaze flicks over my shoulder, and I am surrounded by cherry blossom and vanilla, and a moment later, spicy juniper invades my senses.

I turn just as Rai and Aubrey clear the giant tree. Rai looks straight at me as though he can see through his blindfold and advances, kneeling on the ground beside me and placing a tentative hand on my forearm. He says nothing as his covered face tilts up at me, and I can't help myself. My fingers reach out and brush his snowy locks from the cloth over his eyes.

There is a kinship here, between Rai and me, our covers forming barriers between us and the world.

I want to know more about him. About all of them.

“You just had to ask,” Colt says, a semblance of his bravado returning.

I hadn’t realized I said the words aloud.

“You didn’t.”

I peer at Colt over Rai’s head, and he gives me a little smirk. “I read minds.”

As I shift with surprise, both Rai and Aubrey’s gazes snap to Colt like whips. I feel like I’m missing something again.

Colt lets out a nervous laugh. “The mind reading isn’t at all fun. I can’t control it. I hear everyone all the time in my head. It drives me insane. Literally. I’ve been institutionalized on and off since I was twelve. Nothing—well, not much works to drown out the thoughts.”

I had wanted to care for him before, comfort him. Now, the urge is even stronger.

“I wouldn’t mind,” he says, that brilliant smile flashing.

“I wish I could.” I breathe it aloud without meaning to, but I suppose it doesn’t matter. He’d have heard my thoughts anyway.

Rai finally sits on his butt and wipes his hands on his thighs in a nervous motion. “I told you a bit about my curse, but whenever my eyes are open, technology short-circuits or even explodes. I don’t even need to look at the device, but the curse it somehow connected to my eyes.”

His head tilts back as though he’s looking at the sky. “When I was a kid, my little

sister broke my favorite action figure. I got so mad.” His head shakes, and he turns back to me. “I shouted at her, told her she was selfish and spoiled. I said unforgivable things. That I wished she’d been taken away instead of our brother.” He presses his lips between his teeth before continuing. “As I was screaming, all the electronics within a mile radius exploded.”

Rai leans forward, his tongue swipes his lips. “My parents were devastated. They were losing their second son. There was no hiding what I’d done. Neighbors had witnessed it.” His voice cracks, and he clears his throat. “If I remain calm, the damage is limited to maybe about ten feet all around me. But if I lose my temper or have any heightened emotion, really, that radius increases. So, in my room, where there’s no tech, I can remove the blindfold and study. But I sleep with it on, just in case.” He swallows.

He doesn’t need to finish his thought. I can only imagine the nightmares, especially after being separated from family as a child.

My gaze falls to the bright golden halo around Rai’s neck, and my brows furrow.

“Mira wants to know about the collars,” Colt supplies.

Rai’s smile is sad. “Something about the collars makes them immune to my curse’s effects. I can...feel the technology inside them, but there’s something that blocks me from manipulating them. I don’t know what it is, but when I concentrate too hard on it, I get a migraine.”

That thought is disconcerting. What could possibly block the power of a curse?

Aubrey shifts off to the side a bit of a distance from us, and the sound brings my attention to him. He has a deep frown on his face, his jaw flexes. His eyes flick to Colt before he signs something that looks angry.

“Okay, okay!” Colt throws his hands up in exasperation. “I don’t know why you’re being such an absolute ass.” Then he goes silent.

Obviously, Aubrey has nothing to add to the conversation, and I hate the twinge of sadness that blooms in my chest at that fact.

Yet still, the nearness of these Alphas, warmth builds inside my chest, inside my belly. I’ve never really felt warmth before, not inside me. And I have no idea what it means.

But I do know it’s dangerous.

Cursed aren’t allowed to mate or to procreate. It’s forbidden.

But how is that any different from the rest of the world? The Beta Council has to approve marriages and mating worldwide.

But none of this matters. It’s forbidden by threat of death. I can’t touch anyone, and I’ve never even—

A gasp escapes my lips, and I turn wide eyes to Colt, who gives me a fierce look before rising to his feet.

Oh. Shit.

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Colton

I can't believe the unfinished thought that I catch floating through Mira's mind.

First, I couldn't hear her thoughts at all. Then, I placed my hand on her back. The longer I kept it there, the quieter everything grew until there was nothing but my thoughts.

And then hers.

I could hear Mira in my mind like she was whispering to me, sweet and loving. Longing to embrace me.

I want that so badly.

But I also want to live.

At least, I do now that she's in my life.

I've never felt a connection so strong, and it just keeps growing.

So when she thought of Rai and Aubs, and how she feels for them, I thought, Fuck it . I tried to do on purpose what I'd done accidentally that afternoon.

I called to them. In my mind.

And it fucking worked.

Like, how is this even possible?

When I was a kid, I'd cower in corners, covering my ears, squeezing my head, screaming at the voices to go away until my voice gave out.

The first time I'd done it, my parents sent me to a loony bin. Padded room, straight-jacket, the whole nine.

I was twelve.

And when the doctors there figured out my problem was worse than being crazy, and I was, in fact, a Cursed, my parents disowned me on the spot. Left me behind as I cried out for them not to go, my voice weak from screaming and all the drugs they'd pumped into me.

I never saw my parents again.

It was the institution that had the GBE soldiers come get me.

And they hadn't brought me to the academy. Not at first.

No. The first stop had been Tenebrosa. Where they administered shock and hydroponic therapies, sleep and food deprivation, and pumped me full of more drugs.

A twelve-year-old boy.

It was Major Tomlin, then a Lieutenant, who got me out of there. He'd taken me to the academy himself, wielding verbal assaults the entire way.

That was when I discovered children weren't supposed to be admitted to Tenebrosa.

The GBE had some sort of standards. Who would have thought?

Eleven years later, things with my curse hadn't improved; I'd just learned to ignore it as best I could. After so long, hearing voices that aren't mine every second of the day, I just gave up and accepted this was my eternity.

And then Mira arrived. The voices dulled, my curse subdued. I accidentally projected my thoughts, and now, on purpose.

Who is she?

More importantly, who is she to me?

And even more importantly, if her unfinished thought is true, how will I protect her?

“It's forbidden by threat of death. I can't touch anyone, and I've never even—”

She gasps when she remembers that I can hear her. And somehow, the world around me goes even more silent.

What I feel for her is dangerous, but what she's hiding is even more of a threat to her life.

I rise, and with determined steps, I approach her. Side-stepping Rai, I lean down to her ear, and instead of whispering aloud, I do so in her mind. “No one will ever take you from me. I swear it.”

Her wide eyes fly up to my face on yet another gasp, and in those silvery pools are unshed tears...and hope.

This is what she wants. It's what she needs.

Connection. Protection.

Now, I just have to figure out how to keep my promise.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

Time can fly quickly when your life becomes a routine with only one day of rest each week.

Sunday through Friday, we have classes and combat training, while Saturday is free. And I'm sure the only reason there's a day off is for the faculty, not us.

I've been at the academy for about three weeks now, and every day becomes more soul-crushing than the last.

Learn to fight. Spar. Learn tactics. Demonstrate. Learn history. Test.

My sanity is maintained only by my interactions with some of the other Cursed here.

Colt has become a near-constant companion of mine, as has Rai, although he doesn't touch me as much. Aubrey hangs out with us all as well but is usually off to the side and disinterested in our conversations or activities. However, I have picked up a few of his signs now.

"I'm surprised your boy toys aren't looming over us right now," Nyx teases me as we soak in a bit of sun, me on my face only.

I shake my head and give her a sideways glance. "They're definitely not mine, nor 'boy toys.'"

There's a loud huff on my other side. "Please. Those three would eat you alive if they

could.” This from Arlowe, a friend of Nyx’s who I’d like to think is also a friend of mine now.

Nyx had introduced us shortly after I arrived, and I appreciate the mahogany-haired beauty’s blunt candor.

“If they could touch me, you mean?”

Arlowe sits up straight in the grass and leans forward, brushing her palms on her dark pants and leaving behind dirt. “Yeah, but not how you mean.”

She means that intimacy is forbidden.

I was just poking at her, but I shouldn’t have.

Of all the Cursed currently at the Academy, I’m the only uncontrolled tactile. Lucky me.

“I know,” I say softly.

“So what are you going to do about them?”

“She’s not going to do anything.” Nyx’s tone holds an edge of warning.

People are always listening.

Arlowe scoffs. “Look, we’re forced to take suppressants, but you really think that’s all there is in them? Have you gotten your periods since you’ve been on their junk?”

I still at the same time as Nyx.

There is an unspoken understanding between us. We're the same, she and I. And we're always in danger because of it.

Colt is now the only other person who knows besides me, Nyx, and my father. And him learning my secret was an accident.

"Of course there's birth control in the suppressants," Nyx replies with ease. "They can't take any chances."

"Right. So they know that some of us are bound to bump uglies undercover. It's all fear-mongering."

I peer over at Arlowe's matter-of-fact expression and have to wonder if she's right. Not that it matters in my situation.

"Whatever." Nyx lets out a frustrated sigh.

"You've just got your panties bunched because you've got the hots for the headmaster."

I stifle a laugh when Nyx sends a little jolt of electricity at Arlowe that makes her yelp in pain.

"I do not."

I suppress a smirk as best I can. "Don't shock me, too, but...I felt the draw between you the day I arrived."

Nyx's eyes shoot to mine, alarmed, like I've uncovered something no one should know. But anyone with eyes and half a brain could see how they act around one another.

“And then there’s Erich…”

This draws my attention back to Arlowe, eyes wide. “Who’s Erich?”

The grin that spreads across her face is devilish, her violet eyes glitter in the sun. “Oh, just the tatted, pierced, broody hottie who stalks Nyx with his eyes whenever she’s near him.”

“Erich is a dick,” Nyx chimes from my other side.

“Well, he has a dick that you definitely want to get to know.”

Another shock, and I can’t stop my laughter this time.

“Hey! I am warning you. Cut it out.” Arlowe is only half-serious by her tone.

Nyx grumbles and leans back on her hands to look up at the sky. “Our combat training in the mountains next week? Erich is going to be on my team.”

Arlowe sings, “Ooooooh,” as I ask, “What combat training?”

Nyx looks at me. “A couple of times a year, the more advanced students go to the mountains for war games. We’re split into at least two teams and use all the tactics we’ve learned in simulated battles.” She rolls her eyes.

“I’m on the Orange Team this year.” Arlowe looks smug, but it’s lost on me.

“Green as usual for me,” Nyx grumbles, then turns back to me. “It’s an absolute pain in the ass, literally. We have to sleep outdoors, and there’s no off time, so we’re always on alert. Some of the teams strike at night.”

“What happens once someone is eliminated?”

“They go back to base camp,” Arlowe offers.

“Which is not much better.” Nyx’s tone is sour. “The faculty makes the eliminated students their lackeys until the exercise is over. There’s no actual rest or anything.”

“Well, maybe you and Erich will enjoy a bit of bonding time together.”

When Nyx shoots another bolt at Arlowe for her teasing, she jumps up. “That’s it. I’ve had enough of this abuse.” A darkness covers her body like thick, black smoke, and in a blink, she’s gone, the shadow with her.

“Touchy,” Nyx mumbles.

I smirk at her. “You did electrocute her. Three times.”

She lets out a pffft . “What I sent her way equated to a joy-buzzer. She’s just being a baby.”

My head shakes as I smile at my friend, and then all my senses go on alert as those familiar scents invade my nostrils. My body turns automatically to face them, Colt, Rai, and Aubrey, as the three approach our little sunny spot outside the treeline.

“Well.” Nyx stands with haste and looks down at me, wiping her palms on her pants. “Enjoy time with your ‘boy-toys,’ hm?” The smirk she gives me is knowing before she turns to head back to the academy, waving at the Alphas as she passes them.

“We did not mean to disrupt your time with your friend,” Rai tells me, although he doesn’t seem sad that we’re alone now.

“He’s not, and neither am I,” Colt chimes as he plops down on the ground beside me, his hand immediately finding my knee.

“What did we talk about the other day?” I warn.

“Boundaries. Personal Space. Self-control. Right. Forgot.” He’s absolutely flippant.

I sigh, although I can’t find it in me to be frustrated. A part of me is comforted by not always being alone in my thoughts.

His hand squeezes my knee.

“We were in the library and got bored,” Rai explains. “We missed you.”

The way his words make my heart squeeze is unlike anything I’ve ever felt. Rai is always this way, with his kindness and reverence.

“I can be sweet, too,” Colt grumbles.

I let out a puff of laughter, and Rai clears his throat.

“There is...something I would like to try, Mira. An experiment, if you will.”

My brows lift, my heart giving a little stutter. “An experiment?”

“I would like us to go to the farthest training ground from the academy. If you’d indulge me.”

I look at Rai and smile, my trust in him shining, even if he can’t see it. “Of course. Let’s go.”

Rai smiles then, too, and the sight is so beautiful that it takes my breath away.

He looks at Aubrey in that uncanny way he has of knowing where you are. “You brought it?”

Aubrey gives him an affirmative nod, and I say, “He says, ‘yes.’”

“Good.”

Aubrey takes the lead, keeping several paces ahead of us, and we move away from the academy building in a slow trek. We stay on the cobbled path that runs between outdoor and indoor training grounds, most of which I’ve never visited. Curiosity looms, but I keep following, Rai to my left and Colt with his arm looped through my right.

When we’ve walked maybe two hundred yards, an enormous coliseum appears over the path that begins to lead downward. When we crest the hill, it comes into full view, like something out of ancient Greece. Towering stone columns and arches form an open circular structure, the contents exposed to the elements.

It takes even more time to reach the entrance, and once we’re through the giant arches, what’s beyond is revealed.

An enormous field of grass, maybe more than a hundred yards in circumference, aged and worn with dirt patches everywhere. Tall, partial, and broken stone walls and their debris litter the ground. We maneuver around a few of them to reach the furthest part of the interior, which is where we stop.

“Thank you,” Rai says as he turns to me. “May I...put my hand on your arm?”

His request is pretty small for such a long hike, but it isn’t like I’d say no. “Of

course.”

As Rai approaches, Aubrey removes a school tablet from the back of his pants and holds it in his clasped hands, rested in front of him.

Rai’s hand grips my forearm lightly, his hand warm through my sleeve.

Colt releases my other arm, walks to where Aubrey is standing, and a second later, Rai’s blindfold is in his free hand. I look at his face, and beyond being struck by how he could possibly be any more beautiful than I imagined, I am very confused.

Rai told me what happens when he opens his eyes. Is he trying to show me his curse? But why would he need to hold my arm?

It’s no sooner the thought crosses my mind that his eyes fly open, and so many of my questions are answered.

First, his eyes. They’re the color of tumbled coal, shining pools of onyx. I can barely decipher where his irises end and his pupils begin. And they are radiant.

Second, he isn’t trying to show me what his powers can do because one glance at the bright, glowing tablet in Aubrey’s hands tells me they’ve done nothing.

And I realize that’s the reason he’s touching me.

Why Colt is always touching me

Why I feel like I’ve known these Alphas all my life and that we belong together.

Because we do.

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Raito

Even as I see it, I do not dare believe it's true.

I...am looking at technology.

Working technology.

Thanks to her .

I pivot in Mira's direction to catch a glimpse of this beautiful specimen.

I always knew she would be gorgeous. No matter what, she would be beautiful in my eyes. There was no other way for her to be in my heart. The draw to her, our connection, dictated how I'd perceive her.

Her silvery eyes glimmer in the light as her face fills with awe as she looks at me. Or that could be my hubris.

But I want it to be true. I want Mira to look at me the way I'm looking at her now.

That beautiful, pale skin, her cheeks and the tip of her nose rosy from the cold air. She uses makeup on her eyes, but nowhere else: a simple liner that flares upward at the outer corners. I wonder if she wears it every day or only on Saturdays?

"What is this?" she whispers.

The truth is that I don't know.

Colton had told Aubrey and me about his curse's reaction to being near Mira, but he'd made another discovery:

When he touches Mira, his curse is completely negated.

He'd been testing it for weeks to ensure it wasn't a fluke, and every time he touched her, all the thoughts invading his mind would vanish.

"I know you guys feel the same connection to her that I do," he had told us in the library. "So I thought maybe we should see if it works for you two, too."

I didn't dare to hope. There was no way it would happen to me, too.

Yet here I am, uncovering my eyes in front of working electronics, my hand grasping Mira's forearm.

All I want to do is pull her into my arms and kiss her. Shower her with love.

But this thought isn't new to me. It wasn't born of this newfound joy of feeling normal for the first time in so many years. This compulsion has haunted me since the first day we'd met.

"Don't do it, man," Colton calls, and I glare at him, which makes him laugh.

My attention returns to Mira, and I tell her, "I don't know what is happening, Mira, but I know it means something. Something important. To all of us." I glance at Colton and Aubrey, then back at her.

Mira's head tilts slightly. "How do we find out what this is? Without getting into

trouble?”

That is the question, isn't it? We can't ask anyone. The library wouldn't be helpful. Any internet searches are monitored and blocked.

So how?

“We'll find a way,” I tell her, though I don't know if I'm lying.

For a few more selfish moments, I look at her before smiling. “Thank you.” My quiet words are the last I speak before I close my eyes and remove my hand from her arm to put my blindfold back on.

“You don't have to—”

“I do,” I interrupt. “You've granted me my moment of peace. Now, it's Aubrey's turn.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Aubrey

“Now it’s Aubrey’s turn.”

Is it? Do I actually want this?

I already crave this girl nearly every moment of the day, waking or otherwise. If it turns out that I have some kind of connection with her that neutralizes my curse by touch, what is that going to do to me?

Nope. No, thank you. This is not fucking happening.

“Yes, it is.” Colt’s voice draws my glare, and he just glares right back at me. But there’s no humor on his face, which is abnormal. “You’re going to do this. You have to know. We all do.”

“Don’t force him,” comes Mira’s smooth voice, and for a second, I think she’s defending my honor. But when I look at her, those platinum eyes are sad.

She thinks I don’t want to touch her.

“See what you did, dumbass?” Colt barbs me, and I clench my jaw.

I can’t be swayed. It’s good that she thinks I don’t want her. If I touch her and my curse is neutralized, I’ll never want to be without her again. That is the surest way to get us all killed, either by the GBE or Miranda’s curse.

Yet, if I touch her and my curse remains unaffected, I'll be disappointed despite myself.

That's not something I can deal with.

I don't have much time left here. My instincts have been in overdrive every time a soldier approaches me on campus, just waiting to get the order.

That thing in my chest growls at me, its anger apparent. I know it wants Miranda as much as I do.

But it can be as pissed off as it pleases. I will not change my decision. This is for the best.

"Come on, bro, stop being a selfish prick." Colt crosses his arms over his chest, eyes narrowed at me.

Is he for real?

I'm the only rational one here, I seethe at him in my mind. You're both driven by emotion, just like the Alphas of old. And look where that got us all.

"Aubs, listen—"

Have you even considered what will happen when they discover us? Because they will discover us.

"Of course I have—"

Then you are unworthy of her. That gives him pause. You're willing to endanger her for your selfishness. None of the other Cursed here get a reprieve from their curses.

What makes you so special?

His mismatched eyes flare with anger. “Listen here, you shit. I’ve suffered more than half my life, much worse than most. I deserve what little happiness I can find before they ship me off to die at someone else’s whim. So does Rai. And although you are being an absolute douche right now, you deserve happiness, too.”

“NO!”

At my one roaring word in response, the wall I face beside Colt explodes, shards of stone spraying all around us, one catching me in the corner of my eye, leaving a sting I surely deserve. Colt, Rai, and Miranda all grip their ears and shout, either in surprise or pain, ducking down in reaction.

My rage had built to a boiling point, and although I’m not proud of it, this is for the best.

Let them hate me. I’m willing to be the bad guy to save us all.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

My ears are screeching as I huddle down, eyes closed tight against the pain in my head.

That was Aubrey's curse. That's why he doesn't speak. He must not be able to control it, just like the rest of us.

I pry one eye open a sliver to find Aubrey's back as he walks away from us, right through the hole he created in the coliseum wall.

He's hurting.

My head ticks at the strange whisper inside me. It's feminine but wild, in a way.

That's when that thing in my chest moves behind my sternum, shifting in its place like an animal finding its comfort before slumber.

What the fuck?

A hand grips my shoulder, and I find Rai beside me. He beckons me to stand, which I do on wobbling legs, as I take my hands from my ears.

"Are you all right, Mira?"

His question is more loaded than it should be. Am I? The ringing in my ears is now a quiet, constant tone. I'm physically unharmed, at least I think. I could hear his voice,

so my eardrums have to be okay.

But my heart?

I blink up at Rai's covered face and want to see his eyes so badly, to find comfort in those dark depths. Before I realize what I'm doing, I grab his hand in my gloved one and yank the blindfold from his eyes, sending his white hair swirling in a flurry before it settles again. His beautiful eyes are wide as they stare down at me.

"Mira..." His voice cracks.

What does he see in my own eyes? What emotions does my gaze elicit in him that cause him to pool with unshed tears?

All I want is to wrap my arms around him, press my lips to his forehead as I hold him close.

But I can't.

"How do you know?" Colt asks as he approaches Rai's side.

"What?" My voice is raw.

"How do you know that this connection, whatever it is, doesn't go both ways?"

As in...my curse is neutralized too?

My head is shaking fast as I back away from the two of them. "I'd never risk it."

"But—"

“She doesn’t want to hurt us,” Rai says, his voice full of more force than I’ve ever heard from him. When he squeezed my hand, he asks, “Is there another way to test it?”

“You were there. at the end of my assessment. I saw you. You have to know I won’t hurt an animal.”

Rai’s gaze swivels to Colt. “She was told to freeze a rabbit, and instead froze a scientist to death.”

“I was told to!” I shout, telling them for the first time. “Major Tomlin promised to try and get my dad transferred out of Tenebrosa if I did it.”

Each of them looks equally shocked, and I don’t blame them. I’m sure it isn’t a regular occurrence for a Cursed to be told to kill a member of the GBE by another member of the GBE, and I’m sure that a Cursed trusting one is equally rare.

“Doctor Ness?” Colt’s voice is like air.

“Yeah,” I whisper back in response.

He looks at me, and the light drains from his green and blue eyes. His voice is robotic. “Did you make him suffer?”

His question takes me aback, but I remember...the look on Colt’s face when I mentioned my father was in Tenebrosa.

“You were there.”

“Yeah.” His arms cross over his chest. “I don’t care who told you to kill him or why, but I am glad that monster is no longer on this earth.”

I understand, to a degree. I didn't personally suffer in that facility, but the desire to save my father drove me to being fine with murder.

And I still am. Maybe even more so now that I know they hurt my Colt.

My Colt?

"I am yours," he says, voice even as he nears me and takes my other covered hand in both of his, drawing it to his lips and placing a kiss on my knuckles.

I'm both overjoyed and devastated.

It isn't fair.

"Just try it, Mira." Colt's whisper is imploring. Desperate. "Touch me."

My reaction is immediate and automatic. I recoil, horror on my face. "I can't!" I shout at him; at both of them. "I could never chance it. I couldn't..."

As the tears stream down my face, Rai wraps his arms around my shoulders, taking care not to touch my face with his chin. His voice is airy and quiet. "Don't do anything you don't want to."

But I do want to.

I want this to work. I want to be able to touch them without killing them.

But it's a chance I will not take.

Miranda

“ We need to do something fun before we’re separated for a week.”

Arlowe swoops between me and Nyx, then loops her arms through ours, her short mahogany bob blowing in the cold breeze. Her head turns from me to Nyx before she scowls. “No ideas?”

Nyx lets out a laugh. “What fun can we have?”

Our shadowy friend lets out a pffft and rolls her eyes. “You two are so dull. Let’s get away from these dorks and find some privacy.”

I open my mouth to agree to this plan, but my voice is stolen as the world tilts on its axis and goes dark and hot, stifling, but only for a moment. Then, the darkness clears, and we’re in one of the training buildings, bright and quiet. But the world doesn’t stop spinning around me, and I feel myself rock right before my hands slam to my knees and my lunch lurches from my stomach to spill all over the floor, my gagging vaguely embarrassing, but I can’t bring myself to care.

“ Ugh, Lowe!” Nyx puts her hand on my back and begins to rub. “You can’t transport us like that without warning! Mira hasn’t been through your torture before.”

Arlowe leans down beside me, her eyes apologetic, but nose scrunched in disgust. “Sorry, Mira. I forgot.”

I put my hand up in the universal sign of “I’m good,” but take a minute before

standing up straight, nice and slow. The world has stopped rotating around me, so I take some cleansing breaths.

“ I’ll clean this up.” Arlowe vanishes in a puff of darkness and returns in an instant with some cleaning supplies and hands me a bottle of cold water, which I accept gratefully.

Her curse is pretty handy, although you couldn’t pay me to go through that again.

After sipping the water, I tell her, “I can get that,” but she waves me off. I notice she has cleaning gloves on. Where the heck did she get all this stuff?

She’s finished, gone, and back again faster than my still fuzzy brain can process, the smell of cleaning chemicals the only evidence all that had just happened.

“ Well now!” Arlowe smiles big, her cleaning scrubs gone, everything back to normal. “I guess I gave us a bit too much excitement to start, so want to take a little walk and get some fresh air?”

“ Sure,” I say before Nyx can admonish our friend again. I can feel her desire to argue, and while I appreciate her protective nature, I don’t want our last day together for a while to be fraught with fighting.

We go back outside, this time to the outskirts of the property where the forest borders the well-kept grounds. Their breath puffs white as we walk, and I notice both my friends snuggling into their coats and scarves, shoving their hands into their pockets. The weather doesn’t bother me at all, yet I open my mouth to tell them we can go back inside where it’s warmer, but Arlowe interrupts me.

“ How are your boy toys?”

My head shakes as a smile stretches across my face and turns to a smirk. I'm getting used to her teasing. "Oh, you know, they're boys. And...toy-ful."

Nyx snickers beside me while a loud laugh bursts from Arlowe. "Toy-ful? Does that mean they know what they're doing when it comes to the female form?"

That wipes the smile from my face. "You know I can't—"

"Sorry," she mumbles. "I know."

Now I've killed the vibe. "So, is there anyone you have your eye on, Lowe?"

Nyx chuckles. "Oh, she used to."

My brows raise. "Really? What happened?"

"He's not here anymore." Arlowe's tone is flat, which is not normal for her.

"Oh." I turn my gaze to her and cock my head. "I'm sorry."

She lets out a disgruntled sigh. "Yeah, well, that's what happens when you're here for a while, right? It'll happen to us all eventually."

"Kiyoshi was sold a couple of years ago. I think to the Pacific Asian Empire," Nyx offers. "I believe they try to buy all those who are descendants of families from there."

"Kiyoshi?" That name...

My spine straightens, and I stop walking, shock freezing my steps. "Kiyoshi Sato? Rai's brother?"

They both stop walking as well, Arlowe turning to face me with a frown. “That’s him.”

I must look like a fish, my mouth opening and closing, words completely escaping me.

Arlowe smirks and starts walking again as she calls back, “Those Sato boys are hot as hell.”

As my brows rise higher, Nyx gets closer and whispers, “She’s downplaying it, like everything else. She loves him.” Her dark eyes pierce mine, and she bites her lip, the understanding there is overwhelming.

Nyx knows the battle I’m waging with myself. She’s going through it, too. And it must be even worse for Arlowe, being separated from the Alpha she loves.

I watch her back as she keeps walking away from us, her movements slow and trudging.

I shouldn’t have brought it up.

My feet hustle to catch up to her when a siren wails. It’s coming from every single building, so piercing that I have to cover my ears, as do my friends.

“What’s going on?” I shout.

Arlowe and Nyx both shake their heads before Arlowe motions for us to follow her. We jog around the building toward the pathway leading from the main building to all the secondary locations. When my foot touches the stone path, there’s a commotion and shouting coming from the direction of the main building. About five soldiers are running our way, chasing a male Omega, his golden collar bouncing with his rapid

steps, his sweet scent turning bitter with fear.

The soldiers chasing him keep shouting for him to stop; one calls him by name in a pleading tone.

My brows draw tight, confusion floods my senses. The Omega draws nearer to us; his eyes connect with mine, wild and fearful, and then his collar turns from gold to red.

There is a terrifying pop, and his collar explodes, taking his neck and head with it in a rain of blood, sinew, and bone. His body crumples to the stone path.

Everything stops. There's no sound, no movement. I don't think I'm breathing. But then, as my body begins to quake, Nyx collapses to the ground with a thud, and Arlowe starts to vomit like I had a moment ago. And I...

The soldiers surround the fallen Omega's form, the Beta who had called out to him is ashen, his wide eyes catch mine. He is more shaken than I am, while the others shout orders and look at the body in disgust.

The soldier looking at me didn't want this. I don't know if it's intuition or what, but I can just tell that this man felt something for that Omega.

The creature inside my chest rages within its confines, and the Beta soldier stands up straighter. Through his sorrow, he gives me the slightest head shake, as if warning me not to do something. But I know there's nothing I can do that won't end in me turning out like that Omega, headless on the cold ground.

The Beta looks at his fellow soldiers and says something I can't understand, and then he's approaching us.

Arlowe is helping Nyx sit up, and I can feel their cringing as they attempt to move

away from the Beta, but I put my hand out to them in a stopping motion.

The beast in me growls while a sense of calm washes over me that the back of my mind tells me I should not be feeling.

The Beta walks up to me, slow, his hands slightly in front of him, fingers spread. When he's close enough, I can read the patch on the front of his uniform.

