A/B/G/O The Principle Dynamics:
The Alphas make up the Head.
The Betas are the Neck which support and uphold the Alpha’s Head.
The Gammas are easily the body who obey the Head and protect thy Neck.
Omegas...Omegas, she doesn't rightly now what an Omega should or could present. Only that they aren't represented and are often pushed aside as unwanted oddities that disrupt the order of the Dynamic.

OR

The one in which an Omega falls for an Alpha or Two and is forced to deal with a hell of a lot more than simple Biological responses and how the world thinks she should live her life.

OR

The one in which we have an OFC!Omega, an Alpha!Captain America and a Renegade
Alpha!Bucky and I've forced them all into a relationship because I very well, fucking, can.

(I'm trying real hard to keep this from being a non-original Alpha's rescue the damsel in distress Omega troupe. But, I've never written a A/B/G/O Fic before and I might just let my inner die hard romantic fangirl out to run the show.)

Notes

Α 23%  β 17%  Γ 57%  Ω 3%
They don’t know why the Titles exist still. After all, the human race has long since been removed from their more animal instincts. They walk upright now and have built whole civilizations from mud and stone. Still, the Titles and Positions exist and none of the scientists—with all their fancy titles and degrees—can explain why they remain. But, they sure have written endlessly about it.

Papers upon papers of nonsense drawing, with a stark outline, each role of a Position or Title. All of it so eloquently dubbed The Principle Dynamics by some Greek philosopher back in the toga wearing days. Back then the roles had been more rigid and less expansive. They have long since been altered, edited and revamped. But, for the most part, they are utterly the same.

The Principle Dynamics goes as follows:

First and foremost are the Alphas, those who rule, those who lead, those that stand above and before all Dynamics. They make for the beginning and the only.

Alphas are the Head.

Their words are law. They make up for 23% of the worlds population. They are often seen in positions of power, such as: military, police, owners of companies or any head positions. Such prowess cannot be squandered. Alphas, both female and male, are always virile and fertile people. An Alpha Bonded or not—even if to a Gamma—will almost surely yield a healthy brood. Their ability to mate and breed outside of a bond belongs only to them as does their draw-back of going into a rut every so often during a year.

Second are always the Betas, fiercely loyal, the staunch defenders, and determined enforcers.

Betas are the Neck who support the Head at all costs.

They rank second in the Dynamics and make up 17% of the Whole. They too have often taken such roles as their leaders. For under their calming scents and determined resolves, sits strength only ever beaten by an Alpha's. This is why, when Alphas—rare in their own right—are missing Betas are welcome to govern or oversee lower Dynamics. If properly Bonded(Mated), a Beta can certainly produce children, though often not as easily as an Alpha might. It is not unheard, even, of a Beta and Gamma mating to be found successful. (A Beta is encouraged to mate with those of his Title, but, not forced to do so.) A rut for a Beta is rare. An adult Beta can go their whole lives with only ever experiencing eight.

Third come the Gammas, these are who make up most of the whole of the Dynamics.

Gammas make up the body who do only as the Head and Neck allow.

They are the workforce, what makes the Whole of Dynamics function well rather than fall apart at the seams. They make up 57% of the worlds populace, easily the most dominate role, despite not exhibiting any real dominate behavior. Gammas, despite laws in their favor, are hardly ever elevated to positions with much power. They are often found in positions of caretakers, but, can also be found in active war grounds. Gammas, though they stand as the pillars of society, receive the short end of
the breeding sticks. For a Gamma is notoriously known to be lacking in sexual drive and almost all are plagued with an inability to produce even one child. If a Gamma wishes to mate—in an effort to procreate—it is wiser to seek out a Beta—or better yet—an Alpha for such purposes. If not, a dual Gamma pairing, is often found to be an infertile union. (Gammas are encouraged to mate outside of their Title, for the betterment of the whole, but not forced to do so.) Bonds, between dual Gamma pairings, are unlike an Alphas or a Betas as they do not accurately have a hold an Alphas or a Betas Mark may bear. Gammas are never susceptible to Ruts, though. (Their biology never ruling their bodies as often it may for an Alpha or a Beta.)

Last are those who come in on the lowest position in the order of the Principle Dynamics: Omegas.

Omegas...Omegas don't have positions. Not really, for they are oddities and unexplainable in the paradigm of the Functioning Principle Dynamics. So she's not entirely sure what to liken Omegas to.

There are no set positions for them because, despite the active petitioning, there is ever only one position thought best for them: Breeding. Omegas may come in last and may be so rare that they hardly make any real impact on the Whole, but, they are the most fertile. In fact, they are among the only who can yield a successful pairing with no matter of the opposing Title. But, they are docile Title Bearers. (They are often found lacking in many aspects and so are restricted to domesticated positions, as in: housework, nurturing care giving or child rearing positions their only true option.) Their fertility, like that of an Alphas, comes with its own drawbacks. Instead of a Rut, what they gain as their many burdens is a Heat, for an un-Bonded Omega to go through a Heat is to suffer in the highest forms. This is why, by the decree of the Principle Dynamics, an Omega is to be bonded by an available Alpha/Beta or even a compatible Gamma as soon as they present. (Choice in the matter is so rarely offered to an Omega over such a thing.) There are more Laws forbidding an Omega to a normal life than there is to any other Title in the Dynamic. But, this is easily overlooked, as Omegas make up only 3% of the Whole and it is painfully easy to overlook them.

These are the Principle Dynamics adopted by most cultures as to what is socially acceptable.

In this day and age, an Alpha title is what you dream about—the Perfect Role to strive for. A Beta role is just below Awesome—but the Second best is better than nothing. Gamma life is often what is accepted as the norm but still better than the last option.

Omega life is something all roles, Alpha/Beta/Gamma, agree is a sentence worse than death.

And she, she has the incredibly horrid dastardly bad luck, to have been born in that lowly title and 3—goddamn fucking—percent.

This is the story of how a lowly Omega like herself winds up living among the pedigree of all Title Bearers despite what she may be. This is the story of how she finds a pack among such unlikely people. This is the story of how she broke a few hearts while trying to mend hers. This is the story of how she, such a simple girl, managed to wrangle herself Love when locked up in a tower full of heroes.
She Remembers....

Chapter Summary

“You're a fucking Omega.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With the clarity as if it has just happened to her the day before, she remembers vividly the day of her Presenting.

She remembers the pain; the unbearable, god awful, mind numbing pain that made her vomit on and on despite not having eaten in near days. She remembers the throbbing in her lower abdomen that was something like cramps, only, worse. She remembers the fever that felt like she was being cooked, broiled, alive. She remembers the way her skin itched and burned and the fire that licked its way up her veins. She remembers the faint smell that suddenly began to fill the room the more she perspired while tossing and turning.

She remembers the way her mother had stumbled in, drunk and bleary eyed, and had stopped dead in her doorway. She remembers the way her mother had clenched her jaw and glared at her with such intensity she could’ve killed her with that look alone.

She remembers her mothers tight lipped order to quiet her moans and groans of pain. She remembers how frantic her mother had been to seal the room. The windows all nailed shut and heavy blankets tapped over them. She remembers how her mother had run to the other room and brought back a hand full of herbs tossed in a bowl. She remembers the hideous scent of them being burned in an effort to mask her growing scent.

“You're an Omega,” her mother had gruffly and angrily growled through grit teeth. Her eyes are hard and heart breakingly cold as she stares down at her from where she sits. There's a bottle of whiskey in her hands being tightly gripped and diligently emptied, “You're a fucking Omega.”

The way her mother had slurried the word had made her feel like she was dirty. It made her feel like she should fix it—herself—and stop this from being true. Or better yet, it had made her feel like she should ask for forgiveness. She remembers the shame and guilt that pools in her chest and the pools of tears that threaten to tumble over.

“You're a fucking Omega, do you know what that means?” her mother demanded of her. Her dark curling locks swaying with her anger. Dark eyes—eyes like her own—narrow as she spits out, “You couldn't be a Beta or a fucking Gamma? Why the fuck did you have to be a goddamn Omega?!”

She remembers the way something in her, something that had always defended her mothers against
the rumors and talk of her drunken escapades, snap. She remembers the way her heart constricts in her chest and makes it so its so very hard to breath. She remembers the way a shuddering sob slips past her lips. She remembers how her mother had recoiled from the sound as if physically repulsed by it.

“Don't you fucking cry. Just cause you're an Omega doesn't mean you have to act like a simpering bitch. Get your shit together and quick because it won't take long for the whole fucking barrio to catch the scent of a bitch in heat,” her mother had spit out before exiting without a backward glance.

She remembers the boiling heat of the tears that carved their way down her cheeks. She remembers how her throat had ached and throbbed with the effort it had taken to stifle every sob. She remembers throwing more matches at the herbs in the bowl. She remembers burning the sheets too and bathing in that scent. She remembers how it had taken her a full of thirty minutes to get her shit together.

She remembers the feel of her mothers gaze when she exited her room feeling like, for the first time, she wasn't safe in her home. She remembers the startling epiphany that winded her at the realization that she wasn't safe anywhere. Because she's an Omega and that meant she had no say in anything. Any Alpha, Beta or even a forceful Gamma, could come up to her and claim her. She remembers the heavy weight of such knowledge hanging dead in her mothers gaze.

She remembers the scent blockers that are shoved into her hands. She remembers the knowing gaze of an old man—a bonded Beta—when he comes later that night, a syringe in hand. He was an old back alley doctor from Mexico who got paid well to keep his secrecy. She remembers him telling her that it would be easier for her to endure the Heats naturally until she is bonded. She remembers the old man trying to convince his mother—an Alpha—that it was best she find a suitable bond mate now while her daughter was so young. She remembers the scent of blood from where her mother had clocked him on the nose and effectively broken it. she remembers the feral growls that ripped from her mothers throat that night as she dragged the man out of their home by his sandaled foot.

She remembers the lies, the scent blockers, the heat stopping serums, the drugs and the alcohol used to keep anyone from knowing the truth. She remembers her mothers words ringing in her head until long after her mother as passed and she is left to carry out such deeds on her own.

'Never let them know. They'll take you and you won't have a say over what is done to you. They could bend you over, Bond you and never allow you out into the light of day just because they can. It is better to suffer under the drugs than it is to be taken, dominated and subjected to anothers will. They'll make you into nothing more than a breeder. opening your legs for them and squeezing out kids until you're too old or you die. Never, ever, let them know. An Omega has no rights and no one cares if you wind up dead in a ditch because you denied an Alpha. Everyone will think you deserve whatever bastard lays his hands on you. They'll tell you, you should feel lucky that someone claimed you. That you should take it because that's what you're purpose in life. Fuck that and fuck them, you want a life? You go out there and get it, but don't ever let them know what you really are. You're safer if no one knows. 'You're safer if everyone thinks you're a Beta or a Gamma with a bad streak.'
Chapter End Notes

Thoughts?
In hindsight, her mother had been right. But, then, her mother had so rarely ever been wrong.

She had just turned eighteen when she'd met him. A killer smile, arms thick and wide, dark hair and hazel eyes that spoke of nothing but trouble. He'd been an Alpha and she was living pretty fast and hard that she hadn't cared

But for the first half of their relationship, he hadn't known what she was, not really. He was under the impression that she was a Gamma. And for the most part, she'd done nothing to discourage the thought. In fact, she made a point to only ever buy products targeted for Gamma consumption. Her scent blockers and Gamma beauty products helped perpetuate the lie. He thought she was a Gamma with the fire of a Dominate Beta and he'd thought it was cute.