Hansen.

“ You all need to return to your dorms.” His voice is quiet, soothing, despite the horror behind him. Despite the terror in his eyes.

The creature in me chuffs. Deceiver.

It doesn't mean he's lying to me, but...

My nostrils flare, and I scent him as his eyes widen, taking his aroma deep into my lungs. Muted, bland, like all Betas. And yet there is something beneath it that I can't place. Something that doesn't belong to a Beta.

His fearful eyes, the color of slate, turn pleading. My head tilts as I look him over, my actions foreign, like I'm not in control. When my chin lifts at him, I find myself saying in a calm voice, “We're going.”

The man seems to almost deflate with relief when I turn to my friends' questioning gazes and gesture with my head up the path to the main building.

I lead the way back in silence, the creature inside me warring with my fear and devastation.

This thing is beginning to gain some control over me. The thought sends my heart racing, and I feel dizzy.

As I cross the entrance, the voice inside me is clear.

We must escape.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Colton

She doesn't want to touch us, Aubrey signs, a deep scowl on his face. It's better this way.

Aubs, Rai, and I are in our usual recreational spot in the library, discussing our new favorite topic, Mira. We've only been here about thirty minutes, and the conversation steered to her and our longing to be with her. No big surprise there.

Even Aubrey can't keep her out of his thoughts, despite how hard he tries.

I roll my eyes. "She thinks she'll hurt us."

"Kill us," Rai corrects me. "Her mother died in childbirth, and Mira feels responsible. Then her curse killed the woman who had raised her. Plus, who knows how many others died accidentally while she was on the run?"

Now I'm frowning. "But we all feel it, right? That we're going to be okay?"

I don't mention that my reason for feeling this way has to do with the fact I'm insane and believe there's a creature inside me who speaks to me sometimes. And that creature told me that we, all four of us, are destined to form a pack, regardless of the illegality.

Rai's head drops on a sigh, and Aubs looks a little less severe. Part of me feels that way, but there's no proof. If it goes wrong, she'll never forgive us. Or herself.

Fucker has a point. I wouldn't want to put that on Mira.

His jaw moves side-to-side. And besides the fact I don't want to die, it doesn't matter if we're unharmed by her touch. We can't be together.

Before I can respond, the siren starts blaring, something that hasn't happened in a long time. The volume is so loud that I plug my ears as I rise from my chair. When a voice over the PA system announces that everyone has to return to their dorms, I look to Aubrey and find his concern apparent; Rai's thoughts swim with worry as well.

Although we follow instructions, Rai returning to his room alone while Aubs and I go to ours, the entire time our senses are heightened, proverbial hackles raised high. Again, we're all thinking of Mira and the overwhelming desire to protect her, frustrated and enraged by the fact we can't do so openly.

I reach out with my mind in a way I've never tried before, never wanting to hear someone else's thoughts, yet always having them pushed on me. But this is different. I need to find her. I need to know that she's okay.

Aubrey's gaze burns into my face from across our dorm as he sits on his bed, me on mine. He knows what I'm trying to do and calms his thoughts in an effort to help me focus. I appreciate the gesture, though I know his reasons are as selfish as mine, even if he won't admit it. Stubborn ass.

It takes me much longer than I'm comfortable with to find her, but when I do, I am as gentle as possible when I say her name in her mind.

"Colt?" Her thoughts are a frightened whisper.

What happened?

A rush of images flood my mind, an uncomfortable and new experience for someone who only ever heard thoughts like conversations, never witnessed them visually. And when the images of the scared shitless male Omega getting his head blown off assault me, my body jerks.

Come to our dorm, I tell her.

When I look at Aubrey, the concern on his face is clear. I must look pretty awful.

So Mira doesn't have to re-tell the story, I reach out to Rai, who's easier to find because I know where he is. I tell him to come to Aubrey and my dorm as well, letting him know Mira is on her way.

Rai arrives first, his room only a few doors down from ours. I quickly recap what I saw Mira witness, telling them with my thoughts like a conversation.

Once I finish, Rai drops down into the chair at our little desk, his head shaking side to side.

That's when Mira knocks on the door, the rapping soft and tentative. Aubs is the one who opens the door and lets her in, shutting it behind her pale and shivering form. Shock has overtaken her system. I don't need to read her mind to know that.

I get up, take her gloved hand in mine, and lead her to sit beside me on my bed. I'm sorry that you had to see that, I think at her.

She looks at me, then down at her knees. "I saw it on TV once. Never in person before."

I nod in understanding. I'd seen it a few times before, twice at Tenebrosa and once here a few years ago. It's rare because we're valuable to the GBE since they run the

auctions and get most of the money.

“There was...” she hesitates, rolls her lips between her teeth. “A Beta soldier out there was calling for the Omega to stop, but not like a command, like a plea.” She looks at me, her silvery eyes shining. “I think he cared for the Omega. And...” Her brow furrows, her lips flatten before she runs her tongue over her teeth behind them. “He approached us—Nyx, Arlowe, and me—and when he told us to go back inside, I...scented him.”

My brow raises in surprise.

“Like...I’m not sure, but he didn’t smell right for a Beta.”

You think he wasn’t one?

Her head shakes, and she shrugs. “It was fleeting, but I think something’s not right. How could he be anything else?”

I frown before relaying our conversation to both Aubs and Rai, who look equally confused.

After a moment, Rai chimes in quietly, “There’s been a...shift here at the academy. Something is happening. Something big.”

“How do you know?” she whispers.

His covered face turns to her. “Something in me is changing,” he confesses. “Ever since I met you, my curse is—” he cuts himself off, head tilting in thought, “—evolving. That’s the best word to describe it. When I’m alone in my dorm, eyes free from this confine,” he touches his blindfold, “I can hear the tech throughout the entire building. I’ve never been able to do that before. Sometimes, I pick up on

electronic communique. There is one word that I am seeing more and more.” He leans in from my desk chair, closer to us all. Even so, his voice is so quiet I have to strain to process the familiar word. “Rebellion.”

He’s heard it. This can’t be a coincidence. “I’ve been hearing this, too. In people’s thoughts. Not long ago, one person in particular was really concerned that they’d be found, but I couldn’t tell who it was. He hasn’t been around since.”

What kind of rebellion? Aubs signs.

I shake my head. “I mean, it’s got to be against the GBE, right?”

“Do you think the person you heard is at the war games?” Mira asks.

I shrug. “I didn’t really pay attention to when his thoughts dropped off. I actually didn’t pay much attention at all when I first heard mention of it. But lately, there are whispers in more people’s minds. It’s like they’re scared to even think about it. And now the soldiers are killing people? This can’t be a coincidence.”

Aubrey leans toward me, thinking at me with a crisp tone. “It’s possible this group, this Rebellion, is making a move, and it’s got those in charge scared.”

I take a deep breath and close my eyes, grip Mira’s hand, perhaps for moral support, then project my next thoughts outward. The guy who I stopped hearing seemed to think he knew exactly where this Rebellion is hiding out. He used the term ‘klik,’ so it’s possible it was a soldier.

Mira shifts beside me again. “But you said he seemed worried they’d be found. Wouldn’t a Beta be happy to find them?”

I shrug. There are sympathizers. Not every Beta or non-Cursed is a piece of shit. I

mean, you just mentioned that soldier who seemed shaken by the Omega's execution.

She contemplates a moment. "What do you think is going to happen?"

I frown. I don't know yet. But I'm going to keep searching thoughts and see if I can find more information. I squeeze her hand. We need to stay vigilant. If something is happening, we can't be caught blindsided. We stick together. I swing a harsh glare at Aubrey. No matter what.

Raito

Electronic locks are usually a walk in the park for me. Unfortunately, the biometric locks on all the dorms are blocked by the same infuriating source our collars are. Meaning my curse doesn't have any effect on them.

Luckily for me, my brother is a genius and street-smart. O nii-san taught me things I'd never learn in school due to the role I'd been given here because of my curse's nature. He'd also encouraged me to experiment with my abilities, something the academy almost never does.

It's with him in mind that I "borrowed" Colt's tablet after dinner in the cafeteria, where it was just him, Aubrey, and me, and why I stand outside Mira's door with said tablet in hand after two in the morning.

It's been nearly a week since that male Omega's death, and everyone in the academy is on edge at all times. Especially Mira.

She is scarce at social times, and when she is around, her mind is elsewhere.

And I cannot stand it. My heart is ripping apart.

This must work. If it doesn't, I don't know what I'll do.

Buy Colt a new tablet, that's one thing.

Other than that...

I grip the cool, smooth surface in my fingertips and concentrate. My photographic memory goes far beyond what people read about the phenomenon, and I assume it's a part of my curse. Perhaps the best part, as I recall with every fine detail Mira's face when I saw her weeks ago. Some nights, I spend far too much time reliving that memory, my cock aching, the beast in me growling possessively.

The day I saw Mira feels like a lifetime ago, yet every strand of her dark hair, every line in her lips like a fingerprint, each lash surrounding her pale silver eyes flashes in my mind like a vivid still-frame.

I don't have time to revel in her beauty out in the hall where I don't belong. My memory zeroes in on her eyes and stays there, concentrating on every detail, every valley and slight deviation of color surrounding black irises, as I pull the cloth just a bit from my closed right eye.

Please, please, please...

I peer at the tablet, just a squint, and push the image into the device with my mind, using so much might I nearly grunt with effort. But I need to stay silent.

The instant the image from my mind appears on the tablet, a life-sized replica of Mira's eye, I slam my eye shut and cover it again, breath coming hard, excitement mixed with awe. Yet, no time to reflect on what I'd done. Clock ticking, I feel for the lock and its smooth scanner, just as I do when entering my own dorm, only my lock is set to fingerprints so I don't destroy anyone's tech in the hallway. I align the tablet with the scanner and slowly move it from side to side, then up and down, not daring to uncover my eyes again now that the first part of my plan actually worked.

As my frustration grows, my teeth clench, and I'm ready to take that chance after all when the quiet chirp of the lock goes off, and I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

Heart racing, I turn the door handle and quietly step inside Mira's room, closing the door with a soft click at my back.

Although the surroundings are foreign, I can feel her presence. I know where she's sleeping, can hear her breathing. My heart aches, longing to be near her. And I grant its wish.

At Mira's bedside, I gently put my hand on her leg above the covers, that tingle returning to my eyes that I'd felt the first day I'd touched her, when I learned her touch neutralized my curse. I tear the cloth from my eyes, my vision already used to the darkness. My hand still on her thigh, I place the tablet on her nightstand and sit on the edge of her bed. The movement sends her luscious scent through the room in a whoosh from beneath her covers, and my mouth waters.

The pale golden light from the collar around her neck casts an ethereal glow on her face, and as beautiful as it is, I want to tear the device from her body. The beast inside me that I'd never known existed before Mira Amato entered my life begins to growl in my chest, clawing at my ribs like a caged animal.

It wants Mira, body and soul. But more importantly, it wants her freedom. All of our freedom.

I couldn't agree more.

I'd made the decision more than a week ago, and now that I'm here in Mira's room, looking down at her sleeping form, there's no way I am backing down.

Mira and I are meant for one another. I know it with every atom. And if I have to live the rest of my life never able to touch her, then I'd rather die right now.

If I do die, she may hate me for the rest of her life. I'd be causing her pain. But I

know it will work.

I know it.

With great care, I shift to lie on my side on top of the covers, my hand gently sliding upward, never breaking the connection.

When she lets out a small sigh, her head turns toward me. The moment her eyes flutter open, I whisper, “ Daisuki desu,” and place my bare palm on her horrified face.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

My scream dies before it even leaves my lips.

Rai. His hand is on my face. My flesh. And he's...still him. Solid and warm.

The kind, gorgeous smile he gives me makes tears spring to my eyes, which I close as I nuzzle into his palm, my lips gliding along his skin.

I should be furious with him. He had no idea he would live after touching me.

The anger doesn't come, though, as I look at his face again and see the love there. The adoration.

He leans in, touches his forehead to mine, and breathes, "I would die a thousand deaths for one chance to touch you."

The tears flow now, gravity taking them across my face to the pillow below. That ache in my chest isn't born of sadness but of love. Acceptance. Things I've never experienced before.

I don't know who moves first, but our lips touch, tentative and soft. A simple press; a graze that increases in pressure until our mouths open, tongues seeking one another out. And when Rai pulls my body taut against his, the blanket a barrier between us, I'm frantic to pull my gloves from my hands and fling them across the room. My fingers dive into his snowy hair, even softer than I dared to imagine.

A thought nags at the back of my mind that I have no idea what I'm doing, but surely Rai knows, given my curse. Still, I pull away with reluctance, pressing my forehead back to his, both our coming breaths hard and fast. "I must be really awkward at this," I whisper.

His head tilts slightly. "I didn't notice. Not like I've ever kissed someone before."

This confession sends a jolt of surprise through my spine. "Really? But you're so..."

One brow rises in question. "So...what?"

"Beautiful."

The deep chuckle that flows from his lips does dangerous things to my body. "You're one to talk."

"You can also touch people without killing them."

"You're the only woman I've ever wanted to touch. And look at you, touching me without turning me into a popsicle."

I huff and gently slap his chest, head shaking. "I can't believe this is real. I just know I'm going to wake up facing grave disappointment."

His lips crash back to mine, one of his hands sliding down my back, dangerously close to the swell of my ass, and fisting there. When he pulls back, he says, "This is real, my hime."

I blink at him, clearing the haze from my mind. "Hee-may? What does that mean?"

His smile is everything. "It means 'princess.'"

My nose wrinkles. “I’m not a princess.” I don’t think I want to be considered one, either, all snobby and self-centered.

A huff of laughter escapes him before he grows serious once more. “You are the princess of my heart.”

My lips part in surprise, the utter tenderness of his tone warming my heart.

I take it back. I like the idea of being a princess very much. His princess.

I want to say something equally sweet in return, but a stabbing pain wells deep in my lower abdomen, and it steals my breath with a moan.

“ Hime?” Rai sits up before I know it, and his concerned face looms over me. “What’s wrong?”

“I...” I gasp, clench my belly, and let out a whine like no sound I’ve ever made in my life. “Idunno,” I breathe the words as one. And then, on my next breath, my body grows hot, achy, and when I whine again without meaning to, there’s wetness between my legs.

I groan, reach for Rai’s hand, and place it on my breast; the contact brings small comfort as I writhe on the bed.

I vaguely register Rai’s shocked expression before he asks, “Have you had your suppressants?”

I nod, aware the movements are languid, groggy, like I’d seen drunken people behave.

“How...?” He shakes his head. “ Hime ...Mira, love...you’re going into heat.”

His words don't even register fully before I answer in one, pained breath, "But I've never had my heat before."

The energy in the room stills, Rai's statuesque frame locked in a shocked expression that surely mirrors my own.

I've never said the words aloud. The words that would have gotten me killed on the spot, Cursed or not. Any Omega who doesn't come into her heat is taken away by the GBE, never to be seen or heard from again. This was my most closely guarded secret, more so than being Cursed.

But I trust Rai. Trust him with my life. My body. With my heart.

He inhales deeply, a growl emanating from his chest, his shoulders rising and falling rapidly. His eyes are still filled with love, but there's something else behind them. Something carnal and animalistic. Possessive.

His scent suddenly fills the room, that smoky cherry blossom that belongs to him alone, and it soothes me, my pain and frustration.

He takes another breath, this time through his mouth, and slowly lets it out. "My beautiful hime . Your heat won't go away on its own." His hand grips my breast tighter, moving in a small circle, and brings another whine from me. "Let me help you," he breathes. "Let me take this suffering from you, my love. And help me, in turn." He takes my hand that isn't gripping my belly and places it on his lap, moving it to grasp the hardened length beneath his pants. We groan in unison, my body burning hotter, the wetness—my slick—pooling even further as my body writhes.

"Take this from me," I whine. Then my voice grows into something I don't recognize, something animal. "Claim me. We belong."

Rai's growl grows louder, deeper. "Keep touching me." His voice is like mine was, different and primal.

I follow his instructions, keeping my hand on his cock, rubbing and gripping it tightly as he pulls the shirt from his body with one yank over his head from behind his back.

It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my life. That and the beautiful, toned, lean torso that greets me, illuminated by the damned collar around his neck.

Something slithers inside me, angry, vicious, and I want to crush that infernal thing. But more level thoughts remind me of the danger, and that beast reluctantly pulls back, watching our Alpha's every move with anticipation.

Our Alpha.

Is this thing moving inside me a different entity? Or an extension of myself?

I don't have time to consider as Rai tears the blanket from my bed and moves like a jungle cat, pawing his way over my still writhing body and straddling my hips, rolling his against me. The movement draws another high-pitched, needy whine from me, and his eyes flash serious, his hand swooping up to grip my jaw and neck and position my face to look at him.

"My love," his tone is low, calm. "You will draw attention with all this noise. I know you are hurting, but if you want me to take this pain away," he moves closer to my face with each word that follows, "you must. Be. Silent." Rai covers my mouth with his, and I almost whine again, but something flares in my brain, and I cut the sound off.

Silence will bring bliss. Believe in our Alpha.

I don't know where the thought comes from, and I don't care when he sits back up, gripping my shirt in his hands and tears it from my body, drawing a stuttering gasp from me as my breasts bounce with the movement. My back bows, pushing my chest toward him, keeping as quiet as I'm able. I'm rewarded when he drops his face to my chest, rubbing his smooth, shaven jaw across one nipple as he plucks the other between his fingers. My mouth falls open in silent elation, my legs part, knees bend, hips rolling with need.

Then he takes my nipple into his mouth and sucks.

The fire in my veins turns to an inferno, a small sound slips through my lips, and his hand moves from one breast to cover my mouth, his other returning to my neck and squeezing, just a little.

The sensations that wrack my body are like nothing I've ever felt before, and my body jerks again and again as his tongue and lips and teeth work on one nipple before moving on to the next.

I don't know how long he teases me, making my slick pool until it registers in the back of my mind as uncomfortable, but I don't have the will to care.

Rai moves to lay on top of me, his hips between mine, grinding. His grip moves from my neck to my jaw and moves my head to the side, then he's lacing his fingers with mine and bringing them beside my head on the pillow. His lips touch the shell of my ear, his voice quiet, filled with growling promise. "I am going to rut you. Knot you. Claim you." I turn my head toward him, our noses touch. "And one day, I will breed you. Mark. My. Words."

The groan settles in my throat, unable to escape as the beast inside my chest growls at me with wordless warning, a demand that I don't fuck this up for us.

Rai's hips snap, sending his hardened length slapping against my pussy, and I decide then that there are still way too many clothes between us. Moving to pull the pants I'd been sleeping in down my hips, Rai doesn't protest, instead kneeling up between my legs and undoing the button of his fly before unzipping his pants. He pulls them down his thighs, taking whatever underwear he may have on with them, and lets his cock spring free, bouncing upward before pointing straight at me.

My hand reaches for it in awe as I press my lips between my teeth to keep from making a sound. When I grasp it and my fingers barely meet my thumb, my mouth goes dry.

Is this...going to work? Will this hurt?

Does it really matter?

I take my hand back as he maneuvers his pants off his ankles and throws them to the floor, but my wet pajama bottoms are stuck between me and his body, my legs spread wide.

Rai runs his fingers up and down my covered slit, my hips gyrating of their own accord, pushing toward his hand. Then he grips the fabric with both hands and tears it down the seam, the elastic snapping in his grasp. The carnal smile that spreads across his face is wicked, his eyes grow impossibly dark as he stares at my pussy, his breath ragged. "I wish we had more time," he whispers.

My fogged brain is unable to process what he means, and then he's laying on top of me once more, his skin against mine everywhere but my legs, still covered by my pants like flimsy cloth chaps. He places the head of his cock at my entrance before framing my face with both hands and reconnecting our lips. Mouths fused, Rai's cock plunges inside me, one sure and deep stroke, and I scream into his mouth, the cry a mix of pain at the almost audible pop deep inside my body, and of pleasure like I've

never known as his skin slides, frictionless, along my inner walls which gladly welcome him into me, hugging his cock like a long lost friend.

He doesn't move again until he rears his head back and looks into my eyes. "I'm sorry it hurt." His voice is calm, quiet, almost breathless.

My head shakes slowly, and my hand rises to caress his cheek. The pain is already gone, replaced with ever-growing need. "No apologies. We belong, Rai."

The smile he gives me is filled with love, adoration. I've never been the subject of someone's deepest desires before—or perhaps I never let myself believe that I was since I could never reciprocate—but here, in Rai's embrace, his cock slowly gliding out of my pussy then leisurely sliding back in, our foreheads touching, there is nowhere in the world I want to be other than here.

He is my Alpha. I am his Omega. We are meant to be.

My mind briefly registers that the whine building in my chest is...annoying. As if I shouldn't be so needy or weak. But something happens...something I've never heard of before.

A vibration radiates from Rai's chest into my body, calming my whining and nerves. It's deep in tone and audible and reminds me of a cat. A big one.

The thought snaps me from my reverie, my brows drawing with confusion. "Are you...purring?"

Rai's expression is as questioning as mine, but he doesn't speak, doesn't stop. His thrusts increase in pace and fierceness, and I no longer care what the sound is. His pounding in and out of me, mixed with the vibrations, makes my body quake with pleasure, hips turning upward, seeking more of him. Deeper. Faster. Harder.

When the tip of his cock finds this one place inside me, my mouth falls open with bliss.

Rai is watching me, my every reaction. He adjusts his movements based on my cues, and I love him for his attentiveness.

His thrusts become even harder, but not as fast, hitting that spot over and over until the edges of my vision go white, and he draws from me a sound I've never made, a mix of a scream and a moan that causes him to have to cover my mouth with his palm.

Any orgasms I'd brought myself in the past were nothing like this. This is an explosion of pleasure that causes my slick to cover the sheets. I can feel it pump out of me with every spasm that wracks my body.

Rai doesn't stop. He continues to pound into me, over and over, frantic, grunting, and still vibrating. He lifts his upper body like he's doing a push-up, and somewhere in the back of my mind, it registers that my mouth is no longer covered.

I don't give a shit.

As he thrusts in and pulls out, over and over, my fingers grip my aching nipples and pinch so hard I'm sure I'll bruise.

I still don't give a shit.

Another orgasm builds deep inside my core, and this time, when I let out a strangled cry, Rai roars like a lion. His coal black eyes go white, glowing in the darkness.

And that voice inside me screams, Now!

My body reacts without my permission, and it happens in a blink.

My teeth ache and grow inside my mouth, something foreign. A growl rumbles inside my chest. I grab Rai, bring his body back down to mine, and sink my teeth into the flesh of his shoulder, the taste of his blood more sweet than coppery on my tongue. The moment I do, he growls and reciprocates with a bite of his own near my collarbone, and his cock swells inside of me.

We stay there, locked by teeth and knot, the only sound in the room our heavy breathing and the quieting purr in Rai's chest.

That overwhelming need inside of me is replaced by sheer contentment.

The feeling of my teeth shifting back to normal leaves an ache in my gums as I release his flesh, my tongue lathing at the wound I left behind. The golden lights of our collars illuminate the mark, and that creature inside of me—whatever it is—is pleased beyond measure at the sight of it.

Rai licks at my wound as well, slow and deliberate. His mark doesn't hurt so much, but as my brain begins to calm, I wonder if that will change soon.

When our eyes meet once more, I bite my lip before whispering, "We marked each other."

The corner of his mouth ticks up a fraction before he grows serious. "We did."

"What does this mean?"

"We belong to each other." His hand gently smooths the hair at my scalp. "It also means..." his voice trails, carried away by his thoughts.

But I don't need him to finish. I know what he was going to say.

For as little safety as we had at the academy, we are far more unsafe now. If we're found out, not only are we breaking the rules by having sex but claiming one another—that's forming a pack bond...

Rai's knot begins to deflate, and I feel his cock slip from my body, leaving me empty yet sated.

"I don't want to leave," he says, "but I can't stay here until morning."

"I know," I whisper with a faint smile.

As he slowly rises from my body and off the bed, he goes on. "I have a trusted friend in housekeeping. I'll have her bring additional scent blockers and burn your bedding." He reaches down to pick up his clothing and begins putting it back on. "I'll hit the showers and do all I can to mask..." He trails off again, this time a crazed look shadows his face as he reaches for the bedside lamp and switches it on.

"What's wrong?" I can feel his panic deep in my bones.

And that's when he raises a school tablet to his face from my nightstand. An electronic device.

Rai isn't touching me, and his blindfold is still off.

My lips part, close, then part again. What in the world is going on?

His head tilts, eyes squinting as though he's concentrating—no, listening to something. His brow draws tighter, and then those onyx eyes bleed white once again, the glow reflecting off the skin of his cheeks and eyelids. As I sit up in a whirl, his

head gives a little twitch at the neck, and the tablet in his grasp comes to life, lights flashing and bouncing off the surfaces around us. From the transparent back, I can see videos playing, text scrolling, images flashing.

Those white glowing orbs turn to me, his voice barely audible. “My curse...” He shuts his eyes tight, and when he opens them again, those dark orbs I love have returned. “I can control it.”

Colton

“You’ve been in far better spirits the past few weeks.”

Not even these stupid therapy sessions can bring me down. And although Laurant is always pretty guarded with his thoughts, at least around me, I don’t think he’s put two and two together about why I’ve been happy lately.

Which is good.

“Yeah, I guess I have.” The last thing I’ll do is elaborate.

Although my mood is definitely positive today, I didn’t sleep very well. Vivid dreams plagued me. Dreams of Mira in the throes of passion, alight with energy, sensuality. And while that would normally have made for an amazing night, in my dream, I wasn’t the one bringing her pleasure.

Rai was.

Why the fuck would my brain, mine, force me to see something so amazing through the eyes of someone else? It didn’t make any sense. And it also made me a bit grumpy when I woke up.

I was even more grumpy when I found myself all alone at breakfast and unable to track down the thoughts of Mira, Aubrey, or Rai.

I mean, I’m still happier than I’ve been in years, and I am stoked that my curse isn’t

ruining my life so much now, but honestly, today is not the day for this shit. I don't like not knowing things.

I'll just have to scour the whole fucking campus and track them down.

After I get out of here.

"Have the breathing exercises been helping?"

I laugh before I can think better of it. Shifting on the couch, I lean forward with my elbows on my knees, hands clasped. "I think I've just accepted it."

"Accepted it?"

"That things will never change. Why fight when destiny is already set?"

Laurant's eyebrow quirks. "Your mood has nothing to do with Miranda Amato?"

Mira's name on his lips enrages my soul. The beast inside me slithers, roars, and a growl forms in my chest. I don't fight it.

His arms cross, eyes narrow. "I don't need to tell you how dangerous this is."

That creature pushes and prods inside me. He is a threat to our Omega, it seethes.

"Maybe no one knows how dangerous I am." My voice is borderline animalistic, low, and menacing.

"I'm not your enemy—"

"Aren't you?" I spit. "You're one of us. Cursed . And here you sit," my arms gesture

around the room, “warm and cozy. Safe.” I rise then, an ache forming in my gums as I go on. “One of these days, Laurant, you’re gonna have to pick a side. You wanna continue being a Beta lapdog that grooms your own kind to be sold into slavery? Or do you want to be an instrument of change?”

I have no idea where these words are coming from, but I feel them, believe them. What I say is right. My bones hum with the desire for progress, for retribution.

Rebellion.

I lean in close to his wide-eyed face and use all my strength to push my next words into his mind. “A reckoning is coming, Laurant. Be sure you’re on the right side of history.”

As I stand to full height, his body collapses against the back of his chair, as though his whole form is deflated. I take a moment of self-satisfaction to look at him before turning for the door.

“Colton.”

Laurant’s voice is small, but there’s a touch of pleading in it that compels me to turn back.

The skin around his green eyes grows tight as he thinks louder than I’ve ever heard him, deliberately sending a silent message my way.

“Aubrey. They’re taking him. Now.”

When the announcement bell rings unexpectedly, it sets me on edge.

“Everyone report to Training Ground One immediately and be seated.” The male

voice that rings through the P.A. system is devoid of emotion as it tells us to move, repeating the same command two more times.

Thoughts are abuzz all around, fearful and curious. This is all very irregular, and everyone knows it.

When I arrive, it's with a sea of others, but I find Mira and Rai instantly and rush over to them. "Where the fuck have you two been?"

They look at each other, despite Rai's blindfold, then back at me. Mira's thought pushes into my brain. "We'll talk after."

I'm not a patient person, but she's right. This isn't the time. I frown as we make our way to the mid-level bleachers and sit together, Rai to my left and Mira to my right. When we sit, Mira asks aloud, "Where's Aubrey?"

My body stiffens. They haven't seen him either. And that lapdog Laurant told me...

I look at her. "Later."

She doesn't protest, though she obviously wants to, just like I had. It's written all over her face. Her thoughts are easier to read now that she's near me, and that comforts me in a strange way I've never experienced. But there's still some barrier between us that didn't exist before, and it makes me fidgety.

When thoughts in a language I don't recognize begin to flood my brain, my gaze snaps up to the center of the room, where I find several Cursed soldiers wearing GBE uniforms, their collars bright halos around the dark camouflage material. One turns to another and whispers to him, and I can see the red patch on his upper arm indicating he represents—is owned by—the Kingdom of Russia.

Two men in suits stand off to one side, talking to each other, and while I can't understand their thoughts, I can feel the intent behind them. One of these men, the taller and youngest of the two, is angry beyond reason and filled with hatred.