Between them both, there wasn't a law they hadn't broken. They'd easily fallen—quite happily if she might add—into each others downward spiral. From boosting cars to snorting questionable substance, they were you're regular Bonnie and Clyde without the whole murdering people bit.

Everything had been good then. She'd just lost her mother, her home and any remnants of who she used to be. But, she'd found a place at His side. She'd found safety and security amid the dark shadows of the home they cobbled together. She'd found happiness upon the dirty cash acquired by less than honest means.

And so, of course, she'd fallen in love.

And love...love can make people do some truly stupid things.

She'd told him, of course, bared her heart and soul for him to rifle his fingers through. Told him all the things she'd hidden from just about everyone who ever knew her. She showed him the track marks on her arm and told him the truth. The truth that she wasn't some junky shooting up heroin whenever he fell asleep on their ratty little mattress. The truth that she'd only gone into such a shady lifestyle because she needed the money to by the black market Heat suppressors. She'd told him that she wasn't a Gamma with a Beta complex.

She'd told him she was an Omega and had been all her life.

And he...he'd told her, he loved her and for a while—maybe—that was true.
But her mother had been right about what people would do once they found out. It took all of four months for his smiles to become something stretched and pained. It took all of five months for him to convince—demand—that she stop using Heat suppressors. It took all of five and a half for her to learn what happens when an Alpha's command is ignored or willfully broken.

It had taken seven months for him to force a Mark on her neck for all to see. It had taken him nine in a half months to parade her around the old neighborhood like a show pony. The marks on her face, the purpling rings of fingerprints around her arms, ignored in favor of the fact that an Alpha had rightfully snagged himself a promising Omega. That nature was taken its due course.

And her mother had been right, no one cared. They didn't care about the noises that fell out of their house. They didn't care when she walked out with broken ribs or fingers. They didn't care because she was an Omega and what purpose did they have if not to suffer the rolling hormonal tides of an entitled Alpha. No one cared, but they sure as hell gave her pitying looks and if kids ever got too close to her parents pulled them away.

So in the end, her mother had been right, though she'd never know to what extent.
It's bullshit, for the most part....

Chapter Summary

A type set that says Omegas as supposed to Talk, Walk and Act a certain way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So there's this type set dilemma. The kind of which everyone likes to think completely makes up Dynamics and colors them to the T. The kind that likes to think Alphas—all Alphas Male or Female—are built a certain way. (I.E. muscle bound and athletically inclined.) The kind that like to imagine that Betas—Female or Male—are also built a certain way. (I.E. slightly watered down version of an Alpha.) The kind that think Gammas—Male or Female—are, too, structured in a certain manner. (I.E. a weaker version of a Beta and never as thickly built as Alphas would be.) the kind that say Omegas, especially, are born in a certain form.

A type set that says Alphas are supposed to Talk, Walk and Act a certain way.

A type set that says Betas are supposed to Talk, Walk and Act a certain way.

A type set that says Gammas are supposed to Talk, Walk and Act a certain way.

A type set that says Omegas as supposed to Talk, Walk and Act a certain way.

For the most part, it's a load of bullshit. Just more Classicist trash spewed by traditionalist hell bent on keeping the order nice and fucked. But it's garbage that was spewed since the 18th century. Back when girls were forced to wear petticoats and couldn't vote. Back when same sex and mixed lower Dynamics were considered illegal acts.

It's bullshit, for the most part, but more often than not people often buy into it.

So, one can hardly blame her mother for forcing her to do all that she does. Her mother helps her walk talk and act like an Alpha. Shows her how to fight that ingrained primal instinct to bow her head when an Alpha Voice is heard. Her mother shows her how to lock eyes with a challenger when all she wants to do is bare her neck. These are things her mother teaches her to scramble an on looker—or Sniffer—from seeing past the confrontational behavioral tells.

Everything else she picks up on her own.

The baring of teeth, the growls, and the challenging rumbles. These are things she learns through her own set of trials and errors. Most of them learned under the oppressive—but most effective—fists of pain.

By the time she gets out from under that horrid Bond, she can kick, punch, bite and fight like a
Rutting Alpha. By the time she makes it out of the state, she's carrying herself like a Dominate Beta. By the time she makes it a little past the Bible Belt, she's smelling and looking like a Gamma with a mean streak. By the time she rolls into New York, off a rickety old bus with only twenty bucks to her name, no one could ever pin her as an Omega.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the short little updates. But I'm posting this as it comes. I'm not going to sit here and let my over analytical brain hack it into pieces.
Self Sufficient

Chapter Summary

She's not a stranger to unfair fights. She's fought many and lost about half, but she won't go down without a goddamn fight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She's not proud of a lot of the things she's done in her life. In fact, if ever pressed about her past, she has a bad habit of clamming up. (No lies, no smooth deflection, just straight up locking up and looking like a deer caught in the head lights.) When she finally makes it over the G.W. Bridge she's on her last twenty dollar bill with no real concrete plans.

The first night she spends it on a park bench until a park ranger tells her to get up and get out before she's taken in.

The second night she spends on the steps of some abandoned building. She almost gets shanked by a druggie male Gamma claiming she's stepping on his territory.

By the third night she's starving and her moneys gone.

On the fifth night she finds herself bent over a car trunk and doing exactly what her mother said would wind up happening to her. She ignores the words, the heavy panting and the fingers that dig into her waist. She ignores it for the hundred dollar bill he slaps into her hand.

By the third month she's learned why people both love and hate this place. They love it because it's a big mixing bowl. Everything and Everyone is tossed in and stirred until it creates something as unique and once in a lifetime as this place is. They love it because down every street there's a sense of culture. A sense of walking through eras simply by crossing the street. And they hate it because of the exact same reasons. They hate it because everyone and everything is living right on top of each other. They hate it because those cultured streets are hostile in their own rights; unwelcoming of outsiders. They hate it because everything's too old and on the verge of decay.

By the fifth month, holed up in some rat infested hotel, she's found a place where she doesn't have to put much effort to hide what she is.

Here no one leans in to scent her if ever stopped to converse with her. No one ever tries to force her into submission if she doesn't yield enough courtesy space to a Dominate Alpha or Beta.

No, because this is New York. No one ever stops long enough to even look each other in the eye at a cross walk. No one cares about Dominate Alpha's or Betas receiving their space 'cause there's hardly
any space for anyone. Everyone's too wrapped up in their own lives to worry about the Gamma smelling hooker who walks like she's a DomBeta.

No one really cares.

And for the first time in her short life she's fucking grateful.

—X—

It's an ugly little place. A hole in the wall that's likely to be run by drug money more than anything else. It's located down a long alleyway situated between two abandoned buildings. The floor is littered with all manner of trash, discarded needles, and drugged out homeless folk. She does her best to politely avoid those trying to huddle against the night cold, because, it wasn't too long ago that she was doing as they were. The further she goes down this way the darker it seems to get, for the street light doesn't bleed this far in.

Warily she casts her eyes about, searching. Her friend had said this was where the bar was located but so far she hadn't seen much party life anywhere. She was starting to suspect her friend, who already had a few marbles knocked loose in her head, was pulling a little joke on her. There are no bikes out that might signal a hidden bikers nest somewhere. No insidious skull prints anywhere or even a broken neon sign to say where this mystery bar might be at. Somewhere back she thought she saw a plaque but she didn't get close enough to read what it might have said. But, she continues her slow trek further in.

After all, she's come this far and what has she to lose?

And then, like a bomb of simple noise and loud laughter, the sound of a tall tale party unleases onto the otherwise silent alleyway. Stilling in her steps she chances a glance back and notices the people clambering in and out of a large door suddenly pulled open. She waits long enough for the people to file in and the door to click shut before she starts moving towards it.

When she's standing before the generically dirty and unassuming door she glances to the right of it and stares at the off gold plaque at it's side. The words clear now that she stands so close, 'Sister Margaret's Home for Wayward Girls'. Yeah, she's sure now, her friend was laughing at her somewhere.

Gripping the doorknob, she braces herself—tosses her shoulders back, lifts her head in defiance and clamps down on the unease growing in the pit of her belly so that it might not give way to her scent—and opens the door.

Despite the name, this is clearly a bar and one so very not in the up and up. There's about forty people inside, give or take a few heads, and all of them so overwhelmingly dominate it makes her primal instincts cringe back. The heavy, nearly oppressing, scent of Alpha's, Beta's and a few Gamma's sits heavy over the scent of spilled beer and dirty floors. She ignores the millions years of genetic behavior to tuck down her head and avoid all eye contact. She ignores the need to bare her neck and avoid slighting anyone lest they feel challenged.

She ignores it all the while walking with every bit of hard won confidence she has. She's not a stranger to unfair fights. She's fought many and lost about half, but she won't go down without a goddamn fight. When she gets to the bar she takes a chance to allow her dark eyes to roam the room. Cataloging every possible exit. So far she counts only the entrance.

“Uhhh, can I help you? You seem a little...little to be in here,” a voice suddenly breaks the low murmur filled silence of the entirety of the place.
Quickly her eyes flash over to the man whose suddenly appeared behind the counter. First and foremost what she see's is the makings of a very worn down yellow cardigan. Second is the untamed curly strawberry blonde hair that have an appearance of a downy cloud. Third are the thick rimmed glasses and the quizzical expression on a soft featured face. His scent comes last, a soft little flutter of something like vanilla and lilac—comforting scents. Though there is, hidden beneath that, a certain tang of metal that might like defiance in him. He might be a Gamma or a Beta—she isn't too sure, one can never trust first sniffs—but he was definitely no Alpha. There's a softness to his aura that seems out of place in a dive bar such as this and would never belong to any Alpha male.

But then, he could easily be hiding his nature just as she is. She makes sure to level him with a firm gaze, unflinching and unwavering, as she slides up onto one of the bar stools.

“Look, kid,” he starts again, his eyes nervously taking in her young looking features and then warily casting his gaze over the angry crowd, “I think you better head on out, this isn't the place someone like you ought to be.”

“Someone like me?” she bites, unable to keep her flaring anger in place. He may not know what she truly was, but, goddam did her sensitive self-esteem prickle beneath her skin.

Running a hand over the back of his neck, the yellow cardigan wearing bartender, leans in slowly and lets his eyes level hers, “My patrons here, they aren't your run of the mill late night drinkers, if you catch my drift. So I'd suggest for your own safety, you get up calmly and walk out.”

“Darla sent me,” she finds herself telling him, his eyes widening before narrowing slightly at the mention of the old hooker, realization dawns behind his thick lenses before he nods his head slowly. He's linked it up in his head, what she does for a living, and why she would know Darla a fifty five year old street walker.

“I told her I was hiring,” he mumbles, before glancing around the room quickly again, “But trust me when I say this Kid, this is not the kind of place you want to work.”

With a quirk of her brow she says to him, “I'm tougher than I look.”

“Honestly?” he asks her, though does not wait for her nod or answer as he plows through with a harried strained tone, “I doubt that. You're jail bait, sweetheart. You can show up pierced and dripping in teenage 'I hate the world' angst but, you're what? A hundred pounds soaking wet? You wouldn't last a single night. So, uh, no disrespect—but you're out of your depth on this one.”