He walks to stand alone in front of the lined-up soldiers and, without a word, demands our attention, which we give him in silence.

When he speaks, his accent is thick, his voice booms without a microphone. "My name is Damir Ivanov. I am second seat in the GBE Council."

Well, shit. This can't be good. The thoughts all around agree.

"I came here today on official business. An auction. But what I find instead is weakness. Freedoms no Cursed should be allowed. You are all allowed to live and laugh and do what you please. This ends. Now." He impatiently snaps his fingers a few times at an entryway, and before there's any movement, I hear them: Frenzied and fearful thoughts, hateful and defiant.

Four are marched in at gunpoint, two male Alphas, one male and one female Omega, additional soldiers walking drag behind them, wielding collar control boxes.

The world stops turning.

"They're my life."

"I am proud to die for them."

"This wasn't supposed to happen..."

"I love them!"

I am looking at our future; mine, Rai's, Aubrey's, and Mira's.

These four are a pack. Cursed, and a pack. Mated.

Discovered.

I forget how to breathe as they're brought before Ivanov and put on their knees, facing all of us. Both Omegas are crying, their tears stain their shirts. The two Alphas have obviously been beaten, their faces bruised and swollen, blood staining their shirts and some still dripping to the ground from noses and eyes.

"Some of you have been very free," Ivanov spits. "Spreading lies about a rebellion of Cursed mongrels coming to save you." His hateful gaze sweeps across the bleachers, like he's trying hard to peer into our souls. "There is no rebellion." Lie. He knows there is. "No one is coming to save you." Another lie. He's afraid of something...someone. "And those who spread these lies, those who decide to go against the law and... mate without the Council's consent, will pay the price. And make no mistake—you freaks of nature will never be given permission to procreate outside of a laboratory. And if you get that privilege, it will be with an audience in attendance. Your offspring will be taken from you the moment it is born. It will be raised to be a soldier from infancy, and you. Will. Never. See it again."

Mira gasps beside me, soft enough I don't think many could hear it, and I want so badly to comfort her. Take her from this place. But I can't even hold her fucking hand in public.

This Beta monster's hatred stems from something deep. Something he's hiding, maybe even from himself. While I can't understand the words in his mind, the emotions are clear as day. He means everything he says.

The thoughts of the pack, however, I understand very well.

“ How did they find out?”

“ We were so careful!”

“ He’s not even showing yet.”

“ We’re going to die...”

Fuck. The male Omega is pregnant. That means the suppressants didn’t work. How could that be?

Even being discreet in this venue is a risk, but I have to try. I have to touch Mira and Rai. It’s still easier for me to communicate in someone’s mind if I touch them.

I put my hands down on the bench between us so that my pinkies touch the outsides of both their thighs. Mira’s thoughts, which were mere whispers, are so much louder now. And although I don’t want to frighten her any more than she already is, it’s imperative that I tell her, and Rai, what I know about what’s happening below.

So that’s what I do.

Their reactions come in a rush of outrage and fear, but I latch onto one visual that invades my mind. A scene from the dream I’d had last night. Only...it wasn’t a dream.

Mira and Rai had really mated last night.

What I’d seen in my dreams must have been Rai’s thoughts broadcasting while they mated.

Jealousy and pure dread war inside me, dread winning out almost immediately.

If these GBE fuckers can find this pack, there's no telling how long it will take to find others. To find us.

We should be rejoicing in the fact that we're not alone, that there are more packs of Cursed out there, comrades. But instead...

There are some fleeting thoughts in the crowd that stand out among the rest, strong and undeterred, like they knew. They knew packs existed, fated matings, that the rebellion is a real thing and a war is coming.

I can't tell whose thoughts are whose, but it is an overwhelming flood. There are hundreds of us here, all shackled by these explosive collars, all unable to do anything against these powerless Betas who have all the control.

People are angry. So very angry. And also helpless.

"These four," Ivanov continues, his demeanor growing more boisterous, "dared to go against GBE law. Fornicating, all of them. Orgies," he spits on the ground and mumbles something under his breath in Russian. "Omega whores—"

One of the Alphas roars and leaps to his feet to lunge at Ivanov, but before he reaches him, his collar turns red, and there is a pop, loud and echoing off the walls. His head explodes in a mass of red. Pink, gray, and white chunks scatter and blood smears across the floor in their wake. The gore is splattered across all the soldiers, the remaining pack that kneels before us, and Ivanov himself, who, with a look of utter disgust, wipes the matter off his face with his fingers and flings it to the ground.

While the two Omegas gape in horror, the female trembling, the second Alpha growls. His body begins to grow larger, muscles bulging so much they tear his shirt. Just as his teeth begin to grow long inside his open mouth, the male Omega flings himself at the beastly Alpha and screams, "No!" just before both their collars turn

red.

Pop. Rain of blood and flesh.

There is a sensation in my throat, some mix of a gag and a sob.

A biting pressure increases on my knee as Mira grips it tight, her nails digging in, blunted by my jeans and her gloves. The beast in my chest slithers and threatens to growl, every sense in my being driven to scoop her into my arms and run as far away from this place as possible.

Instead, I am paralyzed, looking at the blonde Omega female who has all but collapsed to the floor with grief. Her mind is...empty. She looks at the fallen bodies of her pack, a slight tremor in her folded form, but no thoughts form in her mind. She's completely shut down.

Ivanov takes a step forward, brushing more splatter from his suit, then he turns his back to us and points to one of the soldiers lined up shoulder-to-shoulder. Then his arm sweeps to the Omega, and he says, his tone crisp and authoritative, "Ubrat."

I don't know what the command means, but the intent in his voice, in his mind, is...death.

I look at the soldier, the Cursed Alpha. His thoughts race, the words are Russian, but the panic is unmistakable. He does not want to follow this order. But like me, like all of us, he is powerless to defy without putting his life in danger, too.

The Betas know what they're doing. They enslave us, put our lives in their hands, turn us against each other in every way possible. War isn't the only battle we're forced to wage.

The soldier takes a shaky step forward, his foreign thoughts become repetitive, and the only thing I can pick up is a name: Konstantin. It's his. He's telling himself something over and over again, psyching himself out by the energy of his words.

His steps are stiff as he leaves the lineup, circles the pile of bodies, stands before the Omega with his back to us. All my brain will process is how impossibly tall this Alpha is; he must be more than six and a half feet. The angle we're sitting at, the Omega isn't hidden by his towering frame. She moves for the first time in what feels like an eternity, tilting her pale, tear-stained face up at him, blue eyes wide, pleading. Not for her life. For death.

She longs to be with her pack, the ones she loves. Those who were taken from her.

The soldier, Konstantin, extends a shaking arm to her. His thought is so clear, so clean, and in English.

“I'm sorry.”

The Omega begins to glow from the inside, so bright her bones appear as shadows beneath her skin. A scream rings throughout the room for a fraction of a second before her entire body is consumed by flame, a white hot blaze from within, a pile of ash left in its wake.

Dead. All four of these Cursed—people that, if pressed, I couldn't tell you their names or if I even had a class with them in the ten years I'd been in the system—are dead. A pack, like mine, snuffed out just for existing. Maybe for knowing too much. Definitely for procreating.

Konstantin returns to his spot among the other soldiers, and Ivanov turns to look over the silent crowd. I know we're all in shock because of the lack of thoughts all around me, even when I concentrate and try to pick them up.

“I trust you all understand what happens to those who break our laws.” His arms spread, commanding us all to look at the consequences. “I will report to the Council, and we will make changes here. Prepare yourselves.”

Ivanov snaps his fingers, and the lineup of soldiers swiftly escorts him out of the building, leaving behind the massacre.

No one moves for the longest time, and then some begin to rise and leave, and thoughts pick back up again. Rage. Fear. Disbelief. Loathing. And in the midst of all that, one internal voice stands out and invades my mind.

Something taps my shoulder in time with a repetitive thought.

“The rebellion is real. The rebellion is real. The rebellion is real.”

My head snaps in the voice’s direction. Laurant. He stares straight at me, pale as paper, eyes like saucers.

“Find them.”

How the fuck am I supposed to do that?

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Aubrey

“ I’m sorry about this, Modumo.” Those were the only words Lieutenant Yarr said to me this morning. He then escorted me, and about ten other Cursed, to Training Ground Five, a vast indoor facility I’d only been in a couple of times before.

Our instructions, given by a man in a lab coat, were to sit on the bleachers and await further instructions.

Some of the expressions displayed on the other Cursed’s faces are fearful, some are confused, others resigned. I’d like to think I’m still the stoic man I was yesterday, but the discomfort of fear grows in my chest, and I’m sure it can be seen in my eyes.

The building’s interior reminds me of the gymnasium at my old elementary school: Bleachers covering two of the four walls, the floor between so polished, people’s shoes squeak when they cross it. The lighting is dim, and it’s difficult to see in the corners, but I feel people there. Their eyes watching.

At the center of the floor is a raised platform. Some of the soldiers wheel in an array of objects and set them up on either side of the stage, and I know that my fear is warranted.

I’m here to be sold.

They want to take me from my friends. From...Miranda.

The beautiful woman had stolen my heart before I realized it. Now all I can do is sit

here, waiting to find out where I will be sent to die, wondering why I'd bothered to keep away from Miranda. Why I'd denied the pack I know to be mine.

Why did I try so hard to get them to hate me if I'm just going to be sent to my death on some battlefield far away? I could have been happy, if just for a little while.

There's movement inside my chest, restless and angry, a growl forming that I force into silence.

These people can't know how I feel. I have to remain indifferent. Go along with the motions. And then...

...What?

And then I'll get sold off to the highest bidder and sent to whichever territory they hail from.

And then, maybe one day, I'll see them again. Colt. Rai. Miranda.

Maybe I'll get to embrace them before we kill one another in the name of a war we should have no part in.

For hours, we sit there in silence before a name is called, far louder than necessary.

"Burr, Jason."

The soldier who shouts his name is no one I've ever seen before, his stoic demeanor not abnormal for one of the GBE.

Jason, a guy who came to the academy a couple of years after I arrived, makes his way down the bleachers on stiff and shaking legs, his pale eyes wide, brown hair a

nest of curls atop his head, making him look far younger than he must be. His frame is small, and if he has any muscle on him, it's hidden beneath oversized clothing.

“Over here,” the soldier commands, gesturing to the side of the stage area where a few makeshift walls had been erected, each constructed of different materials, from drywall to solid metal.

Jason walks to the drywall frame and looks to the soldier for direction.

“You're to tell us what you see behind each obstruction. Go.”

The poor guy takes a huge gulp of air, then turns his back to face the first wall. In a weak voice I barely hear, he stutters through declarations like, “V-vase,” and “C-comp-puter.” He makes it to the solid metal wall and says, “N-nothing.”

“Very good. Head to the platforming area and face this way.”

Jason does as instructed, and before he even makes it up the steps, a female Beta emerges from the shadows and stands at the base of the stage. Her designer skirt suit and molded glossy hair scream “I am important,” and I immediately loathe her despite never encountering her before.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she sings, “let us begin. This is a reconnaissance unit trained for stealth infiltration, hacking, and decryption. We'll start the bidding at one hundred thousand.”

My brain barely processes the starting number before it's doubled, then more than tripled, before the female shouts, “Sold! To the Republic of Arabia.”

There's movement in the shadows, and I can just make out some hand-shaking and murmured congratulations.

If the RA is here bidding, that means everyone else in the building is an allied territory of theirs. A purchase by one territory is like an asset for them all. Until they're no longer allies, anyway.

A soldier whom I rarely encountered but recognize as one of the academy guards leads a shell-shocked Jason from the stage and out of the building.

This little show goes on for eight more Cursed: demonstration, bidding, sale, escorted from the grounds. There are only two of us left when the soldier calls, "Modumo, Aubrey."

I knew this was coming, and yet shock still courses through my body.

I hate it. I hate this.

Why is this happening now? Why couldn't this have happened before she appeared in my life? It would be hard enough leaving Colt and Rai behind, but Miranda? I can't...I just...can't...

Not without being able to apologize for how I treated her.

When my mind clears, I'm standing by the soldier directing the auction, and I hadn't even realized I'd moved a single muscle. The beast inside my chest slithers and writhes with fury, but remains silent. For a moment, I consider using my curse to bring down the whole building and make a run for it. But I can see now that the soldier shouting orders holds a collar controller in his hand, and other soldiers in the shadows have them clipped to belts, the telltale amber light blinking at a steady pace. Any of them could blow my head off in an instant, and even if they didn't, others would track me down and do it. Or maybe the collars really do have the range the GBE claims, and they could detonate mine from thousands of miles away without exerting the effort to track me down.

I'm on the wall side of the stage, where some now have singe marks and holes straight through them from previous demonstrations.

“If the representatives would please move to the other side of the room.” This soldier I've never met obviously has a file on me to take their safety into account before I use my curse.

He turns his hawkish eyes on me. “Take down each of these walls.”

Part of me wonders what the other Alpha's curse is, because there won't be anything left for him to attack once I'm done.

My jaw set, I assess each wall. Drywall, concrete, stone, metal. I could prolong this suffering of mine and take them down one at a time, but why? I'd only be hurting myself, delaying the inevitable.

Instead, I back up about fifty paces, align myself at the center, and before that soldier moves out of the way, I scream.

I roar like I've never done in my life, the force of my voice sending a sonic boom in front of me in an arc, decimating all the walls which slam into the building's frame and turn to dust, all but the metal wall which crashes straight through the building and flies outside, leaving a gaping hole in its wake.

When I shut my mouth and silence my voice, tears stream down my face.

I hadn't just shouted. I'd screamed her name.

Miranda.

No one would be able to decipher what I said, of that I was sure. But never had I

evoked my curse by using a word so dear to me.

I check out mentally during the auction portion. I do pick out words like “front-line warrior,” and, in the end, the bidding concludes at over one million credits.

I am going to the Kingdom of Russia. Where it is cold and icy, and I will forever be reminded of her.

It’s Lieutenant Yarr who leads me from the training ground and back to the academy building.

“They’re staying the night,” he says, his voice strangled. “They’ll take you first thing tomorrow morning.”

When we’re outside my dorm door, Yarr claps my arm and grips it tight, his expression solemn but his eyes filled with emotion. “You’re a good man, Aubrey,” he tells me earnestly. “Do not die out there.” He leans in, his voice low. “No matter what you need to do, stay alive.”

He’s gone before I can process his words.

Before I scan my eye to unlock my room, I know this isn’t where I want to spend my last hours here. Not alone, not even with Colt if he’s in there.

My feet start moving, and before I know it, I’m jogging, then running through the curved hallway until I reach the door I’d been seeking and pound my fist against it three times.

When it swings open, she’s there, her silver eyes wide, filled with tears. Her lips part, but no words come. Instead, she flings herself at me, her arms around my neck, where she firmly plants her lips.

And all I can think is, Death in Miranda's arms, I can accept peacefully.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

A few hours earlier...

Here, at the edge of the woods, I find my solitude, sitting cross-legged on the ground and looking deep into the thick treeline.

That pack. They're dead.

Is that our future? Is death all we have to look forward to?

It can't be. It just...can't.

Now that I know I can touch Rai, that I can probably touch Colt, and even Aubrey, there's no way I can lose them. Not that I would have wanted to lose them before, but this all has some deeper meaning. I know it in my bones.

That beast in my chest chuffs, and its hackles rise again at the thought of that assembly. That...massacre. They were murdered. And one of them was murdered by one of our own!

I know he was forced. I know he had no choice. I know that this is the future that awaits us all, used as tools, weapons, forced into wars we had no hand in waging, left hopeless. But to see the cruelty first hand...

There's a shuffling in the grass ahead of me that puts me on edge, and I move to rise, but a little white head with tall ears tipped in black peers out from the brush, and I

still my movements. It's an arctic hare, like the one I released what feels like a lifetime ago.

The little guy's nose wiggles as his head jerks upward, then side to side, until he nibbles on some moss growing on a nearby tree trunk. His little nibbles bring a smile I never expected to my face. When he looks at me, I get the impossible sensation that this rabbit is the same one I released. But that would be impossible. The grounds here are completely surrounded by a wall. Even with several gates, Laurant and I had taken that hare far from here. And yet...

The little ball of fluff slowly inches closer. His crawl turns into a hop, and the rabbit is suddenly in my lap, looking up at my face with a tilted head, one ear turned sideways.

I can hardly breathe, as I slowly move my gloved hand to his fur. Once there, I stroke the little guy's back, and at once, he leaps again, this time onto my upper chest where, to my horror, he nuzzles my neck.

Despite my cry of despair, tears threatening to stream down my face at the death of this small and innocent creature, when I pull him from my body, he's still a rabbit. He's alive.

When the tears fall now, they're filled with relief and wonder and utter disbelief.

The rabbit seems unafraid and unbothered as I hold him in one of my arms and pull the glove from my right hand. When I pet him with my bare hand, he's even softer than I ever imagined, and the tears stream faster down my face.

When his little dark eyes look at me again, I whisper, "Thank you."

There's no way this creature knew the danger he was in. There's no way he's the

same rabbit I released. And yet, I feel a kinship with him I can't explain.

The beast inside my chest has remained calm and still since this little guy appeared, as if it, too, was fascinated.

“Looks like you made a new friend.”

I turn to find Colt standing behind me. I don't know how long he's been there; likely, my quiet sobs distracted me from his arrival. Sniffing and taking in his fresh grass and rain scent, I look back at the rabbit. “Actually, I think it's an old friend.”

Colt's smile is sad as he carefully sits beside me, my knee touching his thigh, his legs stretched out in front of him. “Can't help but notice you're touching the little fuzzball.”

I jolt at the realization that I never got the chance to tell Colt what had happened between Rai and me, and the apparent aftermath for us both. Giving the little rabbit one last pet, I place him on the ground. “You'd better get back home, little one. I want you to stay safe.”

The rabbit tilts its head at me again, as if it understands what I've said to it and is considering my words. Then, he turns and dashes off, disappearing into the brush. I watch after his retreat for a while in silence, when Colt gives a small huff of laughter, and I look at him. “You're not unlike that hare, you know? Cute, acclimated to the cold, and—” he grins, a little wicked “—I bet you're soft to the touch, too.”

I bite my bottom lip and smile before twisting my body toward his, taking his face in my hands, and pulling his lips to mine. He doesn't react at first, but it only takes a moment for him to run his tongue along the seam of my mouth seeking entry, which I readily grant him. His hands come up to grip my face, mirroring me, but before long, his hands are in my hair, gripping it tight at the roots, pulling my head back and

forcing my mouth to open wider so he can feed on it like he's ravenous for a taste of me.

The creature in my chest shivers with delight.

By the time Colt is on his knees, hovering over me, his tongue circling and flicking at mine with a sensual playfulness, I am yanking at the glove on my still-covered hand to toss it on the ground. Running my fingertips and then my palms under his shirt, up over the divots of his abs, then the mounds of his pecks, we both groan in unison.

He pulls his lips from mine with something like a snarl. "As much as I want this, we're not safe out here." His breath comes fast and ragged as he leans his forehead against mine. "I will never risk your life."

His words sober me, the creature in my chest also acquiescing without argument.

As he rises to his feet and brushes the dirt from his knees, I grab my gloves and rise as I put them back on.

"Come on, little Snow Bunny," he says with a crooked grin as he puts his hand on the small of my back. "We'd better get back inside."

I flash a bemused smile his way. "Snow Bunny, huh?"

Colt lets out a laugh.

We walk back to the academy building side-by-side, a warmth building in my chest. This feels...right. Just like with Rai last night.

My Alphas and I were meant to be together. Meant to be a pack, bearing each other's marks and living together forever. And now that I've discovered this fact, these

fucking Betas want to separate us. Diminish our bond, our power. Kill us for belonging together.

They fear us.

That creature speaks to me once more, and I feel Colt startle at my side, his hand still on my back as he peers at me curiously.

You heard that? I think hard at him.

He gives an almost imperceptible nod. “We need to talk. About a lot of things. I’ll tell Rai to meet us at your dorm.”

They’re going to take Aubrey!

About an hour after the three of us convened in my room, we’d communicated with Colt by thought, all about what had happened the night before: How I went into heat for the first time, how Rai and I mated and marked one another, how apparently now we both had some semblance of control over our curses.

Colt took it all in with a modicum of awe, but not as much surprise as I’d expected. “I actually knew a lot of this already. Somehow, I connected with Rai’s mind in my sleep while you two were...”

Rai, who had uncovered his face once he entered the room, raised one perfectly sculpted black eyebrow at him.

Colt laughed, I assume having a private conversation with Rai. Then he sobered and dropped the bombshell on us.

Aubrey was up for auction.

The second he said it, the beast in me went on a rampage in my chest, and I clenched my fists and paced furiously.

“Hime.” Rai’s voice is quiet but stern, calling my attention to him. He nods his head in my direction, and I turn my confused gaze down my body, my mouth gaping.

My hands are encased in ice. It covers my forearms to my fingertips in some strange claw-like form, the tips of my fingers sharp and curved.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, breathless. “What the fuck is this?”

“You need to calm down.” Colt is eerily calm. “I know you’re upset. We all are. But we need to figure out what to do, as calmly as possible.”

I look at the glistening ice, sharp and deadly, opening my hands to find that it moves with me, like a second skin.

Kill them all.

That is not helping, whatever you are.

I frown at myself—at the creature who’s growing more brazen each moment—and take in a deep breath, then let it out slow, willing the ice to recede. To my surprise, this actually works.

“Good job,” Colt tells me as I sit beside him on my bed.

The dorm lock beeps, setting us all on edge, and a ragged Nyx enters the room huffing and puffing with an oversized duffel in her grasp. When she spots us all in the room, she freezes mid-step with brows raised. “Uh, hey, guys.” Her tone is questioning as her gaze pierces into me.

I wave her inside hastily, and she closes the door behind her, dropping her heavy bag on the stone floor with a thud.

“ What’s, uh...going on?” She sounds nonchalant, but the concern on her face is evident.

I trust Nyx. I know that she won’t betray us. And so, I make a decision and turn to Colt. “We need to tell Nyx what’s happening. Everything. Safely.”

My beautiful Alpha looks at my friend for a moment, then back at me before turning to Rai, who rises from the chair at the only desk in the room and comes to sit beside me. I think that’s the moment Nyx realizes that Rai’s face is uncovered, because she stares at him hard.

“ You’re as hot as your brother.”

I stifle a laugh. My Alpha is, indeed, beautiful, but he stiffens beside me and grasps my arm like a frightened child.

Nyx scoffs, eyes rolling upward. “I’m not interested, I assure you. I have enough boy trouble.” She emphasizes “boy” in a way that draws a sympathetic look from me. I want so badly to ask her all about the war games excursion, especially about what happened between her and Erich, but it’s not the time.

As Nyx slowly makes her way to her bed across from us, I pull off my gloves and grasp Colt’s and Rai’s hands in mine.

She gapes at us, and I think she might faint right there.

“Nyx,” Colt somehow says inside all of our minds at once, including an increasingly shocked Nyx, “Mira trusts you. I know that trust isn’t misplaced.” He squeezes my

hand. “I swear that you can trust us like we trust you.”

Nyx’s gaping face gives a slow, affirmative nod.

“I know you feel a connection to a couple of the Alphas here.”

She pales, her mouth slamming shut.

“Trust,” he reminds her. “You have to know that we have the same connection you do with them.”

Her chocolate eyes grow tight as she nods again, swallows audibly.

“I also know that...”

As he trails off, I look at him as his jaw flexes before he continues.

“You haven’t had a heat.”

Nyx’s eyes dart to me, and before I can defend myself, Colt says, “Mira would never betray your trust, Nyx. My curse, remember?”

She blinks a few times, then looks back at me apologetically, but I understand her fear all too well.

Colt looks at me in question, and I think at him, Tell her everything.

“Mira wants me to tell you that she experienced her first heat with Rai.”

There’s an audible gasp as Nyx’s gaze snaps to me, eyes wide, swimming with newly formed tears, and filled with more questions than I could possibly decipher.

Colt goes on to explain our mating and the aftermath of it.

“We’re all meant for one another,” he goes on. “Even though we haven’t mated, I’m immune to Mira’s curse, and we are certain Aubrey is, too. And when we touch, there’s this...calm...” His head shakes slow. “I can’t really explain it, but I know the significance is huge.”

Nyx’s expression turns earnest, and her jaw works like it wants to speak aloud while I’m pretty sure she’s thinking hard at Colt.

He puts his hand up to stop her. “I don’t know anything for sure, but I would place a high cash bet that you have the same kind of bond with Erich Byrne and Laurant.” He says the headmaster’s name with a touch of distaste. “At this point, with what we know, everything points to fate. Mates, pack.” His head shakes slow again. “We know these things are forbidden. Alphas and Omegas can’t take a shit without Beta approval, and we Cursed have it even worse.” Colt turns to me, a flare of anger in his mismatched eyes. “We never know what histories are hidden from us. What if this...our bond...is the way it’s supposed to be?”

Everything Colt says makes such perfect sense that I’m mad at myself for not thinking of it, even though Rai and I only mated last night. I hadn’t had much time to consider what was going on since the murders at the assembly, and then worrying about Aubrey’s fate.

“But we are all in even more danger than before.”

Nyx looks both frustrated and concerned.

Colt tells her about everything that she missed today at the assembly. When he finishes the morbid retelling, she looks like she might be sick.

“There’s more,” he continues. “Aubrey is being auctioned today.” Colt takes his hand from mine to rub both his palms down his face and lets out a deep sigh. “Your man Laurant told me after our session this morning, and no one’s seen Aubrey all day. I haven’t been able to access his thoughts, either. I don’t know if that means he’s already gone.”

He isn’t. I can feel he’s still here, though I can’t explain how. I place my hand on Colt’s knee, trying to comfort him. His hand rests on top of mine.

Three loud bangs on the door make me jump out of my skin, or more accurately, off the bed.

I know who it is before I even open the door.

Aubrey.

He stands in the doorway looking ragged, his mocha skin pale, like he’s in shock. His shoulders rise and fall with huge breaths.

He’s safe!

Tears fill my eyes, and my lips part, but no words escape. I jump into his arms, wrapping mine around his strong shoulders before pressing my lips to the side of his neck and keeping them there, soaking in the warmth of his skin and his juniper and chili pepper scent.

“ You’re not going to die, Aubs.” Colt speaks these words out loud, and it makes me back up to look Aubrey in the face before I place my bare hands on either side of it.

He’s whole. He’s mine.

I guide him into the room and shut the door, seeing the moment he realizes the dorm is packed and everyone else looks nearly as bad as he does. When his gaze lands on Rai, his eyes uncovered, Aubrey looks at Colt, who translates his thoughts. “It’s good to see you, and to be seen, brother.”

Rai gives him his beautiful smile before standing and clapping Aubrey on the back. “I wasn’t sure I’d see you again, my friend.”

Aubrey’s gaze falls to the ground before his head shakes.

Colt lets out a frustrated sigh, then tells us all, quietly, what Aubrey is thinking. How he had been brought to auction. How they made him demonstrate his curse, and they bid on him. How he was going to be taken to the Kingdom of Russia first thing in the morning.

My mind whirls with the information, and as it does, that creature in my chest growls. That protective anger turns into a roar that I let escape, and every eye in the room snaps to me. Seething, growling, my voice is not entirely my own when I spit, “No. They will not separate us.”

Colt takes that moment to tell Aubrey about the assembly. When he mentions the pack’s execution and the Councilman’s mention of the rebellion, Aubrey signs, What can we do?

I have no idea, but I do know I would rather die than live without my Alphas.

“I’ve intercepted some interesting thoughts over the past few months. One person gave a possible location to find the rebellion.” Colt looks at each of us in a sweeping motion. “It’s a long shot, but...we may find help there. Even if no one’s there, it could be a place to lay low. It’s supposedly north of here, but way too far away to go on foot.”

“ How would we make it?” Rai asks aloud, his hand gripping the glowing collar around his neck. The same one anchoring us all here. The thing they’ll use to kill us if we run.

Aubrey stiffens beside me, then signs again. Diplomats are staying here tonight. They may have a helicopter fueled and ready to take them to the airport.

“ I heard several helicopters today.” Rai’s eyes close, and he lets out a long breath, slow and steady, his posture straight. Every once in a while, his head ticks slightly in different directions. When his eyes open again, he looks...surprised. His voice is airy and quiet. “There are two still here. I can feel them.”

“We have to try.” Colt’s voice in my mind is more determined than I’ve ever heard it. Then his head whips to Nyx who has risen from her bed, sporting that “don’t fuck with me” look she wears so often when challenged.

“ What?” I ask on a whisper.

Colt’s voice rings clear in my mind. “Nyx thinks that she can short the power source of the explosive charges in our collars so Rai can disable the locks. She thinks it’s the thing shielding Rai’s curse from affecting the collars.”

I turn wide eyes on my friend. Tell her no way! It’s too dangerous for her to get involved.

One of Nyx’s dark red brows rises as she crosses her arms over her chest and stares me down, eyes narrowed.

“Uh, she says that you can’t tell her what’s too dangerous, and don’t even try. She says that this is as much for her as it is for us.” He looks at her again. “Look, I said I don’t know if the rumors are true, Nyx. This could all be for nothing. If you’re able to

disable the explosives and we get these collars off and we actually make it out of here, we may just be on the run forever.”

Nyx’s head tilts to the side, her hands landing on her hips.

“Okay, okay. So, we get the collars off and make a run for the airfield. Rai, we’re counting on you to get us in the air.”