Frowning she half growls and half bites, “I can handle myself just fine and I'm twenty two years old—hardly jail bait.”

“My point still stands kid, you can't possibly understand the kind of trouble this place really is,” the honey haired man says with a furrow to his brows and a sternness to his jaw. His slight downward pointed shoulders straighten, as if, he's trying to look more imposing. His words slowly cementing themselves in his brain.

Contrary to popular belief, she's not an exact idiot. Sure, she's never finished high school—dropped out her Ninth grade year because she presented and didn't need to get labeled—and she hasn't ever understood most of what she's trying to educate herself with. But, she's not a total fucking moron. She knows where she's not wanted. She knows the man before—probably a Beta, maybe, by the tone of his voice and the sharp metal tang in his scent—is trying to do her a solid even if he's ripping up the only hope she has of finally getting off the streets.

To him, she's just some lost kid—a hooker—who's getting too deep into a world she might not
Survive. She can see in his brown eyes, the genuine want to help. The desperate ring to his scent as he all but takes her shoulder and shoves her out the door. Something like concern laces his face every time he glances around the room checking to see if people have noticed her yet.

And just then, she has him figured out, he's a Gamma if ever there was one. He's all care and concern—honest and giving—even when he's trying not to be. Gamma's always had a distinct need to do what was best for the Whole. Whether that meant bowing, baring necks or squaring their shoulders for a fight they most definitely would lose. She silently decides, she likes the man even if he was doing his utmost best to get rid of her.

But, no sooner do the bartenders words leave his mouth does she feel a hand winding it's way over her waist to settle on her hip. Turning to her left she takes in the crooked toothed smile of a man well past his prime. By the scent of him, hidden deep under the stale beer and rancid stench of filth, he's a Beta—a Dominate one at that. There's a glint in his gaze as he sneers down his nose at her. A vicious slide of pheromones that lets her know he's interested in more than just sharing a few drinks.

"What's a pretty little thing like you doing in a place like this?" the stranger asks, his sour breath fanning over one side of her face and making her empty belly twist.

"Leaving!" the bartender announces, his voice a bit frantic and higher pitched than his usual speaking tone, "She was just leaving, right kid?"

The not so subtle hint the bartender sends her makes the tips of her frowning lips quirk up in a rueful smile. It'd been a long while since anyone had ever shown concern about the fact that man—definitively older than her by a few decades and clearly ill intended—was slobbering over her. Most nights, people made it a painfully conscious act to ignore such actions. But clearly, the Gamma bartender with the soft honey hair doesn't want her getting caught up in this brand of trouble.

So fighting her self engrained need to never back away from a challenge, she nods her head at the bartender. Saying as she does do, "Well, thanks, then."

The honey haired man gives her a strained and wobbling smile as he nods his head. Honey and amber colored curls bobbing and weaving.

But, before she can slide out of the stool and in turn the mans hold, she's roughly jerked back and into the revolting man's embrace. The left side of her is flush against his plump and heated body. The feel of it, even through her leather jacket covered skin, makes a disgusted shudder run through her.

"C'mon girlie, stay a while, I'll show you a bit of fun," the DomBeta tells her and then proceeds to grind himself into her hip bone.

The action makes her heart stop dead in her chest. The fear and flight of her damn second nature is rearing it's ugly head making her desperate to get up and away from this situation. But her anger and vile abuse born conditioning is a beast onto itself. Her second nature be damned she's a fighter, even if it's a lousy one.

"I'm only going to tell you once," she says, her eyes locked somewhere between golden tinged curls and the dusty bottle of Jack perched on the wall. Slowly, the speed of a snail on Xanax, she allows her gaze to slide down and over to meet his lusty stare, "Get your filthy fucking hands off me."

There's not a person in the bar who doesn't hear the growls she's infused into her voice. Growls only ever slipping out of an Alpha's throat. Angry things that rumble deep in her chest and shake the very roof of her tongue. She won't lie, she gets a sick kind of joy, watching the surprise that flutters over his features and smelling it in the air.
The bartender hadn't been way off base sending her away. After all, she's not much by way of body build. She's 108, starved and malnourished because she walks around only ever carrying less than five bucks. She's a slip of a thing that can barely fill out her once too tight clothes. Her head barely ever rises over anything as she stands at an even five feet. She's well aware of the fact that Alphas and Betas—and whatever willing Gamma—thinks she's easy prey. Her big wide eyes don't help her, or the soft slopes of her features. Her lush and plump pouting lips are enough to warrant every day harassment. And no matter the wear and tear of a rough life marking her from head to toe, she still looks like she's stuck somewhere in her teens.

To hear such vicious, feral and dominate growls rip from her lips as she bares her sharp canines is enough to startle anyone.

For the barest of moments, the man's hold on her loosens and if she wanted to—and she should—she could very well just slip right out with him still locked in his stupor.

But she's growled, growled a challenge and met his admiring gaze with one of a fight. He's a DomBeta and she is—for all instances and purposes—a Gamma by appearance. She technically has no right to refuse him so boldly. In fact, she's more than already initiated a fight between them both.

Quirking up a dark bushy brow, the drunken man, asks—his tone hard and imposing—trying to use his superior Rank against her, “You challenging me, girlie?”

“No as long as you do as your told,” she growls out, her teeth bared and a steely glint to her gaze. She's not about to back down. Not in a room full of Betas, Gammas and some Alphas. Even if she manages to slip past this hulking fuck, anyone can snatch her up and force her to bare her throat. There's no happy ending to this shit-fest she's begun for herself. But she's not about to bow out and give them a chance to bend her over.

Over her fucking dead body.