Rai gives a solemn nod in response.

Colt looks at us. “We’ll need to be fast, and careful. And...we may need to take out some of the soldiers, however we can.”

I huff a bitter laugh at the same time as Rai and Aubrey look unimpressed, like they’re just looking for an opportunity.

Then, Rai’s brows draw tight beside me, his lips form a thin line before he speaks in a quiet voice. “The power sources...I never considered they were shields.” He looks at Nyx. “If you’re sure, then I trust you.”

Nyx nods vehemently, like she has been planning something like this for years and has the whole thing plotted out.

I guess it’s possible. She’s had the collar on far longer than I have.

I look at each of my Alphas and at my best friend, whose expression softens when a tear slips from my eye. I grab her in a hug, and she doesn’t hesitate to hug me back. “I know this will work,” she breathes in my ear. “The rebellion has to be real. We will see each other again.”

“Come with us,” I plead, a sob growing in my throat.

She leans back from our embrace, tears in her eyes as well. “I can’t leave my...pack.”

And I understand this decision more than I can express. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I nod at her.

“ This will work,” she breathes, and I realize she may be trying to convince herself.

“If it doesn’t, being dead has to be better than being separated.” Colt’s heavy thoughts envelop my brain.

Turning to him, I grasp his face between my palms and press my lips to his, softly, tenderly. When his arms wrap around my back, his tongue slides across the seam of my lips, coaxing them open so our mouths and tongues entwine. It’s over too soon, but then I’m in Rai’s arms, and we’re doing the same, a fierceness in him and his actions that I’ve only gotten to know as of last night.

When he releases me, I am embraced from behind by Aubrey, who leans down to nuzzle the hair at my neck, breathing in deep and squeezing me tightly.

Our lips don’t touch, and despite our lives being in the balance, he still doesn’t seem to want that from me. Despite my disappointment, I am more than willing to provide what comfort he needs from me, especially now, with our lives in the balance.

I squeeze his bare hands with mine.

When we separate, my heart pounds in my chest, fear and excitement melding as Nyx turns to Rai and asks, “Are you ready?”

Raito

Am I ready? I have no idea, but this is the only opportunity we'll have.

I turn to the crimson-haired Omega. "Let's do it."

She coaxes us closer together and to lean toward her. My head is right up against Colton's, Mira's against Aubrey's. Nyx takes two collar boxes in each hand and whispers, looking right into my eyes. "You have to do it as soon as you're able."

Time is of the essence in every way imaginable.

I nod in confirmation and close my eyes, searching with my mind for the electronic mechanisms in our collars. I've always felt them, but could never manipulate them, and now I hold onto the faint connection with the locks' power sources that my curse grants me.

When I open my eyes, several things happen at once.

Electric bolts embrace Nyx's fingers, and the tingle they cause around my neck grows almost unbearable, but there is an audible click over the crackle, and I gain control of all four collars in her grasp. My eyes burn, my brain tingles, and I am at one with the locking mechanisms, commanding them to disengage.

Then, the power units fall to the floor, and Nyx holds up her empty hands.

"Fuck yes," she breathes.

I blink rapidly, the heat in my eyes dissipates. Standing up straight, I rub my neck, bare for the first time in over a decade.

Free.

I look to my pack, breath caught in my throat. All of them look ready to jump for joy, but there's no time. My brain tingles again, my eyes heat. Something is happening. The security system.

"They know," I tell them. "Or they will. Soon. We have to move."

"Nyx," Mira chokes, and I know she doesn't want to leave her friend behind, but we must.

"Go," she tells us all as she gathers the dead collar boxes. "I'll ditch these." She looks at Mira. "Stay safe."

"I'll lead us out." Colton heads for the door. "I'll listen for anyone coming for us."

Their thoughts.

"I'll monitor the security system." I take a second to push my connection outward, feeling for anything useful, and finding it. "Eastern helipad. The two helicopters are there. Let's move."

Colton opens the door, and we all file out into the hallway. We still stay as quiet on our feet as possible while jogging along the corridor and down the stairs to the main level. Colton puts his fist up in a stop command when we reach the bottom, then motions for us to go in the opposite direction we need to. I trust him, as we all do, so we duck behind a doorway just as a couple of soldiers, rifles on their backs and sidearms on their thighs, walk into the entryway from the back entrance. They chat as

they head up the stairs, and we wait until they're out of sight to start moving quietly again.

There's no additional feed from the security system, but I feel the cameras on the outside of the building. As we keep moving, I push a signal to them to turn in the opposite direction we're going, keeping us out of view and hopefully not alerting anyone who may be watching the feeds live.

No one has ever attempted an escape like this. They won't expect it.

Colton stops us again at the back door, open into the darkness. "There are guards at the helipad," he broadcasts in our minds.

Hang on, I think back at him. There are alarms I could set off all around us, but I need to choose the right one that won't have soldiers crossing our path before we can get clear. There are two possibilities, and I pick the furthest one, hoping I've made the right choice. My brain singing, my eyes searing, the wail of an alarm fills the air. I hear the ruckus of the soldiers nearest to us as they hustle to the source, and Colton shouts into my mind, "Run!"

As we move, I reach out to the furthest helicopter with my curse, extending my arm toward it and willing it to lose power. At the same time, I extend my other arm to the nearest helicopter and will it to come to life, the burning of my eyes growing unbearable, the hum in my brain deafening. But I have to keep going. We have to get away.

"Get in!" I grit aloud, and they do. With my pack secured, I get into the control seat and meld with the controls, my mind and body becoming one with the machine in a way I've never done before. There's no time to bask in awe. We rise off the ground at my slightest whim, the machine following my will. I'm vaguely aware of Colton whispering in my mind, "Three hundred fifty clicks north, northwest." It is a very

specific direction, and I follow it, just as the alarm begins to wail and a peppering of pings and pops hit the belly of the helicopter.

The soldiers' futile attempt to stop us in an armored helicopter.

What's more, I feel a tracking device and a remote control unit. My mind reaches for them, and they are gone at my command, shorted and useless. For good measure, I kill the radio communication as well.

Colton is beside me, Aubrey behind him, and Mira at my back. They shuffle to put headsets on, and Colton passes one to me. I slip it over my head and ears, and everything around me fades away into a form of tunnel vision. My every muscle twitch commands the helicopter.

I am truly at one with the machine.

Part of me is exhilarated, the other is scared to death.

But I have to get my pack to safety.

"Good work taking out the other helo," Colton says in my mind. "That will buy us time."

I nod in confirmation, keeping part of my attention on commanding the machine to go in the right direction. Mira places a hand on my shoulder, which I grasp, rubbing her bare fingers in gentle strokes. My beautiful hime, I think. I will keep you safe.

Mira's hand stills on my shoulder, and I feel her lean forward. "I heard you," she says into the microphone. "Just now. In my headset. I heard you! But...you didn't speak."

Did I communicate through technology? Using my mind?

“Stranger things, bro,” Colton offers aloud, and I turn my head to find him amused.

It should scare me that I feel nothing at this revelation. I guess that’s not entirely true, I do feel something. Right. Like, being at one with my curse, not fighting it but embracing it, is just...right.

This helicopter is capable of flying over two hundred miles per hour, but although the fuel is full, I don’t want to push it too hard in case we can’t stay where we go. But I do fly fast for the first fifty miles or so to get away from the academy. When there’s no chatter for a while, I take a quick glance behind me to find Mira and Aubrey passed out. The stress and anxiety of today’s events must have drained them terribly if they can sleep with this racket.

Colton is still awake but deep in thought, looking out the window to the earth below. Even from this angle, I can see his drawn brow and the concern etched on his face. He must hear an errant thought of mine because he turns to me with his usual cocky smirk before thinking at me with sarcasm, “ Just wondering if I made the right choice bringing us out here, or, you know, if I’ve thrown our lives away.”

I raise a brow at him before looking back at the instrument cluster, ensuring we’re still on the right course and making small mental adjustments. We had no choice. They would have killed us if we stayed. At least we have a chance now. I look at him a moment and then ahead again. That’s thanks to you.

He snorts a laugh. “ Really, it’s thanks to you and Nyx for disabling the collars. Didn’t know you had it in you, man.”

I wouldn’t have been able to do it without Mira. Our mating...changed my curse somehow. Maybe we’ll be able to figure it out now that we’re out of that place.

A bit more than an hour into our flight, something peers over the lightening horizon.

They're structures of some kind.

"Holy shit," Colton says aloud in a whisper. "It's fucking real." He leans forward to get a closer look and begins to point. "Look! They're buildings covered in snow and ice."

I do look, and he is right. Some of the buildings reach high into the sky, some lay lower to the ground, all are pure white and glisten where the rising sun's beams hit them.

"Wow..." Colton's voice in her ears must have awakened Mira, and Aubrey too, as they both lean forward to peer between the seats to get a look at what might just be our salvation. "Do you think there are people in there?"

Colton's head is shaking as he responds. "I can hear thoughts, but they're really distant." He jolts. "They know we're approaching."

Aubrey taps Colton's shoulder, and he responds, "Yeah, arriving in a GBE helicopter can't be a good look if those inside are rebelling."

"Do they seem hostile?" I ask. "Maybe we should land farther back and hike."

"So we can freeze to death when we're this close?" Colton is obviously not a fan of my idea. "Have you seen the way we're dressed?"

Good point. Not one of us has even a coat on.

"There's a wall around those buildings," Mira says. "Let's land outside that by the arch there." She points, and I follow the line of her gesture to where an enormous arch opens up the wall.

I don't wait for a consensus before guiding the helicopter in that direction with my mind. But something is wrong. My body, my mind, both begin to feel light and distant, disconnected.

“ Hey, brother,” Colton says in my mind with alarm enough to jolt me. I hadn't even realized I was falling asleep. “ Hey, deep breaths. Just land us right there, nice and gentle.” His words come fast, a bit panicked. In the back of my mind, I can't blame him. We're in a giant death trap, and I'm losing control of it and of myself.

I get to the spot we're going to land in and begin our descent, but then there's cursing and a loud crash before blackness envelops me.

Miranda

The helicopter slams into the snow-packed ground, groaning metal scraping and creaking as my heart pounds in my chest. When the racket finally stops, the helicopter has also stopped moving. We're still upright, at least, and I take a huge gulp of air.

“ Rai passed out,” Colt offers in my mind as he looks over his shoulder at me and removes his headset. “ I think this was too much of a strain on him. His curse.”

I nod, more to myself than him. I can't even imagine the amount of energy Rai has exerted today, with his newfound control. But he got us here safely. “We have to get him out of here,” I call out as I pull my headset off, too. Aubrey follows suit, and I disconnect my harness and slide from the vehicle, my sneakers sinking into the layer of snow atop the ice.

Colt and Aubrey help pull Rai from his seat, and he's nothing but dead weight. I flinch as they adjust his arms around their shoulders, the tops of his feet dragging on the snow when they turn and face me.

Colt surveys the helicopter. “Rai disabled the tracker, but anyone could see this thing from the air or land.”

Yes, the helicopter is a big black X surrounded by pure white. But what can we do? Even if Aubrey destroyed it, that would create a huge explosion just as easy to see as the vehicle itself.

But what if...?

Before putting more thought into it, I step back a bit and extend my hand, palm down. Eyes closed, I feel for the moisture in the air, the cold temperature all around us. A deep inhale cools my lungs, and I let it out, slow, all the while thinking two things: If Rai can do his best to help us with his curse, so can I. And, I want this helicopter surrounded by camouflaging ice.

The skin of my hands and forearms turns cold before I hear that familiar cracking sound of ice as it forms. I visualize the helicopter encased in a dome of solid white, and my hair rises from my back and shoulders, taken by a breeze that surrounds me. I concentrate harder and open my eyes, demanding my will be done. Demanding it of the elements, of the universe, of my curse.

My hands and arms are encased in jagged ice, sharp claws tip my fingers, puffs of white, cold air emanate from them. I close my hand into a fist, and with the motion, ice springs up from the ground and also forms in the air, thick and solid, covering the helicopter in a dome of white.

I gasp air into my lungs, unaware of how long I'd been holding my breath. Panting, I turn to my Alphas with wild eyes, the ice crumbling from my arms as my body begins to shake.

There is fear mixed with awe in Aubrey and Colt's faces, and Colt gestures to Aubrey before walking out from under Rai's arm and taking me into a firm, warm embrace.

"That was amazing," he breathes, then leans back to look me in the eye. "You are amazing."

I blink up at him, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion that chokes me, and I bury my face in his chest, squeezing him tight as tears stream from my eyes.

I did it. I controlled my curse more than to touch someone.

That familiar slither in my chest returns after a long bout of quiet. Power, it whispers. Curse is a lie.

I startle, my eyes opening again to peer up at Colt, who wears a confused expression.

He still hears it, like my thoughts.

He blinks twice, then backs away with my hand in his. “Come on. Let’s get to that city.”

The arch is taller than the wall itself, looming what must be three stories high, while the walls surrounding it are a story or more shorter. The stone it’s made from is thick and sturdy despite what must be years and years of neglect. Not even the thick coating of ice and the layers of snow clinging to it have affected its sturdiness, as far as I can see.

The entire perimeter is foreboding and unwelcoming, even more so than the academy had been. And I’m not sure what to think of that.

What if we’ve made a mistake? What if this place isn’t safe?

“Relax,” Colt thinks at me. “I can hear the thoughts of the people here better now that we’re closer. They know we’re not GBE and are ready to welcome us. They...were expecting us.” He pauses, his head tilting in that way it does when he’s listening. “They’re in the city center. An old government building.”

You don’t think it could be a trap? I ask.

He huffs a laugh in my head. “I am all up in their brains, Bunny. I won’t let anyone

get the drop on us.”

His reassurance, along with his new pet name for me, has a calming effect.

Passing through the arch, the interior of the city is enormous and blindingly white, the higher the sun rises in the sky. There are old guard posts, and what look like storefronts and office buildings. There are houses of all sizes the further we travel. And then we reach what must be the center, because a building with telltale Greek-style columns sits high on a hill, expansive with steps leading from the pathway to a closed double-door entrance.

We all stop and look up. There’s a sign above the door, protected by the overhanging roof. It’s gold and etched with fading black letters, but written in a language I don’t recognize.

Rai begins to stir in Colt and Aubrey’s grasp and looks at our surroundings, confused, then peers at the two holding him up. “What happened?” he nearly wheezes.

“Don’t worry, bro,” Colt tells him. “We’ve got you. Let’s get inside.”

We climb the steps, and when we get to the door, I walk ahead, the only one of us with free hands, and push the double doors open. They give no resistance as they swing inward and reveal an immaculate marble and gold interior with ornate area rugs, couches, and chairs behind a circular desk at the front. Everything is clean and looks like it could have been furnished today. But it’s as cold inside as it is outside. No fire in the fireplace, and the only light is provided by the sun through untouched, icy windows.

As the doors close behind us with a thud, Aubrey takes Rai to a nearby chair as Colt comes up beside me, brows furrowed. “ I don’t hear them anymore,” he says in my mind. “ As soon as we entered this building, their thoughts just... poof.” He motions

with his hand, fingers touching and then separating with a wiggle like a little explosion.

I frown and move about the entryway, peering at paintings that look like old frescoes from history books, but on varying levels of faded canvas and with golden frames. One giant scene shows a woman in full battle armor, her golden helm adorned with a starburst at the top, dark hair flying in the wind, a glowing golden sword in her grasp. At her side and behind her back are four men, all in similar armor and wielding different weapons. At their feet are bodies, bloodied and battered, gore spilled across the ground.

The woman looks straight ahead, one of those paintings where the eyes appear to follow you wherever you walk, and hers are bright blue like the sky above her.

On the bottom of the frame is a plaque in English: “Omega Morozov and Pack Conquer The Deceivers.”

My lips part in question and awe as Colt, who I hadn’t realized was beside me, whispers, “Would you look at that? Morozov was a female Omega, not a male Alpha. And she had a pack.”

“Much of our true history has been lost over the centuries.”

A female voice booms through the room, startling me and forcing my attention to the floor above us where two people stand behind a banister looking down on us. Both are wrapped in thick cloth from head to toe, their faces and hair obscured. The one beside the female is a male Alpha, tall and muscular, his arms crossed over his chest in a power stance.

Aubrey is beside me in a blink and takes a defensive stance, as though he may use his curse—his power—at any moment.

“I still can’t hear them,” Colt thinks with no small amount of frustration.

“Peace,” the woman calls. Then, her gloved hands move up to pull her head-wrap off to reveal a beautiful woman, her hair dark and mussed, her skin porcelain and even. She’s older than us, although I can’t tell how much.

My gaze shifts from her to the painting beside me and back, my brows rising in surprise. This woman is the spitting image of the warrior.

The woman smiles as she moves to the stairs on one side of the landing. “My ancestor,” she says, as if reading my mind. Is she like Colt? Is that why he can’t read their minds? Then again, I suppose I gave away what I was thinking.

“My name is Willow,” the woman points at herself before gesturing to the Alpha now behind her. “That is my mate, Caius.”

Caius takes that cue to also remove his hood and face cover, revealing a handsome man with mocha skin, dark eyes, and a nose as sharp as his chiseled jaw. His thin lips are set in a straight line, seeming angry, but when our gazes collide, he winks at me.

Unsettling...

“I know what you are.” Willow is on the ground floor with us now, walking slowly toward us, arms at her sides as if showing us she’s unarmed. As if that actually means something for Cursed. “We’re the same,” she continues, “called Cursed by the Deceivers, their jealousy and greed leading those with power down a path of obscurity. Of slavery.” Her gaze shifts across us, and when she looks at me, there’s pain in her blue eyes. So much sorrow that I can feel it in my chest, my eyes blur with tears.

Colt stiffens beside me, and I find his brows drawn and lips parted. His mismatched

eyes look at me before he gives a weak smile and takes my hand.

“We were told to expect your arrival.”

Just as Colt has said. “By who?” I ask.

Her smile is kind. “The Rebellion is everywhere, even inside that horrid academy. And the facility of the young ones.”

I swallow. So it’s all true. Change is coming.

“Who are these ‘Deceivers’?” Rai makes his way to stand with us, his movements sluggish.

“The Betas,” Willow responds, not hiding her disgust. “Not all are our enemy. Most, like you, don’t know the truth. If they did, things may be different.” Her jaw sets. “Make no mistake, however. Every single member of the Beta Council knows the truth. Every high-ranking military official knows the truth.”

“And...what is the truth?” My voice is thin, my heart pounds in my chest.

Willow looks at me with pity in her eyes and takes a deep breath before answering. “There is no curse. All of us are supposed to be this way. Even Betas.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Colton

After Willow dropped that bombshell about curses not being curses, she showed us to a couple of prepared bedrooms, coaxing us with promises of a good night's rest, safe and sound. Then promised to show us things that would change our lives the next day.

No amount of information Willow could share with us would change our lives as much as one fleeting thought I'd captured.

Somehow, Caius was able to block my curse, and for one moment, he relinquished control before slamming the door in my face, just at the right time for me to hear one of Willow's thoughts, like it was just for me.

And a request that I say nothing.

Which puts me in a really shitty position that I won't forgive any time soon.

Rai is fast asleep, still obviously drained from overexertion. Aubrey went off with Caius to tour the grounds' defenses, the only way he'd agree to rest tonight. After I explained that Aubrey couldn't speak without killing him, Caius seemed pleased his company would be as quiet as he seemed to be.

Mira's racing thoughts are a soft murmur inside my mind, too difficult to keep up with. I can feel her spiraling as I leave the bedroom assigned to us Alphas, close the door behind me, and make my way to her door, where I rap softly on the wood. An instant later, she opens the door, and I'm looking down into the face of the woman I

love, those silver eyes wide and worried.

I'd do anything to take her worry away.

I swoop in and capture her lips with mine, those soft, lush pillows part in surprise, then she relaxes as I pull her close in an embrace, sweeping my tongue into her mouth. Guiding us both inside her room, I close the door behind me before breaking the kiss, my hands on either side of Mira's face to guide her to look up at me. I grin. "I've been waiting to do that for hours now."

The smile she gives in response is brilliant, sparkling, and warms my heart in ways I never imagined possible.

This curse has haunted me for half my life. I've never been able to escape its whims, escape the thoughts it forced into my head. And then Mira came into my life, and everything changed. Everything keeps on changing.

"I love you," I say, earnest conviction in my voice and expression. I want her to know how real this is, how deeply it flows.

Her bare hand sweeps through my hair, and I stifle a groan at how nice it feels, having her fingertips brush my scalp.

"I love you, too," she whispers. "So very much."

I crush her in my arms again, swaying a bit to some romantic music in my head that I remember my parents playing in our house when I was little.

Mira's arms wrap under my arms, her hands rest at my shoulder blades. "That's a nice song," she says, causing me to misstep. I hadn't realized I'd been projecting the song into her mind.

“Don’t stop.”

So I don’t. I keep pulling on the memory of that song, playing it soft but clearly in my mind, sharing it with the woman I love as we dance in the sunbeams shining in through the windows.

When the song, or what I can remember of it, ends, I say aloud the thought I’d been holding back. “I can’t believe we made it out.”

She hugs me tighter, her face buried in my chest where she inhales me with a shuddering breath.

Her rose and myrrh scent invades my senses, overloading me in a way I’ve never known. Then that scent mixes with something new, something delectable that makes my mouth water, my teeth ache, and my cock stiffen.

A soft whine erupts from Mira’s chest, and she steps away from me, hand to her lips, eyes frightened. She winces in pain and grips her abdomen with another whine.

Oh no.

Oh shit.

She’s going into heat again.

I can barely get the words out, barely make my body move toward the door, that beast inside my chest growling and chomping, fighting my every move. “I...I’ll go get...Rai...”

My hand on the doorknob, she whines my name, reaches for me. “No...” she’s breathless. “I want you. Need you. Please...my Alpha...”

I've never moved so fast in my life, dashing toward my Omega, my beloved, and lifting her into my arms to carry her to the only bed in the room. A king-sized bed, I note.

I lay Mira on top of the dark red covers, her head leaning against a pillow, and I climb onto the bed like a predator, her silver eyes narrow at me with lust I can feel as much as my own.

"Hang on," she says in a rush, and I blink as she begins to remove her clothes, fast. Unwanted flashes of Rai tearing her clothes off when they'd mated invade my mind, and I raise a brow at her after she tosses her shirt to the floor. "I don't have spare clothes."

Her expression is so innocent, I grin wickedly, though I'm a bit disappointed she has enough sense right now to be level-headed despite her heat.

That disappointment flies right out the window the moment her bra joins her shirt on the floor, and I'm greeted by two glorious pale globes of flesh that I want nothing more than to sink my teeth into. My mouth waters so much that I have to swallow my saliva so it doesn't drip down my chin like an animal.

On her collarbone is a clean bite mark, still red but going pale around the edges.

I want my mark on her more than I ever imagined. Probably because I never imagined I'd have an Omega to mark—to want me to mark her. The damaged, institutionalized Alpha.

Shaking the thoughts from my head, my hands land on the waist of her pants, and she jolts. "I promise not to tear them off." I smirk at her before she relaxes back on the bed. The scent of her slick further invades my senses as I unbutton and pull the zipper of her jeans down. Mira's breathing is shallow and quick, her belly and chest rising

and falling rapidly as she lifts her hips to help me pull the fabric from her legs. I find myself standing at the foot of the bed, flinging her pants to the floor and raking my gaze from her sock-clad feet to the black cotton panties on her hips, to those glorious breasts that rise and fall with her breaths.

I'm frozen in place, hypnotized by her beauty. When our gazes meet, she reaches for me again. Without another thought, I pull the blue long-sleeved Henley from my torso and throw it to the ground violently, and as I undo my belt to remove my pants, I catch her eyes roving over my arms, my obliques, my pecs. For a moment, that cocky grin settles on my face at the thought of being admired, before the haze of lust lifts like a rug being yanked from under me.

I'm frozen, again, realizing exactly what she's looking at.

The lust is gone from her face, too, as if her heat is completely forgotten. The worry in her eyes too much to bear. I avert my gaze and dip down to retrieve my shirt, but Mira's hands are on my skin, and I shiver with uncontrollable desire; that creature in my chest lets out a soft and gentle purr of delight.

Her hand grips my jaw and turns me to face her. "Who did this to you?"

I deflate like a balloon, my ass meeting the mattress and bouncing my body a couple of times. This was not a discussion I wanted to have right now. I didn't want to have any discussions. I wanted to mate my Omega. But it seems the haze has been lifted, reality punching me in the gut yet again.

I look down at my arms, my chest, at the pale, raised skin, ghosts of self-inflicted pain. Smooth or jagged, short or long, the scars of my desperation will haunt me forever.

"I did."

Her arms wrap around my shoulders from beside me, holding me tightly, her voice whispers against my shoulder. “I love you. Tell me.”

My entire body hunches forward, and I let my shirt fall again, giving up on avoiding this. I’d have to deal with it sooner or later. Every ounce of my being knows we’re mates, and this is unavoidable.

So, in the comforting embrace of my nearly naked Omega, her breasts crushed against my bicep, I tell her the truth.

“The first time I heard someone else’s thoughts in my mind, I had no idea what was happening. I thought that I was going insane, like in cartoons. But, you know, not funny.”

My head shakes. “My family never talked about the Cursed, just completely ignored anything to do with them. Switched the channel if they were mentioned on TV.” I frown. “At first, the voices weren’t many. They were manageable, or at least I could hide it. But it was summer and school was out, and my parents weren’t big on letting me go do things with my friends, so I was stuck at home. One day, I heard my mom’s voice say, ‘I hate that bastard,’ while looking at my dad. I thought she’d said it aloud, so I asked her why she hated Dad. She was horrified. Yelled at me for making up stories and sent me to my room. That was when I realized something bad was happening.”

Mira kisses my shoulder, a silent urging to continue.

“Things got way worse from there. I denied it to myself for the longest time, but I finally realized that I was hearing people’s thoughts, and the more distressed I was, the more thoughts would invade my mind. The constant assault drove me crazy. I couldn’t function, couldn’t think for myself. In the throes of mania, I wound up kicking the wall, hard, right at a stud. Pain shot through my body, and there was this

blissful silence that followed.” I grip her forearm across my clavicle, holding it tight, trying to breathe evenly. “I realized that pain would temporarily make the voices go away. Pain granted me relief from this psychosis invading my life.”

“You started hurting yourself for relief,” Mira supplies softly, no judgment in her tone.

I nod and absently trace the raised flesh on my bicep, some straight, some angry and jagged, all created by sharp edges. By my hands.

“I didn’t want to,” I go on, “not really. But I would do anything to be normal. Anything not to have to be sent away.” A sob catches in my throat, and I clear it. “I caught my parents thinking about sending me off into the system, about doing away with their little ‘problem,’” I spit. “Then they started arguing out loud about whose fault it was. Whose genetics created this monstrosity of a boy they had living in their home.”

“You’re not a monstrosity.” Mira’s words hold more conviction than I’ve ever heard. “You do know that, right?”

I nod again in silence. My brain knows it, especially since meeting all the other Cursed in the system. But my heart...I just don’t know. My parents abandoned me like I was trash. The academy was preparing me for a life as a militant slave. What worth could I possibly have?

“Colton.”

My face swings toward Mira, her expression hard, eyes fierce. “You are worth everything. You are worth us all risking our lives to escape that hell. You are worth living every day of freedom we have to the fullest. To make a difference.” Her hands press to the sides of my face. “You are my Alpha. We are a pack.”

My vision swims just before her lips meet mine in a kiss so filled with passion, I can scarcely believe it's real. Her rose and myrrh scent invades all my senses as she flips me onto my back on the bed and straddles my clothed hips. When she trails open-mouthed kisses down my chest, my abdomen, my cock strains against the zipper of my jeans so hard I can feel it as if my trunks aren't between me and the metal.

I let out a groan as she unfastens my belt and pulls my pants, along with my trunks, all the way off my legs, her fingers grazing my skin the whole way.

My cock juts straight up, and Mira's tongue wets her lips from the foot of the bed as she stares at it. As she hooks her thumbs into her panties and shimmies them down her legs, I prop myself up on my elbows and watch every movement, taking in the details of her body, her glorious scent, the way her chest rises and falls with each breath.

She is magnificent. And she is mine.

I need her. I need to taste her.

When she starts to crawl over me, I grab her body and reverse our positions, and she lets out a surprised squeal.

I cage her face with my elbows, run my fingers through her hair, and bring my mouth to hers, dipping my tongue inside. She reciprocates with a moan that turns into a whine, and I know whatever reprieve she'd had from her heat is now over.

It's time to take care of my Omega.

I release her lips and do the thing I've craved since she removed her shirt, sinking my teeth into one of her breasts, making her gasp and her back bow into my mouth.

It isn't a mark, but the creature inside me is pleased with the gesture.

Another quick nip on her other breast, and I trail my way down her body, nibbling and kissing and licking my way down, across her hip bones. She moans and those hips jerk upward toward my face, a small cry the only warning before her slick releases from that glorious pink pussy, nearly soaking the bed below.

When I lean back a bit to slide further down her body, to put those pink, glistening lips right to my face, her whine is...beautiful. I raise my eyes to look at her face, and her silver irises are already on me, unwavering. My cock aches to be inside of her—to rid myself of this celibacy born of disinterest in anyone I've ever met.

But Mira...my Snow Bunny...she is everything.