The fingers on her hip dig in harshly and she just knows there'll be bruises in the morning. Like a flash his face jerks close to her, close enough that their noses are but a hairs breadth away from one another. His dark eyes are swirling, the glaze of alcohol washed away by the glow of rage and growing testosterone. He was just as reluctant as she to let this fight go. The anger making his features stretch out his bite out in her face, “It'll be a cold day in hell when some Gamma whore tells me what to do. I've seen you around girlie, running up and down the red light streets and sitting at corners. Selling your bit of ass for a couple of twenties.”

“Yeah,” she drawls out nice and low, “I am a whore and I do sell my bit of ass for a couple of twenties” she admits easily, no tremble or drop in the challenging husk of her voice, “But even I won't fuck an ugly shit like you, not for all the money in your pocket.”

With all the grace of a raging bull, his meaty fist flashes up and grips her chin tight and painfully as he growls savagely in her face, “You fucking—”

But before he can finish his sentence her hand has slipped out of her front jacket pocket baring with it her night time insurance. In a flash of silver metal, she artfully slips the piece of steel between her palm and slams it down on the hand he has kept on the dirty counter top.

108 pounds heavy, starved and five foot tall she may be—but—that didn't make her a weakling. The knife digs in past flesh and bone and impales itself into the wood. Her face is released as a pained roar falls from his lips, but, it quickly swings over in a large arch to back hand her across the face.

She ducks out of the way only barely missing it before turning slightly to the left and gripping an idle
and half full beer bottle. Grip tight and eyes hard, she cracks the bottle across his head and lets satisfaction bloom in her chest in the way beer and glass spread upon him. In a crumbled—almost lifeless—heap he falls onto the ground at her feet. The thick crimson liquid of his blood pooling just slight and mixing with the spilled beer. He doesn't lay flat on the ground as he's partially propped up by the hand that is still skewered through with her knife.

It's then—chest heaving, growls spilling from her lips and teeth bared—that she notices how utterly quiet it's gotten.

The thick and strained kind of silence one only ever found on the scene of a death.

The kind that made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

Jutting her chin out and issuing a warning growl to the whole of the room she slips off her bar stool. The dull thud of her scuffed and worn down combat boots echoing in her ears alone. There's a little bundle of nerves and fear steadily growing in the pit of her stomach. She's not entirely sure what the bartender meant when he said this wasn't the run of the mil bar. But, she's not bent on finding out anymore.

With an ease she does not internally possess, she grips the black handle of her switch blade and pulls the knife from where she's impaled it. There's a low 'shlinck' sound where the knife is pulled through wood and flesh. Then a heavy 'oof' where the man's body is finally allowed to crumble fully onto the dirty floor.

Cleaning the knife of blood on her black skinnies, she eyes the man behind the bar—careful not to show her back to the onlookers—and tells him with a strained smile, “Like I said, I can handle myself.”

And just as easily as she had strolled in she walks right back out. The filthy air of the dirty alleyway clearing away some of the fear coiling in her stomach.

Chapter End Notes

Soooooo, at first I had intended on having our favorite red lycra wearing anti-hero appearing on this chapter. You know, saving the day, uttering something witty/Fantastic/Funny or awesome. But then I thought. Why the hell does my OFC need to be rescued? She's a fighter and she can do this! (Plus, I'm not that great with the whole being Funny or witty)

Thoughts????

(P.S. I'm debating whether or not DP should make an appearance after all of this. Any suggestions on how to handle his dialogue is welcome. As in, desperately needed!!!)
Wells running dry...

Chapter Summary

"He's the iconic image of a junky on a bend and he thinks she looks like shit. What the hell did that say about her."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

!!!! Warning!!!!

Mentions of Drug Use and Sexual Solicitation!

Snow – slang for Cocaine

Bombita – mexican slang for Heroin

“You look like shit kid,” her dealer says the moment he catches sight of her.

Coming from him, that's really saying something, considering he isn't the perfect picture of health either. He's a thin looking man, almost skeletal. His paper pale skin is littered in cuts, sores and scars. Under his dark brown eyes are heavy black bags that show he hasn't slept in weeks. His crooked chipped teeth are a shade of deep yellow that borders on brown. He's got bloodshot eyes and a bluish tint to him. Clearly, he's three shots away from deaths door.

He's the iconic image of a junky on a bend and he thinks she looks like shit. What the hell did that say about her.

Shrugging her shoulders she grumbles through a rough and dry voice, “Shit Jay, with lines like that
I'm surprised girls aren't knocking down your door.”

“Hmm, I try,” he rumbles back before casting wary glances over her shoulder and then back over his.

Together they stand in a filthy, trash littered, darkened alleyway. The scent of rotting trash and sewage makes her rolling stomach twist. The trash and scent of filth assures them that outsiders won’t be wandering accidentally past them as they conduct their business. But still, he is weary, because what he sells to her isn’t the run of the mill drugs.

Sure, she sometimes buys the occasional bag of Snow, Bombita or pharmaceuticals when she needs them. But, today's bag of goodies aren't anything fun and worthy of a night spent with questionable company. No. Today's bag is filled to the brim with Heat Suppressors and Hormone Blockers.

Without preamble or hesitance, she hands over the large wad of rolled up bills to her dealer. He takes it easily enough. His calloused fingers lightly grazing over her dry ones as money changes hands. He doesn't bother to count the cash because she's done enough because she's done enough good business that he has some small semblance of trust towards her.

A black plastic bag is what's thrust at her. It's half full, the glass vials clinking lightly against one another. She too doesn't bother checking to see if the amount is what they've agreed. Jay-Jay was a dealer hopped up on crack, but he was a good business man. He didn't skimp out his clients. Not in a time like this—crumbling buildings from the alien/villain attacks—hard times. There were dealers on every corner of every block. He didn't need that kind of talk on the street about his bags being found lacking.