With a fierce, possessive growl, I dive into her pussy with my face, swiping my tongue slowly across that little nub, making her scream my name with the kind of desperation I feel for her deep in my soul. Swirl and swipe, then I form an O with my lips and suck, drawing another scream of pleasure from my Omega. Another gush of slick, and I can't take it any longer. I move down and slide my tongue inside of her, licking and lapping at her delicious nectar, sweet tang in my mouth, while letting her rub her clit against the tip of my nose, fucking my face.

When she comes, she comes so hard I think she's going to sever my tongue inside her, those soft velvety walls constricting and clamping down and then releasing, over and over.

Her body twitches beneath me, and I smirk. Not bad for a first-timer.

But the job isn't finished. And it's time I had my own dream come true.

I crawl and stretch out like a cat beside her along the bed, wrap my arms around her,

then roll onto my back. My cock stands up perfectly straight, painful in its rigidity, and when Mira moves just right to make me slide between her ass cheeks, I groan as the pleasure shoots to the base of my spine.

With her hips gripped in both my hands, I look up at her face, flushed with pleasure and shining with perspiration. The love I have for her swells inside my chest, taking over every cell in my body, as I growl, “Ride me, my Omega. Take your pleasure from your Alpha.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

“Ride me, my Omega. Take your pleasure from your Alpha.”

Holy shit.

Colt’s command spurs me on, awakening something in me I never knew existed. Something... dominating and fierce.

The creature in my chest purrs silently with delight, and as soon as it does, a loud purr emanates from Colt’s chest, vibrating his entire body beneath my straddling legs.

I know what I want. And now, I’m not afraid to take it.

I reach down, grab his cock in a tight grip and line it up to my entrance as he hisses, “Yesss...”

As I slowly lower myself onto him, a little at a time, the feel of him stretching and filling me is beyond compare. My gaze never leaves his face, taking in every expression shift as I take more and more of his glorious cock into my body with a sigh of pleasure and relief. Those mismatched eyes grow tight with concentration, then soften with pleasure, but never do they move from the sight of our bodies joining.

Just before our hips meet, my body convulses with pleasure, not quite an orgasm but so close, and I feel more slick splash from inside me and coat his cock and lower body. I can’t even fathom embarrassment, the pleasure has too strong a hold on me.

“Ride me, Mira.” Colt’s whisper is reverent, his green and blue eyes pleading with me. For pleasure. Release. Love.

So I do as he asks, my hands on his abs as they flex with each roll of my hips, grinding my still swollen clit against his pelvis, reveling in fullness inside me. His fingers slide across my left forearm until he laces them with mine, gripping tightly. His other hand splays across my lower abdomen and pushes, just slightly, indicating that I should lean back.

I do, and it’s the first time our eyes break contact, two of our hands joined, my free hand on his thigh behind me as I lean back. When the head of his cock hits a spot inside me just right, I gasp and whine until it turns into a moan.

His purr ever increases, vibrating his whole body and mine. And when his thumb presses against my clit, I cry out, convulsing as more wetness gushes from my body. I feel it on my thighs and against my ass as I keep moving, never wanting his cock to stop rubbing that spot.

“Look at you,” Colt breathes. “Look at you using my cock.” He rubs his thumb in small, languid circles against my clit. “Whose cock are you riding, Bunny?”

I jerk atop him, then sigh, “Yours.”

I can feel his head shake, drawing me to look at him again. “Every part of me belongs to you, Mira,” he says with soul-burning adoration. “Forever and always. You own me.” His fingers tighten around mine, and his thumb circles my nub a bit faster. “Tell me, whose cock are you riding?”

A small pinch to my clit makes me scream in pleasure. “Mine!”

“Whose cock?”

“It’s my cock!” I cry. “This cock belongs to me!”

My final words come out like a beastly growl, the pleasure unbearable, my body quaking until I feel myself milk his cock inside me, squeezing over and over as the orgasm wracks my entire body. As I scream his name, he reciprocates and his cock swells impossibly large inside me, pumping jets of come deep inside me as it locks us together. Mating us.

But it isn’t enough.

My teeth ache, and I hiss as Colt pulls me down to him, latching his teeth into the skin above my left breast, right near my heart. He growls and purrs, his tongue sweeps across my flesh until I can’t take it any longer. Instinct, feral and raw, has me grip his hair and pull his head back, his lips coated in my blood glisten in the light.

And then I strike.

My teeth sink into the flesh of his trapezius, close to where it joins his neck. Colt lets out a sound, something akin to a howl, and crushes me in an embrace, his hips pumping shallowly, driving his knot deeper inside me little by little.

His blood, like Rai’s had been, is an intoxicating mixture of sweet and copper, and when I release his flesh, Colt claims my lips with his. Our blood mingles in our mouths, and I swear I can taste the difference between them as they mix, forming a beautiful bouquet, like a fine wine.

We lay in each other’s arms, Colt holding me in a vice-like grip, like he thinks I’ll try to get away. A pang of sadness blooms in my chest at the thought, and I hug him tighter.

When his knot at last recedes, I shift higher on the bed, and Colt rests his half-asleep

head against my breasts with a sigh of contentment. As we quiet and begin to slip away, he whispers my name over and over again, as though he fears he'll forget it.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

“This city was once a central hub for the North,” Willow says over her shoulder as she and Caius guide us around the grounds. The snow is packed and slick beneath our feet as we traverse the streets, hugging buildings as we go. Which makes me feel ridiculous after we all walked through here out in the open a day ago.

“That building was the city hall,” she continues. “We did some converting to make it into a hub packs can stay while they’re traveling or running.”

I swallow hard. How many packs are out there right now, running and hiding? Just wanting their freedom. The genetic dice was rolled and came up “Cursed,” leaving one path in life.

“We’re headed for our bunker in the north.” She leads the way over sidewalks, hopping over railings with less effort than I. She’s done this a lot. She knows the route like the back of her hand.

Caius scrambles over to Willow and leans into her ear. When he pulls back and falls in line, she nods before speaking over her shoulder at us again. “Not much further now.”

Rai was in front of me in the chain, Colt behind me, and Aubrey behind him. Colt has been in a very good mood all morning, I notice with a little smugness. And Rai, he’s been grinning at us both since we met in the hallway before breakfast. The room he’d slept in was right next to mine, so...I assume there’s no hiding what happened. Not that I would. Just thinking about how we mated causes heat cramps, and I can’t have

that happen. I've already been battling a headache since I woke up.

"We can walk in the open once we cross this street."

So we do, and not hugging the ice-crusted stone and brick walls is definitely a reprieve.

Willow hangs back and falls in step beside me with a side-eyed look. "Are you feeling all right?"

I blink at her in surprise. "I'm fine, thank you. And thank you for helping us."

Her smile doesn't reach her blue eyes. "I wish it wasn't necessary, but this is how the world is now." She gestures at me with her chin. "Headache?"

"Uh..." Yes? How did she know?

A grin stretches across her face. "You're very expressive," she says quietly. "You keep rubbing your temples."

I let out a puff of laughter. "I didn't realize. Yeah, I have a bit of a headache."

"We have medical supplies at the bunker. I'll get you some pain medicine."

"Thanks." I give her a close-mouthed smile, to which she nods, then jogs ahead to Caius' side.

The building we finally prepare to enter is all the way at the back of the old village, the icy wall towering right behind it. As Caius opens the door, a roar rolls through the air, sending the hairs on my arms on end.

“What is that?” I breathe.

Rai and Colton stand on either side of me as Aubrey stands off to the side and searches the sky, which draws my gaze upward as well.

In the distance, a mass of nearly black clouds swirls in the sky, melding tightly together. Thunder rolls before lightning cracks loudly, the flashing light almost blinding.

“I didn’t think there were thunderstorms in Iceland,” I whisper, feeling a bit foolish for admitting it.

“They’re very rare.” Willow approaches us and looks up at the storm. As she gestures at it, she explains, “That isn’t a natural storm. It’s a signal.” Her gaze sweeps across all of us. “There are thousands of Cursed living out from under the Beta Council’s thumb. We thrive, despite the circumstances. Many of us live in a settlement not far from this old city.” Willow’s head tilts upward. “That storm is an Omega sending messages to local infiltration units.”

“Infiltration units?” Colt repeats in question.

Willow smiles at him. “The Rebellion is everywhere.” She looks back at the storm, watching for a moment. “The message is in the lightning flashes.” As she releases a long breath, she whispers, “It’s almost time.”

“Time for what?” Rai’s brows draw tight, feeling the same tension I can.

Willow turns back to us, her voice distant as she replies, “To take the academy.”

My heart nearly stutters. “You’re going to save the Cursed there? How?” I breathe.

“I’ll explain inside.”

I look into the eyes of each Alpha before we follow her through the door of the small building. Willow leads us to the back, where Caius is waiting by an enormous metal door, thick with an electronic panel on the side.

“Not exactly a hidden entrance,” Rai comments.

Caius raises a brow at him. “No one can get through this blast door or surrounding walls, I assure you.”

I stifle a grin as Rai’s eyes go white. The control panel comes to light with flashes of light, and just as the door unlocks with a loud, echoing boom, a little white spark leaps from one of his eyes. They’re back to their beautiful onyx when he purses his lips at me in humor.

“Interesting trick, but,” Caius tosses something from his pocket through the now open doorway, and with a bright flash, it explodes in mid-air, making me shriek. “Can you disable the defense system?” His brow raises in challenge.

Rai’s expression grows serious as his eyes go white again. The slowest minute passes when another spark pops from his eye, and another. Then a different sound echoes beyond the door, and Caius gives a nod of approval when he turns back to Rai. “Good. You’d be excellent at infiltration.”

Rai frowns, his now dark eyes angry. “That’s what they trained me for.”

Caius hums before he passes through the door, leaving Willow to wave us through. I take Rai’s hand firmly in mine as we walk down the dark, narrow hall. When the heavy door closes behind us, I put my free hand on the wall and find rough brick, my fingers skate over a dip of mortar before light fills the arching corridor. Bare bulbs

hang from above us, one every few feet, emitting yellow light.

It takes me a moment to realize the hall is headed down and not across, the incline decreasing enough to feel it in my ankles, but not enough to make us slip. The floor is laid with the same brick as the walls and arched ceiling, giving the impression of being in a never-ending tube leading into darkness below.

I'm sure we don't need to, but we all remain silent during our descent. By the time we reach the bottom, it feels like hours. What greets us beyond the shadows is like something out of spy movies.

An enormous room filled with computers and monitors, all of them on. The room is cool, and the hum of a climate control system fills the air. The ambient lighting is dim among the bright screens and flashing colorful lights all around, covering the walls around the few doors there, leading to places beyond.

This room has drywall, and what spaces aren't covered are some light hue that changes color with the light from the screens around it. One large screen in particular catches my attention.

"That's one of the academy's training grounds," I say, pointing.

Willow nods as she approaches. "We could only get one camera to show us the grounds. It's mounted quite far from the perimeter wall, on a tall tree. This is the max zoom." She turns her serious blue eyes on us. "We are going to take the academy and the juvenile facility in three days."

Rai's hand squeezes mine as Colt joins us, standing on my other side and placing a hand on the small of my back. "Why then?" he asks.

"We've been setting this plan in motion for years," she explains. "We had to wait for

all the pieces to fall into place to avoid bloodshed.”

“Rush them and kill all the Betas,” Colt seethes. “Who give a fuck about them?”

Willow looks at him, an angry glint in her eye. “Have you already forgotten the collars in the twenty-four hours you’ve been without them? What do you think would happen to the collared if we rush in, killing indiscriminately?”

Colt winces and looks down.

“It isn’t the Betas we’re concerned about; it’s our people. There is a kill switch in both buildings that can either release all the collars in the vicinity or detonate them all. We have people on the inside who are working to ensure things go the right way, and we save all those people.” Her eyes narrow on me, then each of the three Alphas at my sides and back, where Aubrey stands. “I need you all to tell me everything. Tell me what you know, even if it seems unimportant.”

We do as we’re told.

Colt translates for Aubrey, who goes first, stating he was the first one of us all to enter the academy. Then Colt and Rai fill in information as they quickly recap the last decade or so.

None of the information sounds particularly important to me, but Willow listens with rapt attention to every detail.

In the middle of the stories, Caius approaches me with a bottle of water and some pills. “Willow said you had a headache,” he tells me without looking me in the eye.

“Thank you.” My voice is soft as I take the items from him and catch his gaze flick up to my eyes for the briefest moment before he retreats to a desk at the center of the

room and busies himself with a computer there.

After I take the medicine, I drink more water before passing the bottle to Colt, who has been doing the most talking. He takes it with a grateful smile, and we finally get to my entry into the academy.

I explain I'd been on the run with my father, how we'd both been captured, how I need to find him. Free him.

Willow nods, eyes tight. "Do you know where they took him?"

"Tenebrosa."

Her body stiffens before she nods again. "You help us, we'll help you."

I blink in surprise, then hope compels me to word vomit the rest of my story, including the male Omega I witnessed executed. It's Colt who tells them about the pack that Beta Councilman commanded to be executed in front of us all, and Rai explains we escaped because Aubrey was about to be taken away, and how we did it.

"Is the helicopter in working condition?" Caius asks from behind his screen.

"Landing gear was sheared off when Rai passed out," Colt tells him.

Rai's eyes are closed as he speaks. "It's still mechanically intact. Fuel is low."

Caius claps his hands with a hoot. "Best news I've gotten in weeks. We'll trade you the bird for a land vehicle when you're ready to depart."

"Depart to where?" Rai looks around the room, arms raised.

“To save Mira’s father.” Willow walks toward one of the doors. “Let me show you to your quarters. We’ll eat and speak more shortly.”

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Aubrey

“Which one of you idiots hasn’t mated your Omega yet?”

The three of us stop in our tracks.

While Willow helped Miranda set up the room she’d be sleeping in tonight, Caius led us Alphas to a mess hall where he said the rations were stored, dropping that question on our heads as we passed through a doorway and into the next corridor.

I can’t stop my scowl. None of us has mated.

Colt clears his throat dramatically at my side, and I swing my gaze at him to find him looking theatrically innocent, batting those mismatched eyes at me, brows raised.

What the fuck?

Rai claps me on the shoulder before he removes his coat and pulls up the sleeve of his tee-shirt to reveal a beautiful pair of crescent bite marks on his shoulder. When I whip back to Colt, he’s pulled the neck of his shirt down to reveal a matching mark near his clavicle.

What. The. Fuck?

I bare my teeth and sign, When the fuck did this happen?

Rai looks sheepish. “The night before last.”

“Last night, for me,” Colt chimes, sounding far more smug. “Did you think Rai miraculously got control of his curse for no reason?”

I squint at him, a growl forming in my chest that I tamp down. One cough could bring this entire underground bunker down on us.

“Look,” Caius says with a forceful bark, looking right at me. “I don’t know why you haven’t mated with your Omega yet, but none of you are leaving until it happens. Or whoever hasn’t mated her leaves alone.”

I balk. What the fuck is he talking about?

“Why?” Colt asks for me, being far nicer than I would.

“Your pack bond isn’t yet complete. She’s in danger until it is. That means all of you need to forge the bond with her.”

I roll my eyes.

“Explain what you mean,” Rai demands, the edge of a growl in his voice.

Caius sighs and waves us onward, so we leave the corridor. He pushes through a double door at the end to reveal an enormous eating hall, the lights above us turn on when we enter.

“Let me explain this in a way you can understand.” He steps behind a counter, and as the three of us line up on the other side, Caius slams his hands down on the granite. “The longer you all fuck around and don’t complete the bond, the greater the chance of Miranda going feral.”

Feral? Was that...even a thing?

“It would have been better if none of you mated her if you all weren’t going to. Packs are supposed to mark one another together. At the same time.” He leans back, letting his arms fall to his sides before he puts a fist to his chest. “You’ve felt it, right?”

I’m confused a moment, but then that beast inside me slithers behind my sternum and I know what he’s talking about. I find my hand is splayed on my chest without realizing, and so are Colt’s and Rai’s.

Caius nods slowly. “Of course you have. Well, that is what will make Miranda feral unless you all form a bond with her.” He frowns, sending dagger-eyes my way. “You have three choices. Mate her or get as far away from her as possible. It’s your proximity as an unmated fated pack member that endangers her.”

“You said three options,” Rai says.

“Kill yourself.”

I jolt.

“Look,” he grumbles and rubs a hand down his face with a sigh, “we can’t have a feral Cursed here, or anywhere. She would endanger us all. And the sickness is already starting in her.”

“What?” Rai and Colt ask in unison.

The more Caius speaks, a weight increases on my shoulders, trying to push me into the ground.

“It starts small. Minor aches, irritability. But they don’t go away, and things escalate. Before you know it, she’s rampaging, endangering everyone around her, those she loves. And she has power running through her veins that will cause more damage.”

No. There's no way. Not Miranda. She's too...good.

"Don't be an idiot," Colt growls at me. Fucking mind-reader. "I'm glad I can read your thoughts, you asshole. You're un-fucking -believable." He looks at Rai. "This dumbass thinks that Mira won't fall victim to instinct."

Rai stares at me, more anger in his face than I've ever seen. "I don't know why you keep ignoring your bond with Mira. We're out of that place now. We can be a pack. What the fuck are you so afraid of?"

Loving her. Losing her. Like I've lost everything before.

Colt's hand is on my shoulder again, his voice softer than before. "Life is too short to be this scared to live, Aubs. You have to let the past go so you can move forward with her. With all of us. Don't you want to change things for the better?"

A strange sensation forms in my throat, a thickness I'd long forgotten. Emotion wells up from my chest. I want her, I think at Colt. I love her. She's all I could think about when I was on the auction block. I send him a droll look. And you two idiots.

Colt lets out a puff of laughter before turning serious again, something I've seen happening more these days. "You need to make things right with her, bro. She feels rejected. And I don't need to read her thoughts to know that."

He's right, of course. I'd fucked up a lot of things in my life, but this could be the biggest fuck-up of them all.

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Miranda

The reconstituted soup lunch was...different. Dry powder in a sealed cup turned into a creamy broth by adding boiling water.

One thing I had to give the academy was that they fed us well. Although I suppose that was like preparing livestock for slaughter, keeping us complacent until we're sold for as much money as they can get.

Aubrey sat beside me at the table, which was odd for him. Nice, but odd.

When we finished, Caius said he had work to do, and Willow told us she wanted to show us something.

I had no idea it would be so...beautiful.

In a large room off to the side of the living quarters were sculptures of all sizes, marble, bronze, and everything in between. Statues of people, of animals, and even trees and plants. Speaking of which, living plants also filled the room, vines creeping along the walls and ceiling, hugging the sculptures, huge leaves bowing from tall stalks, flowers forming a rainbow all around us.

It takes my breath away, and I can feel the awe of my Alphas.

Willow approaches the wall near me, and the vines there reach for her extended arm and wrap loosely around it. She smiles and hums a little song, then turns to look at us all. "My power started as a simple ability, allowing me to help plant life grow. When

I got a little older, I found I could bring plants back from the brink of death.” She strokes the vine’s leaves like it’s a pet, and it draws back to the wall. “I’m going to do my best to educate you all, but know that there are a lot of knowledge gaps.” She gestures around her. “This city was a treasure trove of lost history, and many who came before us squirreled away information from all over the world to protect it.”

She moves along the wall, the vines and leaves all reaching for her as she moves, her love for them apparent in her delicate touches and whispered musings. Then she addresses us again. “More often than not, packs are made up of four members. The literature and artwork in this old city depict groups of all different mixtures, many of them including Betas.”

I blink in surprise, but it’s Colt that speaks, voice tapering off. “That’s...”

“Difficult to believe?” She gives a sad smile. “Given current circumstances, absolutely. But things weren’t always this way.” She gestures for us to follow her to a wall with an impossibly thick layering of vines. Willow raises her palm, and the vines slowly retreat, slithering like snakes and parting like a curtain to reveal a wooden door, which she opens and beckons us through.

The floor beyond is carpeted, couches and plush chairs ready for social gatherings, a desk in the corner, and paintings covering nearly every inch of the wood-paneled walls. I gape, perusing the images. Ancient paintings, much like the ones in the city hall, groups of four, five, even six, some armor-clad and battle-ready, some lounging in gardens and interior settings, some nude and in various phases of mating, many depicting group sex.

My face flames. Would my Alphas want that?

Colt laces our fingers together, squeezing my hand tightly, and my embarrassment rises.

Rai and Aubrey split up to investigate the artwork as well.

Willow looks at me. “Cursed Omegas are very different from those without power, as I’m sure you know. We have our own specialists within the rebellion who have studied our physiology and behaviors.” She gestures with her chin to a small painting.

Colt and I look at the depiction of a young man in a large bed, completely covered in pillows, cloth, and other plush items, draped with more cloth and sheets like a big tent. Around the bed are two females and one male, smiling with obvious adoration.

“For instance, Cursed Omegas don’t feel the overwhelming urge to nest.”

I stiffen, my lips pursing as I bite the inside of my cheek and my free hand absently travels to my jeans pocket, the lump there giving me comfort.

Colt’s face swings into view in front of me, a smirk playing on those gorgeous lips, and I know I’ve been discovered.

“Socks?” he says inside my mind with a small laugh.

I pout, my face heating. They’re small and I can keep them with me...

His hand clasps the back of my head, bringing my forehead to his lips for a light kiss.

“We believe that the stress of being Cursed, always pursued, always at risk, lowers the instinct to create a stable home environment. And what’s more...” Willow hesitates, gestures to another painting a little further away.

Rai and Aubrey join us to view a nude female Omega in a state of bliss, receiving the bites of her three Alphas at once. “Omegas were never supposed to be born having spontaneous heats.”

My gaze snaps to her. “What...what do you mean?”

She sighs, head shaking. “Omegas are supposed to be able to control their heats. We were never meant to be slaves to them. Research has shown that heats had always been ‘off’ by default. Going into heat was how we used to find our mates.” She gestures at the painting. “We would have huge gatherings every year, Omegas, Alphas, and Betas from all over the world would meet in hopes of finding their destined packs.”

Willow moves down the wall and gestures at another painting, this one far larger than the last. A vast gathering of males and females, all in beautiful ball gowns and tailored suits, mingling and drinking, laughing and dancing to live music being played on a raised platform in the back. To one side, a group of four exits through a door, smiling and laughing with joy. In another corner, a group of five are fornicating, a female Omega’s dress hiked up to her waist, a male Alpha on his knees pulls at her panties, slick visible on her thighs. One of her hands is under the skirt of a female Alpha standing beside her, who grips the Omega’s blond hair at the back of her head, lips parted. The Omega kisses a male, bent over, pants at his knees, ready to receive one of the other male Alphas lining up behind him. Something tells me this male is a Beta.

The imagery doesn’t embarrass me now. These were fated mates, fated packs. They were meant to be together and allowed to be, openly and freely. Accepted.

“Omegas were only unable to control their heats in the presence of their fated mates,” Willow continues. “It was how we knew who we were destined for. It’s why we would all gather like this and give everyone who was of age a chance to find their packs. To live happily. Forever.”

Aubrey stares at the painting with a pained expression, and the compulsion to embrace him is strong. But I refuse. He never wanted comfort from me, and I won’t

be rejected.

Colt squeezes my hand again, and Rai turns to me, love in his impossibly dark eyes as he sweeps hair from the side of my face and smiles down at me.

Anger boils up inside my chest, though. “How does nobody know about this?” I demand.

Willow looks at me with sorrowful eyes. “The victors write the histories.”

How dare these Betas take away our history. Take away our freedom.

There’s a twitch behind my ribs. They must pay.

I couldn’t agree more.

She moves down the wall again, a frown on her face as she points to the painting now in front of her.

People in suits shout angrily in a courtroom, a female on the stand, a varied group sits in judgment.

“Omegas could turn their heats on whenever they wanted. It was meant to be a way to better ensure mating led to pregnancy, but some Omegas turned their heats into weapons. Formed false packs out of infatuation or a desire for power. When that started happening more, the oppression began. The culling.”

She takes a couple of steps down the wall and hangs her head, eyes closed.

When I look at the painting in front of her, the sound of dismay that tries to escape me can’t. I can barely breathe. Colt releases my hand to hug my body to his, Rai’s

hand rubs my back tenderly. Aubrey stands like a statue beside us.

Gaping, severed heads, male and female, sit atop a line of pikes in the background of the image, piles of bodies in various states of decay in the foreground. I lean in to get a closer look when I notice something etched onto the foreheads, then choke when I realize they're omega symbols, seared into the flesh there.

Willow's voice is quiet. "The most elite and powerful packs and bloodlines were falling victim to false pack formations the most. So they pushed back the hardest. Death." She swallows hard enough I can hear it. "They'd come for the Omega children and execute them, too. Decimate the bloodlines. They thought back then that the control was a mutation. But they were wrong. We were always able to control them, we just never abused the power, until temptation was too much for some."

She turns to me, eyes swimming. "For any Omegas discovered to be hiding their control, death would have been a kindness."

Her head tilts, and I don't want to see what she's gesturing at. I know I don't. Yet my feet drag me to look, my stomach rewarding me with the threat of upheaval.

Males and females, all Omegas given the symbols burned and carved into their skin, nude and tortured, taken by force in front of confined, screaming mates.

My mouth opens and closes, trying to voice either a question or a scream, but I'm mute.

"It's important you know," Willow whispers, her eyes searching all of us. "We all need to know the truth. It's what we're fighting for." Her voice gains strength. "We will make the academy a real place of learning, teaching the truth to everyone. We'll fight to stop the Council from creating new establishments to sell us off into a life as indentured soldiers."

Her hand gently rests on my shoulder. “One last thing.” Her other arm gestures down to the adjacent wall.

The painting here isn’t filled with gore or outward violence, but oppression. Omegas bound and in cages, vacant looks on their faces as if their spirits had been broken.

“As Omega populations declined, it affected Alpha birth rates as well. A Beta scientist approached the most powerful family line and informed them that he had the means to repopulate, promising to revitalize their bloodline in return for funding. They began a generations-long program of systematically drugging Omegas to reduce their inhibitions, culling those who wouldn’t submit, and only breeding those receptive to spontaneous heats. But while this worked to keep Omegas under control, the effect on Alphas and many Betas was unforeseen.”

We walk together further along the wall to a more modern painting of males and females depicted like feral animals, tearing into one another with tooth and claw, blood painting their flesh.

“Blocking the natural formation of packs turned so many of us feral that they began killing indiscriminately. This was the start of the true Alpha Wars. The Betas’ meddling in genetics caused all of it. Alphas and Betas who were destined for packs but had no Omegas to claim began slaughtering one another in a blind rage, until Betas became the most numerous population.”

“And then they took control.” My voice is distant and comes on a breath.

“Yes.” Willow leads the way to a group of plush chairs in the center of the room before walking over to a bar near the desk. We all sit, except for Aubrey, and she returns to us with an amber liquid in some glasses, handing one to each of us before sitting in the empty chair beside mine. “Our magic was always a part of us,” she says. “But when packs stopped forming, the magic began to either go wild or die, and was

mostly bred out of us. Another Beta design. But when some of us started being born with the old magic still in our veins again, the Betas got new ideas. And that's how we became cattle to them, weapons to fight their wars for power and wealth."

My head spins, ears ringing.

Rai shifts in his seat. "You're saying this curse—"

"Not a curse," she says with force. "It's pure magic. It's what we were meant to be."

Her visceral reaction startles me, but Rai continues, "This magic was something everyone once had?"

She gives an affirmative nod as she sips her drink, while mine sits heavy in my hand, untouched.

"Even Betas that were destined to be in packs would have some level of magic in them. The records say their magic and pack-prone traits were likely carried over from Alpha and Omega bloodlines in their families." She frowns on another sip. "It all just means that the powerless oppressed those with magic, including their own designations." Her blue gaze zeroes in on us, fierce. "We're going to tell the world. Taking the academy and saving the children at the other campus is the first step, but we are going to orchestrate an information dump as soon as we win the fight there. Then the academy will be our new base of operations, open to anyone who wants to end the Beta Council and GBE's tyranny."

"I think there are some Beta sympathizers in the academy already," Colt offers, and I nod in agreement.

She smiles for the first time since we left the topiary next door. "I believe I know some of them."

My eyes blink rapidly as I realize she probably does. She'd mentioned rebellion infiltrators.

"Tell me, what are your plans after you save Mira's father?"

I look at each of my Alphas, Rai and Colt's gazes fierce. "We haven't discussed it as a...pack..yet," Colt says, "but I want to help bring down these assholes and free our people."

"I do as well," Rai agrees firmly.

I already know what I want. "I don't want anyone else to have to live this way. I want to help however I can."

We all turn to Aubrey, who relents and joins us in one of the remaining chairs. When he sits, his arms cross, jaw sets, but he gives an affirmative nod.

Willow smiles at us, her eyes watery. "I was hoping you'd say that." She stands and gestures to the door. "Let's join Caius and solidify our plan. Save Mira's father, take the campuses."

"Tenebrosa is here in Iceland. It's only a few hundred miles from here."

"What?" I nearly screech at Caius' words. "How do we get there?"

His hand raises, an indication for me to calm down, but I can't. My father could still be in there. I have to get him out.

"We'll provide you with directions and a vehicle. But what's your plan?"

"Wipe them all out," I seethe, my fists clenching, the beast in my chest chomping.

“Those monsters experiment on Cursed; they torture and murder us. Even one of my mates was sent there—as a child!”