She's just shy of nodding her head at him in goodbye when his hoarse voice stills her, “I don't think I'll be able to see you anytime soon kid.”

“Oh?” she questions, fighting hard to keep fear from spiking in her chest. There's few, if not none, who she trusts. And though it doesn't seem normal—or even safe—to other people, but, she trusts Jay-Jay. Trusts him more than she ought to really.

Raising her eyes to settle upon his, she stares at him in an act that might seem challenging to any dynamic. But, Jay-Jay, despite his rough and scarred up exterior of a fighting Beta is in fact a Gamma. He hides his scent of fresh cotton and mint with the smell of graveyard soil and weed. He hides his comforting scent of nurturing nature with the bite of narcotics in his blood. He hides it all behind the dead eye look of his glassy black eyes. He hides it so that he survives the black of the back alley business he conducts.

He knows—better than some—why a Dynamic may want to hide their second nature. He knows what he smuggles in for her. He knows and he's never once asked her over it or made it known to others. No doubt, by now, he knows exactly what she is despite her posturing.

“That shit is getting harder and harder to come by, babe,” Jay-Jay tells her only after he's running his dirty fingers through his greasy dark locks, “my connect, in the True North, says the wells gone dry up there.”

“What? Why?” she questions instantly. The mere thought of no longer having Suppressors on hand making everything in her twist.

Shrugging his shin shoulders he answers in a slur, “Shit's getting cut off, what-ever's out there on the street is about the end of it. The great U.S of A. is really upping their game sniffing this shit out. What you ave in your hands is about the last I'm gunna be able to sell to you until the heat goes
tersely she nods her head and squares her shoulders, ignoring the panic growing in the pit of her stomach, “Well, thanks then, for this batch.”

“No problem little mama,” he smirks widely tossing at her a little bag of white pills for her to catch, “Need anything else, you know where to find me.”

Pocketing the bag of thirty odd sedatives and smiles back at him before leaving the dark back way. With a black bag stashed inside her black leather jacket she makes her way back to the flea bag motel she's been living out of. She's only halfway there before she bumps into a leering Beta with sharp fangs and a wad of hundreds tightly bundled.

Needless to say she goes back to her room with company. Needless to say she stuffs her goodies in the tank of her toilet. Needless to say that while she bends her body and whores it out, her mind races with the revolting thought that soon—very soon—she'll probably fall head first into a heat. Needless to say she cannot sleep that night and needless to say it has little to do with the stranger snoring on her bed.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know, this update literally took us nowhere. I tried writing the appearance of at least one of our Avengers but it feels random and out of place. Yeah, I get the universe I'm writing about has to do with superheroes and they do not follow logic and such. But, I want to write about my OFC and show you guys the dark road she's walked before she finds her way into the tower among our heroes. I want to show you guys that she is real and that her struggle is hard. At least, I hope I am conveying that. But, I apologize for such a short update. I'm already writing chapter 7. no worries.

any who. Thoughts?
-Ani

(P.S. so yeah sorry to those who don't approve of drug use and or prostitution. There will be a lot, and I do mean A LOT, of mentions of self medication and dark issues as such. So prepare yourselves.)
The Damsel in Distress

Chapter Summary

“At the risk of sounding like every damsel-in-distress cliché ever made,” the blonde begins, her smile growing wider as she straightened her shoulders—proud and regal, “How can I make it up to you?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She's somewhere between halfway there and almost under, by the time her skin starts that uncomfortable itch and burn. The undeniable need to keep swiping her tongue over her canines as they've become incredibly sensitive to touch. Her scalp is tingling, as if she's showered with too hot water despite the fact that the motel she stays at has none. But she ignores it in favor of digging her nails into her palms.

She's on edge, a nasty feeling. One where she feels like an exposed nerve being poked and prodded till she's dying. The overwhelming need to sink her teeth into something makes her squirm in her boots. Every noise that pops in her ears has her flashing her eyes back over her shoulders. There's a burning in her stomach that has little to do with its' empty state.

This discomfort is something she's grown accustomed to but abhors with every fiber in her being. The beginnings of her unscheduled Heat approaching like a pack of wild mangy dogs, nipping at her heels. It's an unwelcomed sensation; one has effectively put a stall to with her illegal drugs.

But, Heat Suppressors and Hormone Blockers can only do so much. They dull the greater part of it. It keeps her from actually falling the red tinge of her second natures lust. It keeps her from wanting to bend over for any Alpha she happens to catch scent of. But, they don't dull the edge of the fear, of the adrenaline or the aggression pooling in her gut. They take away the need to mate but leave enough of it that she feels like going a few rounds—less with genitals and more with fists.

The aggressiveness, the jitters, the crawl beneath her skin, the bite to her smiles—all of it are what the Heat Suppressors and Hormone Blockers let bleed through.

It isn't ideal. But she'll take it. At least she's not a slave to her second nature—as much. At least they stave off the rolling tides of Hormones and stop the inevitable waves of Pheromones that present. (Pheromones that make it blatantly clear what she is.) It isn't ideal, but, it's better than nothing.

Gritting her teeth against the need to run her tongue over them, she stands stubbornly still just inside a dirty alleyway. The buildings that line the trash strewn street are broken and crumbling. They look old and smell of old filth. But word is, they used to be nice enough places for a quick squat. (Some hero related incident reduced them to their current state. Though which incident it was, she couldn't
Caught in the process of lighting a cigarette she catches the soft and subtle scents that just barely make it over the scent of burning tobacco.

At the mouth of the street stands a woman with strawberry blonde strands and golden skin that shimmered. Though she's dressed in regular casual clothing, there's something in the air around her that screams poise. She's dressed in skinny jeans with a white wash and a simple genderless v necked tee. She wears beige sandal booties that are reminiscent of gladiators. Hanging on her neck sits a golden band of some kind of jewelry. In her hand she holds a golden clutch bag.