Willow waves her palm toward me and pulls back, like a calming wave. “We understand that, but you can’t go in there without a real plan of action.” She turns, and Caius pulls up a map and some aerial photos on the large screen. “Tenebrosa was next on our list after the academy, but I think now we can hit Tenebrosa first. I’ll send word to my people on the inside.”

Anger flares in me, hot and raging. “You have people inside Tenebrosa working with those monsters?” My voice is a growling hiss, my head throbs.

Colt gives me a concerned look, but I ignore him.

Willow eyes me silently for a moment. When she leans her palms on the desk in front of her, there is a new energy around her, commanding and controlling. “Listen very carefully, little girl.” Her tone is eerily calm. “I have given my life to this cause. I have given up more than you will ever understand to free our people and topple this undeserving regime.” Her jaw squares, voice lowering to a near menace. “My people risk their lives every day, living undercover, doing what they must while also doing whatever they can.”

“Our people will help you free your father,” Caius interjects. “If he was sent there in the last year, he’s still there now. No prisoner has been transferred in that time, but there was a transfer of power recently.”

So, Major Tomlin made good on part of his promise. “Do you have news from inside?”

“Things have been very quiet since Dr. Vera Song took over the facility,” Willow tells us.

“Do you know anything about this doctor?” Rai asks.

Willow's eyes sparkle. “Oh, yes. She's one of mine.”

My brows draw tight, Tomlin's voice whispering in my mind. “ If I did it, my authority would be questioned. I wouldn't be able to put someone I trust in charge of the facility.”

“We'll discuss the rest of the plan at first light.” Fury turns my vision red, and I open my mouth to argue, but Willow interrupts me with a stern voice. “You are growing impatient, and I do understand. But this rage is not all you. You're growing feral, Miranda.”

I scoff, humorless laughter bubbling. “What?”

My Alphas stiffen around me, like they know something. In my peripheral, Aubrey backs into a corner across the room, as far away as he can get without leaving.

“The pack bond is very tenuous at the start,” she says. “What makes it stronger is the connection between each member being solidified. The longer you go without a full bond, you put yourself and your mates in danger. Especially you. As the only Omega in your pack, you're a central piece—the keystone, so to speak. You need your Alphas' bonds to reach your optimal strength, and they need yours as well. The balance will bring control over your magic, making it as easy as breathing. Believe me, I know.”

Willow takes a deep breath and holds my gaze. “For your sake and the sake of our missions, I can't allow you to leave here until you've mated with all your Alphas.”

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Aubrey

I don't know what I'm doing out here.

I take that back. Caius and Willow are why I'm standing outside the door to the room Miranda was assigned in the bunker.

No, that's not right either. I'm here because I want to be. Because my Omega is in there, and she needs me, whether she knows it or not. And I need her, too.

But how am I going to tell her?

If I touch her and my curse isn't affected, and I try to speak...I could kill everyone in this underground bunker.

I want to growl, but of course I can't. Instead, I pace, my sneakers tapping against the tile floor in the hall, my arms crossed over my chest, and I'm certain a scowl on my face.

When the door I'm hovering near swings open with a violent gust of air, I stop in my tracks and turn to face the woman who has tortured me for months. Or, maybe I'd done that to myself, I realize, as I stare into those silver eyes of hers. But her beautiful face is marred by anger, her head tilts to one side, lips pursed, behind them her tongue runs along her teeth.

"I could hear you huffing and pacing around out here," she says, tone clipped. "What do you want?"

I blink. The aura around her is dark, abnormal. It pushes against my chest with great force, nearly choking me.

Feral. I'd never encountered a feral anyone before, let alone a Cursed Omega.

"Well?" she demands, her voice a near growl, low and guttural.

My eyes widen despite myself. All I can do is gesture toward the room behind her, which makes Miranda roll her eyes and turn from me to enter the room. I follow and close the door behind me, cross my arms again, and watch her.

She's the one pacing now, but not with the same nervous or frustrated energy I'd had in the hall; she prowls like an animal looking for a fight, or at the very least, prey.

I narrow my eyes as I watch her. Miranda's breathing grows ragged, her shoulders rising and falling at an increasing rate. A noise comes from her as she spins on me, silver eyes fierce, teeth bared. I blink, and that's all it takes before she's lunging at me and I'm sidestepping her advances.

"You shouldn't be here!" she shouts, more angry than I've ever seen her. "You don't care about me or our pack!"

Another swipe from her small hands has me dodging.

She couldn't be more wrong. And now I know how wrong I had been, too. In my attempt to protect us all, I've made a terrible mistake.

She lets out a frustrated yell, and her hands are instantly encased in ice, formed into claws like an animal. The shock of it makes me misstep, and her swipe catches my cheek just below my eye. My hiss turns to an uncontained growl, the entire room shaking with my rage. Rage at her, at myself, at this absurd situation we're all in due

to lies and hunger for power.

I reach out and grab her hair in my fist at the back of her head, my knuckles pressing against her scalp. I already knew she could touch me without killing me, but now for the ultimate test.

“Miranda!” I bark her name with a growling force that makes her go utterly still in my grasp. My voice is raw, rough, but it’s there, and the bunker hasn’t collapsed around us.

My curse is neutralized, just like it had been for Colt and Rai that day at the training ground. When I’d refused to even test the effects of her proximity.

Now, thanks to me, I have an unruly Omega to take care of before she turns into a danger to herself and our pack.

Our pack.

The creature in my chest loves that I’ve acknowledged it at last; I can feel it preen inside me. Smug.

Miranda turns wide, shocked eyes on me, her lips parted, breathing still quick and ragged.

All this time, I’ve denied myself her luscious form. Denied us both of the connection we have, of the draw she has on me. Of the love I most certainly feel for her.

I stare at her pale pink lips and lick mine a second before I pull her body to me and devour her mouth. She squeaks with surprise before I loosen my grip on her hair, just a bit, and wrap my other arm around her back, hauling her small frame against me.

She sweeps her slick tongue against my lips, and I take control, opening my mouth and ravaging her, my tongue commanding hers, leading the swirling dance before I suckle it, bite it, drawing a groan from us both.

I pull away just long enough to yank my shirt over my head, taking another second to enjoy her even wider eyes as they take in my chest. Then I'm pulling her shirt over her head, sending that mouthwatering scent of hers wafting through the air, and then gripping her pale breasts in my large hands. Her bra is black and cotton, and I hate it. I'm sure under different circumstances, it would be alluring or sexy, but right now, it's just in the way.

I yank on it, knuckles pressed into her flesh. "Take it off," I rasp, my voice still weak from lack of use.

Her hands quiver as they go to her back to do as I command.

My cock is so hard it hurts as I move backward to sit on the edge of the only bed in the room. Before I do, I unbutton my jeans but leave them in place, giving me a bit more breathing room.

Miranda's bra drops to the floor, and she stands there, unwavering and beautiful. Her areolas are tan, lighter than my skin but almost the same shade, the tips of her nipples pink. I feel an aching in my gums as I stare at her, my eyes gravitating to the fresh bite mark above her left breast and the more healed one on her right collarbone. There's no jealousy at the sight. Instead, I find a sense of pride growing for my pack brothers who had taken care of our Omega. But anger wells in me at my previous actions—or inaction.

I'd shunned my Omega. Made her think I didn't care or want her. All in the name of protection. All for nothing.

I clench my jaw, push those thoughts from my mind, and gesture at her to remove the rest of her clothing.

She does as I silently command, quietly removing her pants while I lean back on one arm, watching, and grip my cock through my pants with my free hand.

Miranda watches my movements like a contained beast, those pale eyes sweeping over me after she kicks her pants off and reveals her every curve to me.

I fight the shudder that threatens to wrack my body, and beckon her to me with a wave of my hand, still resting on my dick.

She approaches slowly, and when her knee bumps mine, I splay my hand on her quivering belly so I can speak. “Kneel.”

Her movements are fluid, her right breast grazing my clothed knee on her way down. I let my hand glide up her torso as she lowers herself to the floor before me. My fingers find her right nipple and pinch hard, drawing a gasp from her.

She’s holding herself back from me. My Omega isn’t going into heat.

I have to change that.

“Take out my cock, Omega.”

She blinks before her hands move to my fly and grasp it, pulling what I’d already undone down further, then gripping the elastic of my boxer-briefs. My dick twitches, my hips reflexively pump toward her and she slowly pulls them down, letting my cock spring free like a caged beast ready to pounce.

That awed look crosses her face again, even more prominent than when she’d stared

at my chest a moment ago. Part of me wants to revel in her gaze, but the rest of me is far too impatient. Pinching her nipple again, I say, “Suck my cock, Omega.”

She lets out a small whine, and I know I’m getting close to what I want. What we both need.

Her scent grows stronger as she grasps my cock with one hand, her fingers unable to meet on the other side. As she leans down, her lips part, that pink tongue slips out, and she swirls the tip of it around the head of my dick, drawing a hiss from deep inside my chest.

She’s going to make me come with her tongue alone.

“I said suck, Omega,” I command through clenched teeth.

Those silvery eyes turn up at me, capturing my gaze as she opens her mouth wide with a little sassy smile, and takes me as far into her mouth as she can.

The warm, wet cavern is bliss, her back teeth scraping the sides of my cock making my body jerk. Then she does what I’d told her to, and sucks me. I try to hold back, but the guttural groan that escapes me fills the room, and at the sound, she sucks harder, taking even more of me into her mouth until the tip of my dick is squeezed in her throat.

No matter how much I want to keep feeling her mouth around me, I know it’s a losing battle. I won’t last, and that’s unacceptable.

“Stop,” I rasp.

She sucks even harder, swirling her tongue around my cock faster, her head bobbing up and down until my teeth clench before I bark, “ Stop.”

She obeys, her puffy lips wet and pouting as she peers up at me.

I take a moment to catch my breath before standing and shucking off my shoes, pants, everything, until I'm completely naked before her. She bites her lip and reaches for me, but I swat her hand away and sit back on the bed, gripping my cock, watching her silver eyes sparkle as I give it a stroke, her saliva helping my hand glide effortlessly.

The whine she lets out is like the most beautiful music I've ever heard, her scent ramping up even more, filling the room with that delicious smell. And then, I see it. Her slick glistens on the insides of her thighs, and I hiss, squeezing my dick at the sight.

With my free hand, I beckon her, then take her hands and place them on my shoulders, freeing me to give verbal commands to my Omega. "Straddle me." My voice is still gruff, not matching that in my head.

With measured movements, Miranda slides one knee and then the other on either side of my thighs, her chest right in my face. I wrap my arm around her back and pull her to my mouth, taking one nipple between my teeth and biting, drawing a hiss from her, before swirling my tongue around the bruised flesh. I grab the globes of her ass with both hands and repeat my assault on her other breast, and this time, she tosses her head back with a mix of a groan and a whine that makes my cock jerk, tapping against her pussy lips as more slick splashes onto me.

She moves her hips to try and take me inside her tight body, but I hold her ass up, denying her, drawing a louder whine from my Omega.

I do this to her until my cock is about to explode without being inside her. I pull us both further up the bed and lie flat on my back, my hand splayed across her sternum, holding her upright. When I grip my dick again, aiming it at her center, I spread my thighs, taking hers with me, lowering her pussy to the head of my cock in a slow,

torturous movement, until the head slips inside of her tight ring, making her gasp, her hips circle.

“Do. Not. Move.” My command isn’t a bark, but she turns her wide eyes on me, and I wonder for a moment if this is too much. I’ve denied us both our mutual comfort for months, and now, I am showing her my deepest and darkest desires.

But I can see that flicker of excitement in her gaze, of recognition. Of acceptance.

She wants me as I am. My solemn vow is to make sure she never regrets it.

“I’m going to give you so much pleasure,” I rasp. “You will never want to be without my cock inside you. Your pussy will weep when I’m not in it. Your body will yearn to feel my skin.”

She shudders above me, but dutifully remains still. Her slick now slides from her core down my cock and onto my hips, and the feel, the scent, is more than I ever wanted. More than I ever dreamed.

Without any more preamble, I bend my legs, place my feet on the mattress, and piston my hips upward, sending my cock deep inside her tight core with one, smooth motion.

Miranda cries out in surprise and pleasure, and I lower my hips before slamming into her again, forcing her body forward, her hands positioned on either side of my head to hold herself up. I grip her ass again, tight, pulling her open as I slide my length from her body and slam back in, over and over again. As my balls begin to tighten, so much unspent come inside them from years of celibacy, years of never knowing my fated mate, something moves inside my chest, and I emit a sound I’ve never made before.

My body vibrates with the loudest purr I've ever heard, low and deep in resonance. It fills the room along with our mingling scents, and Miranda's body begins to quiver in a way that lets me know she is close.

My purring intensifies, and I sigh, sliding my length out just a bit, making her gasp and moan, writhing above me as I tease her. Out just a bit, back inside, out a bit more, again and again. Each move brings a moan or a whine from my Omega's throat as I catch my rhythm and look up at her face.

"You like that, Omega?" I grunt, feeling even more possessive than before. "You like taking my cock?"

"Yes," she sighs, her ass jumping as my hips meet it again.

I give a dissatisfied hum before pulling almost all the way out of her and slamming back inside, making her cry out.

"I asked," I growl between brutal thrusts, "does my Omega like taking my cock?"

"Yes!" Miranda shouts, her head lolling back and forth with my forceful fucking.

"You love getting fucked by your Alpha, don't you?" My voice is even more unrecognizable, guttural, and fierce.

"Yes," she barely manages to gasp as I intensify my assault. "Take me, Alpha!"

My hands come up and grip her breasts tight, fingers pinching her nipples and drawing yet more slick from her pussy that gushes down on me. The feel of it spurs me on, my speed increasing to a level I never imagined possible. With each thrust, her entire body bounces almost off of my dick as I fuck her mercilessly from below.

When her pussy clenches me like a vice, I know she's nearly reached her breaking point.

I stop.

I pull her hips to mine by her ass, my cock seated fully inside her, and don't move. We're both gasping for air when she turns wide eyes on me, a whine rising from her chest.

My head tilts on the mattress as I tsk her and shake my head, chest heaving from exertion. "Do not move, Omega," I command through gritted teeth. "Don't you dare come."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

An uncontrolled gasp slips through my lips.

“You’re going to warm your Alpha’s cock for a while,” Aubrey tells me. “If you’re good, I’ll give you what you need.”

I blink at him, feeling like my eyes are going to bulge out of my head.

Warm his cock? After he nearly fucked the life out of me? Is he serious?

One look in his beautiful hazel eyes tells me that he is, indeed, deadly serious.

His pacing outside the door drove me into an uncontrolled frenzy. All I could think about was how he’d kept pushing me away again and again, while I longed for him. He wanted to be a hero by denying me, us, of what was fated. But now he wants to be a hero by mating me, saving me from the feral rage that was building inside me.

But in this moment, with his thick cock deep inside my body, his big hands gripping my ass, all I want is to please him. Do his bidding. Whatever it may be.

Some part of my brain is screaming that this isn’t right. I should still be furious with him. But that voice is so quiet, the bliss and elation coursing through me overwhelm it.

Our gazes locked, I see the dominance in those gray-green eyes, but also the sorrow. The love.

He's suffered the same as I have.

My hand raises to his chiseled face, palm meeting his wide jaw, thumb tracing the lines of his plump lips. His eyes soften for a moment, but I know this isn't what he wants from me right now. There's time for tenderness later.

He grips my wrist and takes my hand from his face to place it on his chest before giving his next command. "Turn around on my dick. Do not let me fall out of your body."

I blink at him, lips parted. Turn around...with him still inside of me? Is that possible?

I intend to find out, slowly spinning on top of him, maneuvering my knees and legs in slow, deliberate movements, over his abdomen, his thighs. His hisses with pleasure at the same time I groan, the feeling of his cock swirling inside me something I've never experienced before, but a delight I want to feel again.

"Good girl," he croons, his warm hands massaging my lower back and my ass, eliciting another moan from me. "Lean forward on your hands, then stay still."

My breath catching, I do as commanded, my hands on either side of his shins on the mattress. His fingers glide around my pussy, gathering my slick and sliding his fingertips to my ass, circling the tight ring of muscle there and making me cry out.

"Still," he commands without barking when my body pushes back against his probing fingers against my will. "One day, my Omega—" I shiver at his possessiveness "—I will fuck you here." One fingertip presses inside me, making my whole body quiver. "I will fuck your tight ass while one of your other Alphas fucks that juicy pussy of yours, and you suck the third's cock in that delectable mouth."

The whine that erupts from my chest is utterly obscene, and his cock twitches inside

of me at the sound. My body craves what he's promised, my heart pounding at the visual.

Torture. This is pure fucking torture.

He hums behind me, pulling his fingertip out almost all the way, then sliding it back in so slow I'm about to lose my mind.

"You've been so good, Omega," he rasps. "So obedient." His hands grab my ass cheeks again and pull my hips to his, forcing his cock impossibly deep inside me. "Have you been good enough for me to give you what you need, Omega?"

Is this a trick question? I don't know if I've been as "good" as he wanted me to be.

"Answer."

"Y-yes," I squeak.

His hand comes down on my ass with a loud crack, and I cry out.

"With conviction."

"Yes!"

He hums again, his body remaining still as one hand rubs the spot he just spanked. "Yes," he whispers. "I think you've been good enough, my Omega. Now, I'll reward you."

In a blink, Aubrey's hands have lifted my body by the hips until only the tip of his cock rests inside me, and his knees bend on the bed. Then he is jack-hammering into me from below with so much force, so much speed, my mouth opens on a silent cry

of ecstasy. With each upward thrust he sends his balls slapping against my clit and my body goes rigid as stone atop him. The pleasure building and building until we're both drenched in sweat, my slick pouring from my body almost like a faucet, allowing his pumping to be completely frictionless as I coat his cock, his hips and thighs.

When stars form in my peripheral vision, white and flashing, and my silence turns to a guttural cry that echoes off the walls as I come, Aubrey slams my body down onto him, sitting up so my back is flush with his chest. His right arm hooks around my shoulders as his left crushes my breast and squeezes my nipple. As I scream, he roars like an uncaged animal, raw and dangerous. Then his teeth sink into the back of my right shoulder as his cock swells inside of me.

My gums ache, my teeth elongate, and I grip his forearm, draw it to my mouth, and bite down hard. More of his blood fills my mouth than either Rai's or Colt's had, and in the back of my mind, I wonder if I've bitten Aubrey with more force as some form of punishment for torturing us both for months.

But as his sweet blood fills my mouth and I swallow it down in a gulp, Aubrey laps at his bite on my back, his purring intensifying and soothing my soul. Tears spring to my eyes, and my body shakes as I release my hold on his arm with my teeth and sigh, licking the wound with gentle care.

After a moment, Aubrey's next whispered words against my shoulder make those tears spill. "I'm sorry for what I've done, Miranda. I'll make it up to you, I swear it. I love you with all I am."

I want to turn around and embrace him, but I'm locked in place by his swollen knot. So I hug his arms to my chest, rub my face into the crook of his elbow. "I love you, too, Aubrey."

The door slams open in that instant, making us both jump, and me screech. There in the doorway are Colt and Rai, Rai breathing heavy and gripping his chest, Colt looking like the cat that ate the canary.

“See,” Colt sings, jabbing Rai in the shoulder. “I told you she was okay.”

Rai is out of breath as he says to me, “We heard Aubrey roar, and after all that feral talk...” He swallows hard.

More tears fall from my eyes. My Alphas were worried about me. They wanted to protect me.

I reach my arms out to them, and they approach, Colt shutting the door behind them.

Rai reaches me first, crawling from the foot of the bed to take my right hand, Colt doing the same with my left from the side of the bed. Before I know it, they’re both kissing and licking their bite marks on my body, making me shiver, my hips twitching in pleasure.

Then, Aubrey’s gruff command reverberates throughout the room: “Please our Omega.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Raito

Aubrey's back is against the headboard, his cock deep inside our Omega's ass. She writhes on top of him, her back to his chest, his large hands roaming over her smooth body.

Colton is on his knees beside them on the mattress, gripping and stroking his length, one hand holding the headboard as he watches Mira dip her fingers down to her core and draw her slick to her clit, then circle it.

I hiss, my cock throbbing at the delectable sight.

Despite Mira's pleasure being our focus, it's Aubrey who takes command, directing us.

"Look at that pussy, Rai," he rasps, his hips giving a small circle against her ass, drawing a moan from Mira. "Devour it. Make her slick pour from her core."

My breathing is ragged when I dive forward, grab Mira's hand and remove it from her pussy, then take her clit into my mouth and suck.

She cries out, slick splashing my chin, her scent and taste overwhelming my senses. My lungs are full of myrrh and rose, my mouth with the sweetest tang I've ever tasted.

This is what I'd wished we had time for when we first mated. For me to ravish her pussy with my mouth, feel her come on my face. To taste her as I am now.

I swirl my tongue around her nub, but never stop sucking, circling her entrance with two fingers but not penetrating her. Every move, every sound she makes, spurs me on, lets me know I am driving her wild. When she grinds against my face, Colton hisses then groans, and I turn my eyes upward to find him grasping both Mira's breasts, massaging and pinching, as she strokes his cock with one hand.

More slick spills, her whine grows high-pitched, her hips begin to jerk, and she cries out, splashing me with more delicious slick as she comes on my face.

When her cries turn to whimpers, I lean back, the air turning my wet face cold.

"That's good," Aubrey says with a sigh. "But our Omega needs more. She wants more. Don't you, Omega?"

Her whine builds up again, her body jerking and grinding.

"Tell us," he commands.

"Yes!" Her cry is loud and forceful, yet breathy.

"Good girl," he purrs. Then, he looks me right in the eye, heated and lustful. "Fuck her pussy while I claim her ass."

The ache in my balls is like nothing I've ever felt, my cock so hard it's painful.

Aubrey's legs are spread out, Mira's spread over them, her body wide open and begging. And I oblige, crawling over her, my arms propping my body up, my dick so straight and hard I slide into her without needing to aim.

Mira cries out in ecstasy, her head thrown back against Aubrey's shoulder, but I can't make a sound. As I pull out of her tight, wet, heat, Aubrey draws from her ass, and

we slam back in at the same time, making Mira's body jump, a scream escaping her throat. With every thrust, I can feel Aubrey inside her, a skin barrier between our cocks, but she is impossibly tight because of us both filling her at the same time.

Aubrey, uses a hand to prop up Mira's head and commands Colton, "Fuck her face."

With a groan, he complies, sliding his cock into Mira's eager mouth, making her hum and whine.

The three of us find a steady, even rhythm, fucking all of Mira's holes as one, my pleasure turning animalistic as I pump harder and faster, my pack brothers keeping the pace with me until I see stars. Mira's pussy clenches my cock with enough force that I am completely lost, roaring as my release spills inside of her, her slick gushing in waves. She screams around Colton's cock, he and Aubrey roaring their release right after.

My knot has swelled in time with Aubrey's, and the tightness is nearly overwhelming. It makes me want to fuck her again, rut like a beast, but one look at my Omega's face, come dripping from the corner of her mouth, those lips wrapped around Colton's knot, and I know she is completely spent. So I push deeper inside of her as I lie on her chest, letting my breathing grow steady as we all bask in the aftermath, our purrs in sync.

When Colton tells Mira she can release him, she gives a disapproving but tired sound, and Colton lets out a small laugh, but I feel his gratitude. Keeping our knot inside our beloved mate is an ecstasy in itself, and Colton can feel that bond at the same time as Aubrey and me.

It takes much longer for our knots to release Mira's body than it did during our first mating, but when we all slip from her, she lets out a contented sigh. I kiss my mark on her collarbone, and the others follow suit with theirs. Then Colton is sliding off

the bed on wobbling legs and heading toward a door beyond the foot, opening it.

“Jackpot!” he cries. “There’s a killer bathroom in here. And it looks like a closet.”

He disappears inside, compelling me to follow, my legs just as weak as his look. I find a beautiful white bathroom with a sink, toilet, a standing shower toward the back, and a huge claw-foot tub to one side. Colton is in the closet at the back, rummaging through clothing. “There’s a lot in here to choose from,” he says to me over his shoulder. “And more importantly—” he pulls out a mound of folded towels with a grin.

I chuckle as he places the stack on the sink counter.

When I turn back to the bedroom, Aubrey is helping Mira walk to the bathroom, her slick and our come coating her legs and face. Part of me laments that it’s seeping out of her, but that is instinct. My logical brain, which must always take precedence, knows that there will be a time when our pack will produce children. But not until it’s safe for them to live freely, have the life we never did.

So, we have to fight for that future.

Water starts flowing behind me. “Hey, Aubs,” Colton turns from the tub and gestures at Aubrey with a nod. “Give Mira one of your socks.”

Aubrey stops short, and I raise a brow in question at Mira, whose face is pink, her lips pursed.

“His sock?” I ask.

Her purse turns into a small pout before she slowly moves to her pants on the floor, reaches into a pocket, and removes a white and a black sock. I recognize the black

one as mine, one I thought I'd left behind in her room when we'd mated the first time. I figured my friend in housekeeping had burned it with everything else.

My lips tick upward into a smile.

Aubrey chuckles. "You're carrying our socks around?" he pulls one from inside his jeans on the ground and walks over to her.

Mira pulls it from his grasp and holds the three socks in her hands like precious treasure, her eyes averted. "Having them with me is comforting," she whispers.

Aubrey pulls her into a tight embrace, presses his lips to the top of her head. "I'd give you anything you want."

I hum in agreement. "And when we take the academy, we'll do everything in our power to ensure you have a safe space to build your nest."

"And for us to build a family," Colton adds as he joins us. "Some day."

When the three of us embrace our Omega as one, Mira snuggling into our chests, nothing has ever felt so right.

Miranda

“Tenebrosa is here,” Willow points to a circled location on a large paper map. “And this city is here.” Another circle southeast of Tenebrosa’s location. “At dark, you’ll take the vehicle we’ve prepared and head straight there. You’ll park here,” she points to a black X, “and keep hidden as you move until you get to the gate.” She looks up at us, blue eyes stern yet alight with excitement. “We’ve sent word to our people inside that you’re coming. That’s where you’ll come in.” She looks at Colt and taps her temple.

Colt nods, his demeanor serious. “I’ll pick out friend from foe.”

“Exactly,” Willow continues. She pulls out another large paper roll and straightens it on the tabletop, this one a set of floor plans. “You’re going to burst through the front gate here, which will alert everyone to your assault. My people will convene with you and watch your backs. You’ll enter the facility here,” she points to a side door, “and go through this corridor to the main lab here. That’s where Doctor Song will meet you. She will direct you to Mira’s father, but she has another mission inside that facility.”

“What is it?” Rai asks, his voice hard.

Willow considers him a moment. “Vera’s job was to infiltrate the facility, put an end to the disgusting experimentation, and wait for a distraction to destroy all the logs and data within.”

“We’re the distraction.” Aubrey states it, doesn’t ask.

“You are an opportunity,” she corrects. “We had planned to send a unit of our own to stir things up there so Vera could complete her mission and we could extract the prisoners, but now that you’re all here, that team will be on the front lines to save the children at the juvenile facility.” Her arms cross. “This is a coordinated attack planned for years. You’ll attack the lab, drawing GBE reinforcements away from other outposts tonight, then tomorrow night, we will knock down the gates at the academy and juvenile facility at the same time.”

My head is nodding, jaw set. “We split up and reconvene at the academy after.”

Willow smiles. “Precisely. Our teams on the inside will do what they must to disable the collars just before we strike.”

Caius approaches with a big box in his grasp, placing it on the table beside the papers. “I know Rai will get use out of these,” he says, gesturing at it with his chin.

Rai, looking intrigued, sorts through the items, a grin playing on his lips. “I’ll test some ideas before we leave. Thanks.”

Caius nods. “So, which one of you kids knows how to drive?”

Before I can respond, Colt claps his hands. “That would be me,” he says, sporting his giant smile.

“I, too, can—”

“Oh, no,” Colt cuts Rai off. “You don’t know how to drive, and after the helicopter incident, let’s not test using your power to control the car, hm?”

Rai acquiesces, looking a little like he might be pouting.

Aubrey chimes in. “Is destroying the data in that place going to be enough?”

Willow frowns slightly. “I don’t have a direct line to Vera, it’s too dangerous right now. But I will admit that my desire is to wipe that place off the map, if possible. Only if it’s safe.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“There were reports of...chemicals. Maybe some other toxic materials.” She sighs. “Ask Vera for her input and follow her direction. She will know best.” She looks back at the maps. “Study these. Memorize them. Sundown is in seven hours.”

“I thought I might find you in here.”

Willow’s voice carries like a song through the topiary. The plant life here is calming, and I found myself drawn to it, trying to find some peace before embarking on our mission to save my father. To save everyone.

This has become so much bigger than me and my family, my pack. I guess it always was.

I give her a weak smile. “I hope it’s okay.”

“Of course it is.” She joins me, sitting lotus-style on the ground, surrounded by greenery. “Once we take the academy, as I said, it will be our new base of operations. I’ll need to find a suitable location for my friends here.”

I blink at her in surprise. “You’re going to take them with you?”

“Oh, yes,” she smiles kindly, looking all around her. “Once the battle is won, and we will win, I’ll return for my friends when we move all the history here to the

academy.”

“I can barely imagine that place being a true learning institute for Cursed.”

“Believe it,” she says with conviction. “We are going to change the world, Miranda.”

I do believe in her. In the cause. I want to fight for a better future for all of us.

Her voice is quiet when she speaks again. “About a decade ago, I lost one of my mates.” Her arm extends, and a branch reaches out for her, the most beautiful orange and yellow rose on its tip, like flames on its petals. “This rose plant was the first gift he’d ever given me.” She smiles, and a tear drops from her eye, clutching at my heart. “It was a mission gone wrong. One I was in charge of.” She returns her hand to her lap, the rose retreating to its place along the wall. Her head tilts in thought. “I’ve always been so careful. My whole life, I’ve always thought things through to exhaustion, trying to ensure everything went smoothly and we were victorious. But sometimes, you can’t plan for everything.”

When she turns to me, her eyes are swimming, glistening in the low light. My heart gives a thud. “My Curse was easy to hide when I discovered it. The only person I ever told was my sister.” Her smile is sad. “She was one year older than me, also an Omega. She was in awe of my power and confided in me that she wished she were Cursed, too. Then, one day, barely at twenty, she fell in love with an Alpha. He was so kind to her, and they wanted to build a life together. Their union was approved by the Council, and they married. Around that time, I found two of my mates, Caius and Thebus. Twins, if you can believe it.”

She lets out a small chuckle that draws a smile to my lips.

“We were living in hiding, my mates and I. We were ready to go in search of the rumored rebellion forces and join them when we received word that my sister was

going to have a baby. I knew I had to be there. My mates and I agreed it was for the best that I stay with my sister and her husband to help. I planned to talk them into coming with us when my sister was well enough, but if she refused, I'd return to my mates and the three of us would go."

She leans back on her hands, looking off into the distance. "When the time came for her to give birth, we had everything ready in their house. A midwife was there, and my brother-in-law was a nervous wreck." A sad chuckle. "The labor was...difficult. And when my sister gave that final push, the midwife whisked the baby to the corner of the room. I could feel the panic in the air. She did everything she could, but the little one didn't make it."

My body shakes with emotion, a tear drips from my eye. Willow and her family had gone through so much...

"My sister demanded to hold her baby, and the midwife presented her with the small bundle, wrapped in a clean blanket, and left us all to mourn. My brother-in-law was white as a sheet, a statue at my sister's bedside. And I grew angry, watching these people I loved more than anything endure something so..." Her voice trails off, and when she continues, it's distant, airy. "Then my sister, she wept, wailed like I'd never heard. My heart felt as though it were being torn apart in my chest. I went to her and embraced her. She continued to cry from the depths of her soul until her tears began to glow like the sun, golden and blinding, and I had to look away. When the light died, so did my sister. But her baby...she cried her first tears, took her first breath."

Willow's fists clench, tears pouring down her face, and I grasp her fist in my hand, squeezing it tightly, offering any strength I can to this woman whose strength is unimaginable.

"My sister had given her life to bring her baby back. After all that time, she had been Cursed, just like me." She chokes. "And none of my power could save her."

She looks at me, her jaw set. “But now, we were in danger. The midwife would know, and the baby would be the offspring of a Cursed.” Her eyes grow hard. “My brother-in-law would not follow me to find the rebellion. Perhaps it was unfair of me to ask in such a dark time, but I thought it was the only answer to save them, for my sister’s sake and theirs. So, instead of us leaving together, I did what I could to help him before fleeing.”

My lips part, my brows draw tight. “You let him say you did it,” I breathe.

She nods slowly, then shakes her head on a sigh. “I ran from the house as fast as I could, made my way home to my mates as stealthily as possible, and we were on our way within an hour.” A huff of humorless laughter. “I didn’t have time to mourn for weeks as we traveled, following cryptic clues. When we’d finally found one of the rebellion branches, that’s where I found Jory, my third mate.” A watery smile. “My Alphas consoled me, purred me to sleep every night as I lay tangled in their limbs. They healed my heart as best they could.”

She takes a deep breath and says, “Thebus was killed in action, giving his life to save mine. Jory infiltrated the GBE five years ago. He’s been undercover ever since. So it’s been me and Caius.”

“Willow...” my whisper is hoarse. “You’ve lost and sacrificed so much.”

“I will do everything I can to save and protect our people.”

“I swear we’ll do everything we can to help, too,” I tell her.

She gives me a kind smile, places her other hand on top of mine, sandwiching it between hers. “I know. Your pack is stronger than you think. But don’t take unnecessary risks, okay?” Her eyes grow fierce. “If anything goes wrong, you get out of there and make your way back to the academy to meet up with us. I mean it. Even

if it means leaving your father behind. Any parent would want that of their child.”

I give her an affirmative nod, but I know in my heart that we’ll do whatever it takes to save my father and the other Cursed in that facility, no matter the risks. It’s what Willow would do. I’m sure of it.

Aubrey

March in Iceland brings approximately twelve hours of darkness.

The four of us are bundled in thick clothing, supplied by Willow, from insulated pants to coats and thermal masks. Our boots have spikes on the soles that feel strange on the solid floor of the SUV, and Colt took his off to drive.

The white four-wheel drive vehicle, its heavily shadowed interior lit only by the moon, is outfitted with chains on the large, solid tires and a sharp, angular plow on the front grill. The back compartment is filled with organized supplies, including full gas cans, more chains, the box of gadgets Caius had given Rai, and guns. Lots and lots of guns.

The four of us—our pack—spent hours before we left ironing out our attack plan, and planning for as many divergences as we could imagine.

These motherfuckers trained us to be the perfect soldiers since adolescence, but their inflated egos never let them see us for the threats we are. I would bet that never in a million years did they think we would break free of their control and fight back, thinking their collars infallible.

I mean, what reason would they have to believe it would happen? We've been living under their control for centuries without an uprising.

I don't know how many Cursed are left in the world after so many years of slaughter and denial of procreation, but I do know we are going to fight to free every last one of

them.

Colt drives fast but steadily along the icy roads for over two hours until he says, “Hang onto your butts,” over his shoulder, and cuts the wheel. We plough through a high snow bank and into a wooded area off-road.

Rai is in the front passenger seat, fiddling with some tech, attaching wires with his bare fingers. He slips something on over his gloves and wiggles his fingers a few times, nodding to himself.

Miranda is beside me in the first row of back seats, her coat and gloves on the seat beside her. My Omega isn’t as affected by the cold as the rest of us, and seems more comfortable without the constraints.

She looks at her bare hands, clenches and unclenches her fingers, and a pale blue glow surrounds her palms. Her eyes narrow, her brow draws together, and tiny shards of ice spring up from her skin. A frown plays on her lips, and she closes her hands. When she opens them again, the ice and the glow are gone.

Her head tilts.

“Testing your power?” Calling it that and not a curse is becoming less difficult pretty quickly, just as using the term “pack” has been.

She turns to me with a small smile. “I’m a bit scared of what we’re about to do, but part of me is also kind of excited. To let go, you know?”

I do know. So do Rai and Colt.

Since we’d all bonded our Omega, there have been changes inside us. Not just our powers, but it’s like an emotional connection has started forming.

I can feel them.

“Me, too, brother.” Colt chimes in, still driving along the treeline. “I have to try and read your minds now. Can you believe that shit?” he laughs, and it’s happy. “But I feel you guys, here,” he places a hand on his chest briefly. “Like, your emotions.”

“I do as well,” Rai says.

“Yeah, me, too.” Miranda turns to me in the dim moonlight, and I see the question in her eyes.

“What is it?”

“You love me.”

I let out a huff of laughter. “I’ve told you I do.”

“Yeah, but...” her fist rests on her sternum. “It’s different to feel it, knowing that it’s your feelings, after—well, you know.”

I frown in spite of myself. “I was a fool, Miranda.” I look to the other Alphas. “Colt, Rai. I apologize to all of you.” I sigh and look back at Miranda. “I thought that I was saving us all by denying our connection. I didn’t want us to get hurt.”

“I know,” she says. “I always knew, but that assembly...” her head shakes, and she looks down into her lap. “They murdered that pack as an example to all of us, the same day they were going to take you away.” She looks at me again. “I both understood why you did what you did and knew that we had to get out of there at any cost.”

I take her hand in mine, the skin cool to the touch. “When they made me demonstrate

my power to the buyers, I shouted your name.”

She startles, eyes large.

“Nearly blew down the place.” I grin at her, and she lets out a laugh dangerously close to a giggle. That sound makes the beast in my chest purr with delight. It had been dormant since our mating, satiated, I guess.

“This is our stop.” Colt slows to a halt and cuts the engine in a spot where the trees form a canopy. In the distance, floodlights and area lights illuminate what looks like a prison. Tall walls with barbed wire along the top, guard towers at every corner hovering over everything. The gate in the wall is solid metal, riveted, and definitely thick. The wall itself isn’t much different.

Spotlights swoop around the interior and exterior grounds, and it puts me on edge. Is this how it always is, or are they expecting trouble?

“Either way, we have to move,” Colt whispers aloud, reading my mind.

We meet at the back of the SUV and start gearing up. Miranda didn’t take her coat from inside the car, and while I worry for her, I trust her to know her limits.

We all layer bulletproof vests beneath our coats, Miranda over her thermal shirt. Colt and I equip ourselves with assault rifles under our arms and on our backs, shoving magazines of ammunition into cinching loops at our thighs, then we all take sidearms. Miranda and Rai only arm themselves with 9mm handguns and clips.

The four of us have done our best to plan for this siege, and all we can do now is move forward, trusting each other to do their part.

When we’re all geared up, I look to each of my packmates in the virtual darkness and

nod at them before saying, “Let’s go.”

Against every protective fiber of my being, Miranda takes the lead. She’d practiced again and again at the bunker, not in her element, and succeeded. Now, it’s with an awe-inspiring level of ease that she turns her body sideways and extends both arms, the one in front forming a giant shield of ice with a crackling sound, the curved formation growing out from her palm.

We gather close together and push forward, the shield serving to obscure us from view as much as possible, her other hand hovering and mending the icy snow our shoes disturb to cover our tracks. But the sound is louder than I imagined, and I wince the closer we get to the facility.

We have to rush them, I think hard at Colt, and nearly miss my footing when Rai’s voice responds in my head.

“ We should. They haven’t detected us yet. I’m tapped into the security system.”

“ Good work, Rai,” Colt says, steady and calm.

“ Have you linked our minds, Colt?” This from Miranda.

“ Just a little something I’m still working on. Glad it's helping now.”

I take a breath and mentally steel myself for what’s to come. We all know the plan, I remind them.

There’s this strange sensation of nodding inside my head that makes my brain itch. I shake my head and power through. On three, we rush the gate.

One.

Two.

Three!

Miranda's shield disappears, and I run through my pack straight for the gate, screaming obscenities at the top of my lungs, adding the power of my bark to the sonic boom that smashes through the gates, sending the giant metal doors spinning through the air where they crash into the building ahead of us.

The gunfire starts just as the alarms wail.

“Incoming friendlies!” Colt shouts in our minds.

Three soldiers surround us, facing outward. One shouts, “Hold fire!” as Colt says in our heads, “Don't shoot!”

A glistening dome of rainbow colors surrounds us, bullets ricocheting off of it like an impervious shell.

Not only are these soldiers a part of the rebellion, but they are Cursed. Yet, I don't scent them as Alphas.

How were they able to pose as Betas?

“This way,” the shielding soldier tells us and we follow him to the side door where Rai gets to work immediately, attacking the electronic defenses and lock with his power. When the door swings open, the alarm stops wailing, and Shield Guy shouts, “Go!”

As his shell falls away, one of the other soldiers steps up, arms wide at his sides, then quickly swoops them in like he's hugging himself. A giant arc of golden light flies

from his arms, taking out guard tower after guard tower like a boomerang-shaped heat-seeking missile.

The force of the explosions leaves me little doubt that any guards in those towers are dead.

The third soldier takes point, leading us through a bright white hallway with another door at the end, the electronic lock on the wall beside it has a biometric panel with the outline of a hand on it.

“I’ve got this,” the lead soldier says before placing his hand on the panel. The door opens inward and he resumes his lead, readying the rifle on his back just as a handful of guards rush toward us from around a corner, their boots stomping and screeching on the shiny floor.

The soldier opens fire, sweeping his gun from side to side across the width of the hall, making the soldiers drop, red streaking the floor and walls. He strategically hit them below their vests to bring them down, but when one points his gun at us from the ground, his breath coming in loud wheezes, the soldier fires a single round through his forehead. His body collapses.

“Keep moving,” the rebellion soldier tells us, and we turn down the corner from which the enemy soldiers had come.

The walls are glass, laboratories on either side, people in lab coats and hazmat suits with heavy gloves inside, red lights flashing on the ceilings.

“We’ll come back to these later,” the Boomerang Guy tells us as he jogs up beside me. He’s older, with salt-and-pepper hair, clean-shaven, and has a seriously angular jaw. His dark eyes are as hard as his expression. “We go to Vera first, then split up for your target.”

Miranda's dad.

I nod at him, and he moves to point ahead of the shooter, leading us around a few more corners, just as we expected from the blueprints. When we reach a solid metal door, Boomerang Guy pounds on it twice, pauses, then raps on it four times, fast. The door slides open to reveal a woman, tall and slender, with straight black hair, dark almond-shaped eyes behind red-framed glasses, and smooth skin, not a lick of makeup. The patch on her coat says "Song."

"Here I thought you'd forgotten about me," her voice is droll as she peers at the three rebellion soldiers with narrowed eyes before stepping out of the room, allowing me to see inside to a small but tidy office. "We don't have much time," she says on a frustrated sigh and begins to move through the hall. "I received word just an hour ago that there's going to be a surprise inspection. Prepare yourselves."

"What does that mean?" Colt asks as we stop at a door the doctor punches a code into.

"If we don't hurry, we'll have more GBE soldiers on our asses." The door opens, and she turns to look at us. "And a member of the Council."

"Shit," Colt says as we pass through the door. "I bet it's that asshole Ivanov from the assembly."

"One point for Blondie," Dr. Song calls sarcastically before stopping at a split in the hall. She turns to the rebellion soldiers, who nod at her, the shooter and Boomerang Guy taking off down one side. "This way," she tells the rest of us, leading us the other way.

Shield Guy takes point and extends his arm, palm forward, that glistening shield taking up the entire corridor's width and height. When pounding boots echo from

behind me, I know they're not friendly.

Turning, I do something I'd practiced with my pack back in the bunker, a suggestion of Colt's. A soft, childish sound effect, "pew-pew," comes from my mouth, my lips forming an O at the end of each one, aimed right at the chests of each incoming soldier. They fly backward, their limbs flailing in front of them, weapons dropped to the ground.

"Nice!" Colt shouts, probably more proud of himself for the idea than of me for implementing it.

"Hurry," Dr. Song urges, and we hustle down the hall to another security door. "The cells are below," she tells us. "I'll let you in. Wait for the collars to disengage before opening the cell doors."

As the door opens, she rushes off in another direction, Shield Guy leading us down a steep flight of metal stairs.

The basement level is even brighter than the ground floor, almost blinding. Everything is white aside from electronic lights along the walls, some medical instruments, and the gray examination tables inside glass containment cells. The first few we pass are empty and clean, but when we come across an occupied cell, the female inside screeches, grips her head and ducks into the far corner, body rocking back and forth.

Colt winces, his head shakes, likely trying to rid himself of her intrusive thoughts. Perhaps the memories of what was done to her.

Not all the others are the same, but some are. The rest watch us, questioning and silent. Some angry. I frown, no longer sure of the wisdom behind freeing all of these Cursed. I can't imagine the mental effects of years of torture and experimentation.

They may have arrived sane, but what about now?

“Most are okay,” Colt says aloud before stopping in the walkway. He raises his voice. “We’re getting you all out of here,” he tells them, his expression so determined. “When your collars disengage, we’ll unlock your cells.”

A young male Omega walks slowly to the glass, his wary pale lavender eyes roving over Colt, his light blond hair long and scraggly about his face. “You’re one of us,” he says, his Irish lilt pronounced. He looks at Shield Guy, and his brow twitches. “Cheeky cunt. This was your plan all along?”

Shield Guy gives him a noncommittal shrug, keeping his gaze trained behind us.

Mira approaches the glass, puts her hand on the clear barrier between them. Her voice is fierce when she tells the Omega, “We’re bringing this entire facility down. No one who hurt any of you lives past tonight.”

The Omega’s head tilts, his hand tentatively pressing against the glass at Mira’s palm, and a slow, deadly smile spreads across his unhinged face. “Oh, yes. I like that. I like you.”

My eyes narrow at him, and his head turns to me. “Not to worry, Alpha. I mean what I say and no more.”

Odd guy, but the look in his eyes compels me to believe him. His expression is crazed, but his eyes are somehow sane and steady. Either he’s perfected an act, or something deeper is going on with this one.

“Name’s Zephyr.” He gives a little bow like a showman. “I’m at your disposal. If we get out of here.”

“We will.” I know it.

“Your target is down this way,” Shield Guy says, gesturing further down the pathway.

“We’ll be right back,” Mira says before hustling down the cells until a male voice, hoarse and watery, cries, “Mira!”

She stops short, her hands slamming into the glass barrier. “Dad!”

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Miranda

I choke on tears at the sight before me.

My dad looks like death. His face is gaunt, his movements sluggish. His brown hair is dirty and stringy, longer than I've ever seen it. His eyes, once the same color as mine, are dark like steel now, even in the bright lights.

But he's alive.

I don't see any obvious signs of physical abuse or torture, though there will be time for questions later, once we get out of here.

"What are you doing here?" His voice is so raspy, it reminds me of Aubrey's when he first started speaking again.

He eyes my bare hands on the glass, his brows drawn, then Colt is beside me, taking one hand in his and holding it tight in front of my gaping father.

"What...? What is...?"

I shake my head at him. "We'll explain later. Right now—"

I'm cut off when the lights shut off, leaving us in complete darkness. Then there's a loud boom in the distance, a clicking noise inside the basement, and red lights flash overhead.

“The collars are off!” a male voice roars before some of the glass cells begin to explode, some of the captives leaping from them and running up the stairs.

My father looks down at his body, at the control unit on the ground, and lets out a growl before stomping on it. “Get back,” he seethes as his fingers spread at his sides and the cell walls around him begin to vibrate.

“Go!” I tell my pack and the rebellion soldier, taking off down the pathway with them in tow, just as Dad’s cell explodes.

As he steps out, a familiar voice calls, “Uh, a little help here?”

Zephyr is still in his cell, knocking on the glass wall, when my dad approaches and nods at him. Zephyr walks back against the far wall, and my father puts his hand on the glass, tapping his fingers against it rapidly until it shatters and falls to the ground.

When Zephyr passes through the opening, his fist taps my dad’s shoulder. “Thanks, Isaac. Still don’t trust my curse after last time.”

My father pats the Omega’s back.

“Is everyone out?” Vera Song’s voice comes from the top of the stairs.

After a quick sweep to confirm, we jog back up to the ground floor where we meet her, and Zephyr plants his hands on his hips, staring the doctor down. “Now this I didn’t see coming.”

“We have little time,” she says in a rush. “I’ve flushed the chemicals and bio samples together to destroy them. The database is being purged and will be submerged in under five minutes.”

“Let’s move!” the rebellion soldier shouts, taking the lead with his shield out.

“Oooh, colorful!” Zephyr sings as he runs alongside us as best he can, my dad as well, both likely fueled by adrenaline alone.

“This way!” the soldier points down a hallway.

We move down it, and the glass labs on either side are now bloodbaths, the people in their hazmat suits filled with bullet holes.

We follow the shielding soldier all the way back to where the GBE soldiers had been shot earlier, maneuvering around their bodies to get through the door and back outside, where the two other rebellion soldiers are waiting.

“We cleared out the rest of the GBE,” one of them says. “We’re going to take the Doctor and rendezvous with the infiltration team at the juvenile campus.”

“And I’ll escort this group to the safe house,” the soldier with the shield tells them.

Dr. Song turns to Zephyr. “Do you want to stay with them or come with us? I wouldn’t recommend being on your own right now.”

“Oh, I’ll stay with these fine folks,” he grins at our group.

Dr. Song nods in confirmation just as the ground begins to rumble. “The servers have been submerged. It’s safe to bring this place down.” She turns back to Zephyr. “You should let go.” Those are her final words before she turns and runs off toward the gate with the two rebellion soldiers.

Colt stares at Zephyr a moment and nods to himself before turning to us. “Let’s get to the gate.”

“But we need to—”

“We will,” Colt cuts my dad off. “He will.” He gestures to Zephyr.

The shielding guy who stayed with us leads the way to the gate, where we all turn back to the facility. Zephyr stands between us and the building, his dingy white scrubs fluttering in the cold breeze. His arms raise, his hands encased in a purple energy so dark it’s nearly black, save for the lighter edges that lick like flames, ebbing and flowing.

The screech is what makes me jump first, plugging my ears with my fingers with a cry. As the sound grows deafening, there’s a rumbling at our feet, and the building begins to fold in on itself, right into the center. The squeal of bending metal is accompanied by the pops and twinkling of breaking glass, the snap of wood, the sizzle of severed live wires, all until the building is sucked into an enormous sphere of energy, the same color as that around Zephyr’s hands. It spins and spins, growing smaller as the sounds die, and then there is nothing left but a gaping hole in the ground where the facility’s basement once was.

Zephyr turns to us, that dark energy of his framing his right eye like blazing lashes. Then the energy disappears, and he’s trudging toward us, slow and exhausted.

I run to him with Aubrey, catching him just before the young man falls to the ground. We pull his arms over our shoulders to help him stand, but I realize immediately the height difference is going to be a problem and wince.

“I’ve got this, Bunny,” Colt says with a grin as he takes my place under Zephyr’s left arm. “I may not be as tall as Aubs, but—”

“We’ve got to go!”

The rebellion soldier shouts frantically just as I hear it. Helicopters. A lot of them.

I can't tell which direction they're coming from, but it doesn't matter. I know where they're headed.

We run as fast as we can, Rai taking the lead to get us to the SUV in the woods, but we're out in the open, easy targets from the sky. Shit.

"Hang on!" I yell. "Stick closer together!"

We keep moving, but they move in closer, Rai, my dad, and the soldier in front of me, Aubrey, Colt, and Zephyr behind. I raise my hand in the sky and concentrate on forming ice, just like I had when I shielded us during our approach to the facility. Only I never practiced creating the shield above my head, and as it grows from my forearm skyward, I realize immediately that I've made a mistake. The coverage is too wide, the weight of the ice far too much, and my arm swings to the right, topples over, and what ice I did form shatters on impact.

"Fuck," I hiss. All I wanted was to help. Tears sting my eyes.

"It's okay, Mira." Dad is beside me now, his silver eyes filled with concern as they look down at me. "That was a great effort, kiddo. I...I never imagined you could do something like that."

I shake my head. I should be stronger. I should have been able to protect us.

With my idea a bust, we run as fast as we can for the woods as a helicopter spots us, the bright light shining down from above as gunfire pelts the snow and ice at our feet.

Rai turns his white, glowing gaze upward, and the helicopter begins to spin violently in the air before careening away and crashing in a ball of fire yards away.

More helicopters come, and Rai does the same to them, sending each one away, spinning and screaming. When a few show up at once, the air around us sliced and whipped, snow crystals flying, he disables two of them as soldiers propel down lines from the third behind us.

More gunfire, and the rebellion soldier shields us, but I can tell that he's straining, just like Rai.

Aubrey turns his head and lets out a sonic scream, sending two of the GBE soldiers flying backward. But there are two more, and they lunge for Aubrey and Colt before they can react. I see the control boxes in their hands, and something...snaps.

I leap at them, forearms to fingertips encased in thick ice claws, and all I see is red. I grab both by their necks as I take them down on their backs. They gurgle in my grasp as I growl in their faces.

How dare they. How dare they try to chain us; take what's under my protection!

My grip tightens, and still, one of them tries to put that control box on me now. I scream, my claws slicing through both their necks like scissors through paper. Their blood is sour when it splashes in my mouth, and I spit it back in their lifeless faces.

Kill. Kill. Kill.

I am a flurry of rage and redemption, tearing the soldiers apart, ripping into their clothing and flesh, tossing chunks of them all around the pure white snow, until red is all I can literally see. Dark fading to pale, globs and pools, streaks and splatters.

"Miranda."

Those eyes beneath me fade to a milky color, the light completely gone from them.

Monsters. They are monsters who deserve worse.

“Miranda...”

Worse, yes. What I’ve done isn’t enough. No, there needs to be a higher price to pay.

My head snaps toward the sound of boots stomping closer, and I am in the air again, soaring toward the approaching soldiers, taking them down in twos, crushing throats, tearing out hearts, roaring at their audacity.

When the final soldier’s head comes off his neck in my hands, I look at it, my own head tilting to one side as I do.

Insects. These Beta suppressors are nothing but insects.

“Miranda!”

My gaze whips toward the familiar voice. Colt stands a little off to the side, his brows drawn, his mismatched eyes glistening in the moonlight. His lips are parted, one arm extended toward me.

Is he afraid? I’ve taken care of the threat and protected my pack. Why does he look so scared?

“I’m worried about you, my love,” he says in my mind, making me blink.

Worried about...?

The gore all around me suddenly screams for attention, and I turn wide eyes at the scene.

I did this. But...

“Come on.” Colt’s arm wraps around my shoulders, and he steers me away, toward our group and the woods beyond.

As we pass my statuesque father, staring at me with horrified eyes, I can only wonder what I’m becoming.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Miranda

A small, one-room cabin deep in the woods is where we all stop to rest during daylight. It's about halfway between Tenebrosa and the academy, according to Lucas, the rebellion soldier who wields the reflective shield.

There are two single beds adjacent to one another in a corner where Zephyr and Lucas are resting. Zephyr slept through all the events after he crushed the facility with his power. I can't imagine how draining that must have been.

Aubrey and Rai sit in old, dusty chairs by the unused fireplace, Aubrey sleeping with his head tilted back, mouth open slightly. The sight makes my lips twitch a bit.

I'm seated on the floor with Colt's arm possessively around my shoulders. He rubs my arms and back every so often, but stays mostly silent. My father sits on the floor all the way across the room, his gaze flicking to me warily and then away.

"He's being an idiot." This from Colt in my mind.

I don't react to his jab because this is the umpteenth time he's said something like it since I murdered those soldiers.

I don't blame my father for being frightened. I still don't remember everything that happened, but the amount of blood and...bits...I had to wipe from my body when we got to the cabin clued me in that I'd probably killed more than I thought.

The killing itself didn't bother me. It was the lack of control.

It was like when I'd started to go feral before mating with Aubrey, only amplified a million times. Which doesn't make sense, because my pack bond is complete now. So why?

Maybe my desire to protect my Alphas was so strong that I lost it.

My father clears his throat quietly, drawing my attention to him. "How...did you escape the academy?"

I scrutinize him for a moment, Colt pulling me close and kissing the top of my head almost possessively. Then I give my father the abridged version of events, whispering so as not to disturb the others. I leave out any mention of mating, but I know he knows. It's obvious.

When I get to the part where we met up with the rebellion, my father stills, hanging on every word.

"When I was first brought to the lab, the Beta in charge was...monstrous," he tells us. "I only knew him for half a day, but that was enough."

"You're lucky," Colt says. "If he hadn't been replaced, you might not be here right now."

Colt doesn't tell my dad that I'm responsible for Dr. Ness' death, and I'm thankful for that after what he just witnessed me do. I don't need him to be more disturbed by my actions.

My father nods. "I believe you. A Major Tomlin addressed all of us during the transfer of power. He said we just had to hang on a while longer, but none of us knew what he was talking about at the time." He looks over at Zephyr. "Some of the Cursed had been there since they were children. The ones still alive were deemed 'special,'"

he says the word like it disgusts him. “We were all experimented on. Even Dr. Song would inject us with things, but the other prisoners said the shots made them feel better or nothing at all. Since Ness didn’t get a chance to touch me, Song was the only scientist I encountered aside from her assistants.”

“Do you know what you were injected with?”

His head shakes no at my question. “Zephyr said that his curse got stronger, though.”

Colt sighs, leaning back against some piled-up blankets. “We need to rest so we’re ready for tonight.” He opens his arms to me, and without a second thought, I snuggle into him and close my eyes.

I feel my father watching, questioning. He hasn’t asked how I am able to control my power, and part of me wonders why. The other part refuses to acknowledge the nagging feeling that he knows much more than I imagined.

“Holy shit.”

Lucas had taken the wheel of the SUV, and after four hours of travel with one stop to refuel, using the canisters in the back, we’re on the road leading up to the academy. And what we find is devastation.

Fire lights up the grounds and building, thick smoke visible in the moonlight. Flashes of color from firearms and magic alike light up the night.

Lucas stops the vehicle off to the side of the road. “We should hoof it from here.”

He takes off in a jog, and Zephyr gives a wild smile, all teeth and no emotion. “Let’s feck some shite up!”

We all follow, spread out, to the busted-open gate. There are bodies, most of them GBE soldiers, littering the ground along the way. But there are also some fallen who aren't in uniform. I don't recognize them, don't know if they were students or part of the rebellion, but my heart aches all the same.

My father and pack pass through the gate behind Lucas and Zephyr, but a strange sound catches my attention, drawing my gaze down the outside of the wall. The shadows cast by the tall stone make it difficult to see, but there's movement approaching, slowly. It's wide and makes a steady stomping noise.

Ice claws sprout along my skin on instinct, and I get low, until a scent invades my nostrils. It's muted but familiar.

"Peace!" a male voice shouts at me, and I stand up straight, eyes wide.

The thing moving closer is an enormous polar bear. It's adorned with black armor from its head to its back and legs, but moves easily. Riding on the bear like it's a trusty steed, is a man in only a tee shirt and pants, a rifle peeking from behind his back.

"Major Tomlin!" I cry, but it's quiet over the small roar of the polar bear that stops right in front of me.

The Major peers down at me, his face softer than I've ever seen it before. This close, his scent is more powerful, and I know for sure the truth.

He's an Alpha. And he's Cursed.

"Call me Jory," he says with a small smile.

Jory? "You're Willow's mate?"

That smile grows wider. “Glad to see you two had a talk.” He pats the bear’s side and says, “I told you I loved animals.”

I’m still gaping as he looks at the wall and back at me, expression falling serious. “Are you ready for this?”

I shake the shock from my head, and there’s no question in my mind. “I’m ready.”

His smile returns, and he gestures behind him with his head as the bear lowers itself. “Hop on, then.”

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Colton

There isn't a single collar glowing on anyone's neck.

A scan of the thoughts around me finds that the collars disengaging caught everyone by surprise only a moment before the siege.

Those from the academy I know best are inside the building, and so are Willow and Caius.

While I fire controlled shots from my assault rifle, Rai and Aubs are at my back, Aubrey shouting and sending soldiers flying, some cracking their skulls clear open against walls and trees. Rai's eyes glow white as he wields some bit of tech he'd built. It's wrapped around his right hand and arm, and whenever a spark pops in his eye, bolts of electricity leap from the device, coming to life, moving to envelop any nearby soldiers, causing them to convulse and froth at the mouth.

I am in awe of the control of my packmates. And a little jealous.

When Mira arrives on the back of a polar bear, my jaw nearly drops to the ground, especially when I see who's with her.

Tomlin.

Mira jumps off the bear and turns back to Tomlin. "We'll meet you inside."

He nods at her, and the bear runs to the stairs leading to the academy entrance.

One look at Mira, and I know everything. Our minds are one as our thoughts meld.

He's a Cursed Alpha. Willow's mate.

It's not long before my pack is back to back, soldiers pouring in on us as we attack in every way we can, firearms and power. There are more soldiers than I ever imagined. More than there'd ever been at the academy before.

Then the helicopters come, and I can feel the thoughts of hundreds more soldiers.

Also, Councilman Ivanov, whose dark thoughts I'd recognize anywhere, even if I can't understand the words he's thinking.

We have incoming, I push into my pack's minds, then push harder to reach as many Cursed minds as I can. We have a lot of incoming!

I can feel all kinds of emotions, from fear to resignation to determination.

My pack is exhausted, all turning to their firearms to defend when the helicopters start landing outside the wall. I stop counting after five land as soldiers rush in through the broken gate, wielding guns and collar control boxes. I don't know if they'll work when the main control unit in the academy has been shut down, but I don't want to find out.

Aubrey and I run out of ammo first, then Rai throws his handgun at a soldier's face hard enough to knock him out before Mira, breathless, turns her empty gun into a dagger of ice and shoves it into the nearest soldier's eye. When he drops, we're surrounded.

Throughout my life, I've been scared many times, most of which were during my childhood. Fear of the voices in my head, of being abandoned before it actually

happened, of being put into the system where I'd live the rest of my life. But the fear that grips me now is on a level I've never experienced.

My pack. My Omega. The people I love more than anything in this world.

I won't let them die.

There's movement at the gate, and I feel Ivanov there, his foreign thoughts smug, but I also pick something else out of his brain. He'd sent his Cursed soldiers away. He did it so they couldn't see our uprising.

He's scared the rebellion will spread.

Something shifts in my chest, the beast that used to feel foreign but is now a part of me. It growls with me, and my brain is on fire. My gaze sweeps over the nearest soldiers, and they're frozen mid-movement, eyes wide and vacant. I push harder with my mind than I ever have, reaching for as many of these Beta pieces of shit that I can, and finding them. Finding so many of them all over the grounds and inside the academy walls.

It's like the world has stopped spinning, all their movements halted in the middle of whatever they'd been doing.

Then, with all those minds firmly in my grasp, I whisper three words.

"Kill each other."

Silence. Then, two soldiers in front of me face one another, aim their guns, and fire. A hot mist covers my cold face.

Four more heads explode. Six more. Gunfire and more gunfire with increasing speed

and quantity, reaching further away, the sound of bodies dropping all around us.

People scream.

Chaos explodes all around and then stops just as quickly.

One sweeping gaze confirms a sea of black-clad bodies on the grounds, blood pooling everywhere.

My head snaps to Damir Ivanov, his expensive suit covered in gore, his face ashen, eyes wide with delicious terror.

He doesn't know real fear. Not yet.

I step closer to him, slow and easy, not taking my eyes from him. He wants to step away, his eyes flicking nervously, his mouth twitching, but I hold him in place with my power.

I control your mind, I tell him softly. Calmly. So I control your body.

A sound rises from his throat, but I don't care what he has to say. I can see it all now. I can understand it all, as though I were born speaking Russian. Our minds are at one, and his is a mind I don't want to spend much time in.

I knew he was a bastard, power-hungry and hateful, but I had no idea how much influence he had over the Beta Council. He'd been instrumental in so many barbaric events other than the executions here just days ago.

I prod and pry, the whole time he whimpers, unable to move a muscle. My probing is painful. I can feel his distress. I could end the pain, but I don't.

I'm vaguely aware of the growing audience around me, no one but my pack daring to get closer.

Then I find it. His secret.

I knew he had one the moment I first saw him. I didn't have the power to find it then, but when I grasp it now, a roar escapes my chest, all fury and rage. He screams in his throat, mouth forced shut like I've sewn it, and I make him see. See her. Over and over again, the Cursed Omega he'd loved, the one who hated what he'd become, the one who spurned him for another when he joined the Council, the one he locked up after murdering her lover in front of her. The one he would visit again and again in the night, pumped full of chemicals, and force himself on whenever he pleased. Until she ended it by taking her life in a rare moment of clarity.

He'd seen the surveillance footage, how her dull eyes looked straight into the camera, and she whispered a message just for him before slicing her throat.

My hand whips out and grasps his neck, squeezing hard enough to elicit more panic, but not hard enough to end him.

I pull her voice from his mind. “Ya bolshe nikogda ne budu tvoei.”

I will never again be yours.

It repeats over and over, and his pulse quickens as I send images into his psyche from his buried memories. From the first time they met to the brutal aftermath. The first time he saw her dance, the day he murdered her lover in front of her. The day he smiled to himself as she drew laughter from the children around her by creating a rainbow of tiny fireworks in the sky, the day she looked into the camera as an unrecognizable woman, and ended it all.

I draw out his pain and even guilt. There's remorse for what he did hidden deep within the confines of his mind, but instead of this changing his ways, he quadrupled-down on evil, murderous hate.

I burn these memories into his mind, the images and her last words echoing on a loop until his body convulses, foam seeping from the corner of his mouth, and he collapses.

Death would be too good for this one. So I make sure he'll live, comatose, locked in his memories for all time.

Forever isn't long enough, but it will have to do.

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Miranda

Colt was...magnificent.

I don't know if he did it on purpose, but I saw everything he pulled from that Beta asshole's mind.

Fucking monster.

And I know Rai and Aubrey saw it all, too, because my hands are still held tightly in theirs as we all stare at Colt with awe and admiration.

When he turns to us, I leap at him, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and squeezing, kissing his neck as I whisper how much I love him. Then Aubrey and Rai are at my back, their arms around us both, natural and loving.

But there's still more to do as we separate and pass through the small crowd that had amassed around us, and head into the academy. Most of the crowd follows when a voice calls out, "What do we do with him?"

When I turn, I see a young man I don't recognize pointing at the Beta Councilman, who twitches on the ground every so often.

"Leave him," Colt tells him, and we turn back to the academy.

Inside, Willow and Caius are in the center of the foyer. Around them are several Beta soldiers I recognize, their uniform badges and patches torn off in defiance, some

wounded by obvious gunfire.

“Yarr,” Aubrey calls and rushes to the combat instructor, who’s leaning against the wall, breathing heavily. There’s blood on his torso, and I think it’s coming from a wound in his shoulder.

“I’ll be fine, Modumo,” he replies with effort. Then he looks at him quizzically. “You’re talking.”

Aubrey shakes his head. “And you’re bleeding.”

The older man laughs, then groans in pain.

A woman I don’t recognize approaches from the back of the small crowd and crouches in front of Yarr. “I’ll help,” she says quietly.

“Mira!”

I turn toward the chorus of cries to find Nyx and Arlowe running at me just before they wrap me tight in their arms.

“I knew you’d make it back,” Nyx whispers, emotion welling in her tone.

“She wouldn’t shut up about it.” Arlowe’s tone is sarcastic yet watery when she steps back and smacks my upper arm.

My smile is automatic, my eyes swimming as I look at my friends. “I’m so glad you’re okay.” My voice cracks. “I knew you’d fight when you were able.”

“This one,” Arlowe smacks Nyx’s arm this time, “has fried all sorts of Beta assholes.” She grins proudly.

Nyx rolls her eyes. “I didn’t have much of a choice.” I follow her gaze over her shoulder where Headmaster Laurant stands, fidgeting and shellshocked, beside a young man whose pale blue eyes are locked on Nyx. His once-styled hair is mussed from battle, tribal tattoos peek from beneath the neck of his shirt like black flames. There’s a ring in one of his nostrils and a barbell in his opposite eyebrow.

I turn wide eyes to a smirking Arlowe. “That would be Erich.”

I stifle an even bigger smile when Nyx turns back to us in a huff. Then, her face goes pale as a familiar voice sings from behind me.

“Well, well.” I turn to find lilac eyes above me, but they’re honed in on Nyx; that wild and unhinged smile is settled on Zephyr’s face. “This is the most pleased I’ve been to escape my life as a lab rat.”

My lips part, but nothing comes out, my brows furrowing as I look back and forth between Zephyr and Nyx.

Arlowe lets out a huge laugh, gripping her middle as she bends over with the force of it. “I don’t know whether to hate or pity you,” she says between laughs.

“Attention, if you please!”

The room sobers and we all turn toward Willow, who stands alone in the center.

“First, I want to congratulate you all, not only on a job well done, but because you fought for your freedom today.” She proudly looks around the room. “Our fight is not over, but yours can be. We would never force anyone to join our cause. If you choose not to fight, you can leave any time. Our people will help you find safety.” Her hands clasp. “If you choose to stay and fight, know that what we fight for is not only retribution, but to change the entire world.”

When she moves about the room, most are captivated, but some look disbelieving. “I have a pack,” she gestures to Jory and Caius. “And we will fight for pack freedom as well. If you have found your mates, there’s no longer any reason to hide. We will protect you, and help you protect yourselves.”

The energy in the room changes as if there’s a collective sigh of relief.

More people file in from the back entrance, and murmurs build.

“Also, we’ve taken the juvenile facility. Our leader is there now, and all the children are safe.”

There are gasps from some people, including Arlowe, whose hand flies to her throat. I put my palm on her back, but she doesn’t react.

“If any of you have family there, you can see them tomorrow morning. If you’re unsure if you do, the registries are open for you to search. Your tablets and all the computers have been unlocked, and you all have unrestricted access.” She looks right at Rai, who gives a small nod.

“Now that we’ve received the all-clear,” Willow gestures to Colt, who also nods in confirmation, “we will begin the process of healing and cleaning.”

Willow directs anyone who’s greatly injured to a group of rebellion members who have the power to heal, and anyone with minor injuries to be examined by Dr. Gayle, whose face is somber but determined.

So many who aren’t Cursed decided to stand against the GBE. To stand for what’s right.

A tear of gratitude slips from my eye.

When Willow seeks volunteers with power to help clean up the hundreds of bodies strewn across the campus, Zephyr claps his hands, making the three of us jump. “Well, that’s my cue, ladies!” And he’s gone, joining a large group by Caius, including the Alpha named Erich, who eyes him warily.

I’m about to ask Arlowe about the juvenile facility when Willow comes by, her smile bright, eyes crinkled in the corners.

“Miranda!” she sings kindly before addressing my friends. “I’m Willow. Miranda and her pack found us escaping here.”

Nyx and Arlowe turn big eyes from Willow to me and back again.

“They were right where Colt thought they’d be,” I supply.

“That would be my doing.” Major Tomlin— Jory —joins Willow’s side and puts his arm around her. “I knew some of the kids here could read thoughts, so I did everything I could to feed information to them. About the rebellion’s existence and location.” He frowns. “All I wanted was to take this place down with you, but I had to set other things in motion first.”

“So you further endangered my daughter and her pack.”

My father comes up from behind Willow and Jory, his gaunt face severe.

As I look at him in question, Nyx and Arlowe get closer to me, protectively. I feel my Alphas look at me, reach out through our mental bond, and I send them a silent message to stay where they are.

I don’t know what my father’s hostility is about, but adding more Alphas to the conversation will only make things worse.

“Your daughter is a very capable warrior,” Jory tells him, his tone very calm. “I’ve seen what she is capable of. I believed in her, even if I couldn’t be honest with her.” He turns to me then, his voice and steel eyes soft. “I’m sorry about that.”

“You let them risk their lives, not knowing the truth!” my father shouts. “For what? To save me? To save all Cursed everywhere? What is the plan here?”

I open my mouth to protest against his absurd behavior when Colt shouts from behind us, “You’re one to talk about secrets, Isaac.” All eyes whip to him, and my heart races.

There’s something...something inside Colt’s mind...something he’s been hiding from me.

His pained, mismatched eyes turn to me, but he addresses my father. “I don’t care if this is the right time or not. I can’t take this anymore. Either you tell her, or I will.”

I look at my stricken father, the man I always thought the world of. The man I’d do anything to save, anything to never part with. “Tell me what?”

But I already know.

I look at my father, his silver eyes like mine, then to Willow, her fingers pressed to her trembling mouth. A mouth and face so like mine. Hair like mine. And I know.

I swallow, my voice coming out like air as I look at the woman before me. “Your sister was...”

Tears stream from her eyes, dropping off her jaw and chin. “Miranda,” she whispers. “My sister’s name was Miranda.”

The world around me goes dark. I faintly hear the gasps of my friends at my side, feel the grip of one of their hands tight on my forearm.

My Alphas are coming closer now, and I know I can't stop them.

I turn tear and rage-filled eyes on my father. "You lied to me." My body shakes, my mind numbs. "You lied to me about everything. My entire life, every fucking thing you told me was a lie since the day I was born."

"Miranda—" he reaches for me, and I step away in fury.

"You let me believe I killed my mother."

"I never said—"

"It doesn't matter what you said!" I scream. "I believed it. Then I killed the woman who raised me with my curse, and I carried the weight of both their deaths." My fists clench, ice crackling along my skin as I stare at the man who called himself my father.

"You had a choice," I croak. "You knew you and my mother were both Cursed. You knew I was going to be, too!"

His voice is broken, defeated. "It's never a sure—"

"Bullshit," I seethe. "You knew and you chose a life of comfort for as long as you could, instead of joining Willow and the rebellion."

"I thought you would be able to hide your curse, like me. Like your mother."

"You thought wrong, though," I say on a humorless laugh. "I must have been such a

disappointment to you. The dirty, Cursed secret you couldn't hide."

"That's not true!" he shouts.

"No? I made it impossible for you to keep hiding and living your beautiful life. And your plan was what? To run forever? Until you died and left me alone to keep running?" I shake my head in disbelief at him.

His wary silver eyes flick across the room at the people around us. "Maybe we should—"

"They are the last people you should be worried about right now." I snap my ice claw in front of his face, and he flinches, eliciting a modicum of satisfaction inside me.

"Do me a favor," I say, stepping away from him and the others. "Stay far away from me."

Miranda

Part of me feels bad. Not for how I yelled at my father, but for running past all the people working so hard to clean up the battle. Using their curses to pile bodies, make them vanish to who knows where, and remove the blood and sinew from the ground.

I sit by the line of forest that's walled into the campus grounds, right where Colt and I had our first kiss. All of the floodlights are on across the grounds, chasing the darkness into shadowy corners. Some scouts use flashlights or their powers to light the corners in search of more spots to clean.

When Nyx and Arlowe join me, they sit in silence on either side of me on the ground.

Nyx's voice offers softly, "Maybe he had a reason to lie."

Arlowe huffs on my right. "I'd be just as pissed as you, Mi. Probably more pissed."

"Lowe!"

"What?" she leans forward to look around me at Nyx, incredulous. "I'd want to kick him in the nuts!"

The laugh that erupts from my body is a surprise, but a welcome one. "I love you guys."

My head swivels back and forth to find them grinning at me.

Nyx leans back on her hands and looks up at the moon. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“We’re free.” Arlowe’s voice is distant, her head shakes. “But how do we help the rest of the world?”

“Like Willow said, the road isn’t going to be easy. Are you two going to fight with us?”

Arlowe lets out a pfft as Nyx says, “Do you even need to ask?”

The longer I think about it, in light of all that’s happened, my father’s betrayal starts to feel meaningless. Our battle to end this tyranny and liberate our people worldwide is far more important.

But I won’t forgive him quickly or easily.

“Excuse me, ladies.” I turn to find Jory approaching us from the academy, something in his arms. When he’s a few feet away, he squats down and extends his hands to me, a small white ball of fluff in his grasp. “He missed you.” Jory smiles. “He was frightened, so I helped him hide during the fight.”

Joy. Pure and utter joy is all I feel as I take the little snow hare and lightly embrace him against my chest. My friends coo and aww at him, and although I can’t communicate with him like Jory, I get the feeling he’s basking in their attention.

“Mi gets all the good stuff,” Arlowe jokes, poking me with her elbow.

Jory winks at me, stands, and goes back in the direction he came.

“I’m so sorry, Bunny.”

When I return to the academy, my mates are all waiting for me. Colt nervously pets my fuzzy friend's head—I still haven't chosen a name for him and decide to ask Jory if he already has one—as he peers into my eyes like he's willing me to understand. But it's not necessary.

"I know," I say. I'm not angry with him, and he can feel it. "It wasn't up to you to tell me. But I appreciate you pushing the person who needed to." I send a sideways glare to my father across the foyer, who's standing with Willow, Caius, Jory, and Laurant. They're in a deep discussion.

My Alphas take that moment to gently embrace me as one, careful not to squash my friend.

"Let's go to Colt and my room," Aubrey suggests. "We can push the beds together for now."

"For now?" I ask, peering up at him.

"They're discussing pack rooming," Rai tells me, gesturing toward the group with Willow. "The plan is to clear out faculty bedrooms so all packs can be comfortable and stay together in larger, private quarters."

There's a surge of happiness in me as I look around to find various groupings of Cursed all around us, making me wonder just how many packs there are here.

"A lot more than I ever would have guessed," Colt supplies. "I never picked up their thoughts, which leaves me with a lot of questions."

"Maybe their bonds protected them," Rai offers. He looks at us all. "Our connection is new. We're still discovering its effects."

It's strange to think that our bond is new. The sense of belonging with my Alphas is so strong, it's like we've been together forever. And looking at each of my Alphas, I know they feel the same way.

"Excuse me..."

The familiar female voice is hesitant, and I back out of our group embrace to look at Willow's remorseful face.

"We'll give you two a minute," Aubrey declares before ushering Rai and Colt to one of the stairways.

"I'm so sorry," she says in a rush. "I should have told you, but I knew your father would be angry with me if I did, and you might have been angry with him, too, and the mission—"

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I throw one of my arms around her in an embrace, cradling the rabbit in my left as I hold Willow tight. Her body shakes, and I realize mine does, too, as her hand smooths the back of my hair and her lips press to my forehead.

When I look at her this time, tears are streaming down her face, and I wipe my thumb under her eye with a watery smile. "I understand. I understand why you didn't tell me and why Colt didn't, either. This isn't on either of you." I gesture to my father with my head. "He did things, made decisions that hurt me, hurt us all. I..." my voice trails, brows drawing together. "I idolized him," I whisper. "The sun rose and set with my father. And now that I know he's lied to me my whole life, I don't know what to do with that."

Willow's hands rest on either side of my face, her smile small and sympathetic. "I would never tell you how to feel, Miranda," she says. "I know your father loves you.

He didn't want to force you to live a life on the run if it wasn't necessary. That may have been misguided, given what's happened, but I know he had the best intentions in mind."

I frown, part of me knowing she's right, the rest of me wanting to stay angry.

She nudges me on the shoulder. "You're entitled to take the time you need." Her smile grows large then. "And maybe you'd be inclined to help me with something?"

I bite my lower lip, trying something I never thought I'd be able to say. "Sure...Aunt Willow."

She clutches her chest, fresh tears springing from her blue eyes. "Ah," she says on a sob, "you've got me going again."

When we laugh, our Alphas all rejoin us, obviously feeling the emotional shift.

"Most the people here want to stay and fight," Caius relays. "Some of them want to wait until they reunite with their siblings to decide."

"Those who want to leave, we've guaranteed safe passage to the nearest rebellion outpost," Jory adds. "The people there will help them figure out where they want to go and get them there."

"We'll be putting together a training plan for anyone who stays," Willows says. "We're going to help everyone hone their power as best we can, group them with like-abilities and instructors. Some of those without power are staying to help, too, like the doctor and Lieutenant Yarr."

I nod at them and purse my lips. "I was surprised when you said that the leader of the rebellion was at the juvenile facility," I tell Willow. "I thought you were the leader."

She smiles at me. “I’m one of Rodrigo’s advisors, as are Jory, Vera, and a few others.”

“Rodrigo leads us, but everything is a joint effort. We all have a say.” Jory reaches out to pet the rabbit.

“Oh! Does this little guy have a name? And will he be safe outside?”

Jory smiles, something I’m starting to get used to. “He has a name, but it’s nothing we could ever pronounce.” His grin grows. “You should give him a name. And, as for his safety, why don’t you keep him inside with you tonight? Everything should be cleaned up tomorrow morning, and he can go back to his den. You can visit him any time.”

I look down at the fuzzy bundle in my arms, rub my finger gently between his black-tipped ears.

“Yuki,” Rai says, staring at him. “You should call him Yuki.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Snow,” Rai replies. “Or happiness. It depends on how it’s written.”

“Fitting either way,” Jory chimes, his head tilting.

“Willow! Jory!”

A young man I don’t recognize rushes toward us, out of breath.

“Easy, son,” Jory tells him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Breathe.”

He catches his breath, barely, then says, “We just got word from Rodrigo. They interrogated some soldiers and found out that there’s a facility in the UNA where they’re holding prisoners. More experiments.”

Willow and Jory look at each other, and Caius lets out a low growl.

“Brief us,” Willow says, looking back at us apologetically before leaving for another room.

“That doesn’t sound good at all,” Colt says with a sigh.

We all agree, but there’s something different now. Something that wasn’t true before.

“We’re going to fight back,” I say. “I bet we’re going to take down that facility, too.”

“And any others we find,” Rai adds.

Aubrey puts his arm around my shoulders. “And then, we’ll take the fight straight to the GBE.”

Miranda

One month later...

“Keep your eyes covered!” Colt says excitedly.

“No peeking, or else,” Aubrey says from behind me, close to my ear, making me shiver.

My Alphas had found me with my aunt—it’s easier these days to use the title for Willow—and told me they had a surprise for me. I was immediately excited and suspicious, especially when Rai took one of his old blindfolds from his pocket with a devious grin and tied it over my eyes.

After a very frustrating few minutes of them taking me up the stairs, shouting, “Step!” in unison every time I needed to take a step upward, my face flaming with embarrassment, we finally arrived at the floor where their secret was located. I had lost count.

They’d steered down a hallway until they stopped me by the shoulders.

A door opens in front of me, and I’m guided through it, then stopped when the door closes behind us.

“Close your eyes, and keep them closed until we tell you.” Rai’s smooth voice comes from in front of me as fingertips grip the blindfold and pull it over my head. I hear footsteps circle behind me, then all three of them say, “Open your eyes!”

My heart thumps as I do as instructed, my breath catching immediately.

It's a bedroom. Our bedroom. The walls are freshly painted a pale gray, decorative paintings and photographs hang on the walls. There are dressers, four of them, and at the center against the back wall is an enormous bed, a canopy draped over it hung from the ceiling, made of layers of sheer fabric in a rainbow of colors. And the pillows—they're everywhere! All sizes and shapes, looking plush and fluffy. And it's all I can do not to leap onto the bed and bury myself in their softness.

I don't realize I'm crying until I sniffle, and my Alphas embrace me together, kissing me one by one.

"Do you like it?" Colt asks tentatively, like he actually needs to. All of my Alphas feel what I feel, just like I feel them. It's part of our bond.

But they want me to say the words. "I love it." My voice is an airy whisper.

"Good," Aubrey says before putting his hand out in front of me.

I look at him in question.

"Socks," he says.

I frown and back away from him. "They're my socks."

He sighs as Rai's laughter fills the air. "You can have any of our clothing you wish, Hime. Anything at all for your nest."

"Yeah, you don't want months-old socks stinking up the place." Colt's nose wrinkles.

I pout at them. "But...memories..."

Aubrey puts his hands on either of my shoulders. “We’re going to make more memories, Miranda. This I swear to you.”

“In fact,” Rai sings, “we should start now.”

“Absolutely.” Colt’s smile is wicked.

Then, in record time, I’m naked before my Alphas.

It happens so fast my head spins, but I notice I’m the only one without clothes. I don’t get a second to protest when Aubrey grabs and lifts my breasts with his hands to Rai’s eager mouth. He pulls one nipple between his teeth, the other between his fingers, drawing a moan from me, then hooks my knee with his free hand and lifts it. Colt drops to his knees before me, his tongue lapping at my clit, swirling my opening, demanding the whine that builds in my chest, the slick that drips from my core.

When Colt’s fingers slide into my pussy, I cry out on a whine, more slick runs down my thighs but Colt laps it up then wraps his lips around my clit and sucks until stars flash then explode in my peripheral, and I’m coming on his face.

When the haze lifts, Rai is gone, and Colt is removing his shirt. Then, I’m lifted by Aubrey and taken to the bed where he maneuvers my body to straddle Rai’s, my back to him.

“Get her ready,” Aubrey commands before putting me on all fours, my hands on either side of Rai’s thighs.

I gasp as Rai’s fingers probe my sensitive flesh, drawing my slick from my pussy to my ass, slipping a finger past the tight ring, then another, scissoring them, drawing more slick from my body, my whine obscene.

“Yes,” he whispers, the reverence in his voice unmistakable.

I throw my head back and rock my body into his fingers, making him fuck my ass as I moan and hiss with pleasure.

The bed sinks on either side of me, and Aubrey and Colt are there with us, both naked, their cocks hard and ready for me. My mouth waters, my slick pours down my thighs. I'm sure I'm soaking Rai below, who pulls more of it to my ass, speeding up his assault until Aubrey says, "That's good."

Rai pulls his fingers from me, and I whine in protest, the loss of his intrusion driving me wild.

"Our Omega is a greedy little thing," Aubrey hums.

Colt comes closer, grabs my face with one hand and says, "She has been so good, though."

"Yes," Rai agrees, pulling my ass cheeks apart and massaging them, making me groan.

"Should we reward her?"

I have to force myself not to answer Aubrey's question. I want to shout "Yes!" at the top of my lungs, but I've learned over the last month that's not what a good girl does.

There is no audible response before Aubrey places his hand around my throat and straightens my body, holding me upright. Then Rai's hands are on my hips, pulling me down onto him, the head of his cock slipping easily into my pussy. I cry out as he strokes once, twice, three times, then pulls out completely and slams all the way into my ass in one thrust.

No sound comes out of me when I'm pushed backward, lying on my back on Rai's chest, his hands on my breasts, my head lolling to his shoulder in bliss.

Then Colt and Aubrey are each holding one of my legs, spreading me wide open. The sight makes more slick gush from my core, and Aubrey is suddenly inside my pussy, his thick cock slamming home, his balls slapping my skin. When he pulls out completely, Colt is there, his hard cock repeating the motion, making me cry out on a whine, my body shaking.

Then they do something I never dreamed of when both their cocks sink into my soaking pussy at the same time, stretching and drawing a strangled cry from me.

“Fuck,” Colt hisses.

And then they’re fucking me, alternating strokes, one of them inside me all the way, the other’s head at my entrance, and then they switch. Every time they thrust, Rai’s cock is drawn from my ass a bit, and his grip on my hips slides me back down his length, seating him again.

The assault is maddening, faster and faster, harder, my whine growing high pitched as they growl possessively instead of purr, still making my body vibrate deliciously in all the right places until I’m screaming; screaming until my throat goes raw and my voice gives out, and they’re still thrusting, pumping, then spilling their come deep inside me with carnal groans that set my body and soul ablaze.

When their knots lock us all in place, I don’t even register discomfort at the increased stretch, my body limp and completely sated. One knot in my ass, two in my pussy, and I couldn’t be happier.

I had no idea the faculty had their own bathrooms in each bedroom, but I’m ecstatic about it now.

Our bathroom features a shower and tub combo with a glass door, and it’s spacious.

My Alphas bathe and pamper me, each washing themselves one at a time until we’re

all clean. Then, I'm wrapped in the softest, fluffiest towel I've ever felt, and carried to our enormous bed.

Aubrey kisses my forehead, positioning himself across the head of the bed, a pillow on his stomach for me to rest on. Then Rai and Colt envelop me in their arms on either side of me, and I smile when all three begin to purr, their scents mingling in that way that lets me know I'm home.

We may still have a long way to go for freedom, but wherever the journey takes us, as long as I'm with my Alphas, I am home.