Though she's dressed simply and there is an air of casualness to her—something deep in her belly tells her this blonde does not belong here.

“You don't need to explain it to me Scott, but, you and I both know he's not the kind of man to take no for an answer,” the blonde says suddenly. Her pale pink lips parting in an easy smile that falls from her so naturally. There's such warmth in her voice. Warmth only the rays of the sun can provide after a particularly bitterly cold night.

Something in her chest tugs sharply at the sound of it. Almost as if she's heard that voice before—whispering to her reassurances in moments of despair—and it feels like...home. But she roughly pushes those thoughts and feelings aside and blames the wonky side effects of the Heat Suppressors and Hormone Blockers. Because, she's never met that blonde woman before least of all heard her whisper any kind of words to her.

“Yeah, I figured. But trust me, if this was up to me, you can bet your ass I would have already signed on! I mean, seriously I get to be in the Ave—” the man who speaks now—his voice bright and happy is cut off, no doubt by whatever look the blonde sends his way, “Right, cloak and dagger and all that jazz. But, like I was saying, there'd be no problem if this was up to me. I'm a team player. But, I do what my Boss-Lady says and when she says it. Trust me when I say Big-Daddy Prym is a garden gnome compared to my Pack Momma.”

The man who stands opposite of the blonde woman with the pretty smile is relatively average. He does not stand very tall nor is thickly built. He's dressed in a dark black hoodie, a gray back pack slung over one shoulder, ratty torn jeans and flat chucks on his feet. His hair is dark and there's a show of slight gruff on his face. She's too far away to scent him—or the blonde for that matter—so she cannot tell where he is ranked in the hole pyramid of power.

The drugs dull her senses too so there's no chance she could make sense of them anyway. Colors aren't so vibrant when the drugs hit. Food tastes like ash and rational thoughts fly out the window. She's little more than a ball of anxiety riddled primal instincts now. Still, despite all the fresh dose being injected not one hour ago, something in her hind-brain rev up. Something like instinct warring against the stifling sludge of chemicals rushing through her. There's a pooling want—a need—to somehow inch closer to the two at the mouth of the alleyway and scent them. A desperate thing that writhes hungrily to taste their rank on her tongue.

But she squashes that bit of herself down viciously. A growl vibrating in her chest to keep her stupidity in check. In an effort to keep her head screwed on straight she takes a half step backwards, cloaked by the shadows the crumbling buildings provide.

_Fucking Omega bullshit_, rings savagely in her mind, the ghost of her mothers voice.

“Hmmm,” the blonde hums softly, her smile gentle and warm—slightly teasing around the ends, “So I've heard. Still, I'd appreciate it, if you could speak to her on this matter. You lot are a highly
debated topic at the Tower. Everyone is anticipating and welcoming you and your packs addition to the ranks. Especially a certain stationed guard where someone may or may not have broken into not a few months ago."

“Oh shit, Falcon remembers that?” the man—possibly the same Scott the blonde had addressed in the beginning—grumbles out. His hand running harshly over his face as he huffs out a harsh breath, “I told him I was sorry about that. He's not still hung up on it is he?”

“Falcon remembers that?” the man—possibly the same Scott the blonde had addressed in the beginning—grumbles out. His hand running harshly over his face as he huffs out a harsh breath, “I told him I was sorry about that. He's not still hung up on it is he?”

“He's an army veteran, on top of that he's a DomBeta. Of course he's still hung up on it. Like a dog with a bone that man,” the blonde softly laughs, her laughter ringing softly and delicately in the growing dark.

“Shit,” the man curses while scrubbing the back of his head and ruffling his dark hair, “I'll talk to the Boss-Lady, see how she feels now that most of the drama's blown over, but I can't make any promises. Ross, that hypocritical douche in a hand basket, really rolled us over with those Accords. Screwed the proverbial pooch. My packs gone underground as far as everyone else is concerned.”

“I understand, no one will hear otherwise from me. But, seriously considering our offer is all I ask for Scott, feel free to drop by anytime you wish. Everyone is eager to properly meet you,” the blonde tells him before they make their goodbyes.

And then, just as abruptly as their conversation had banished the silence, everything falls quiet. The only sounds being that of her own puffing and huffing off the dwindling white stick between her lips. Glancing at the lone blonde through the corner of her eyes she can make out the glow of a cellphone in her hands. The blonde woman, most likely, arranging for some kind of taxi service to steal her away from all this filth.

Good, she thinks—not at all bitter or angry, the woman glowed to brightly and prettily to be caught in streets like these. Streets littered in people like me.

Lost in that thought, she almost misses the growing rustling and growls of an impending fight. Turning sharply to her left—down further into the dark alleyway—she can make out the shadows of two men. Large bulking figures pushing and edging each other on. It's a familiar sight, two Gammas psyching one another up, the less than playful nips and jostling to ramp up the intimidating scent of musk only they can emanate.

If they can ramp up their scent, mix it with something like iron or metal, paired together with a weapon of some sort. This tactic can scar off any passerby’s. Even Betas.

Though, whether it's ever worked on an Alpha, she isn't sure.

Noticing their play for what it is—danger—she turns to eye the blonde still lounging casually at the mouth of the pathway. Pale golden hair tucked nicely behind one ear as she continues to fiddle with her silver gleaming phone. Flashing her eyes back to the approaching men she bites down on the growing anxiety that tells her to make herself scarce. Hopped up on drugs she isn't the most rational thinker.

Clenching her jaw tight she all but stomps out of the shadows and heads to the woman causing the all the fuss.

“You need to leave,” she grits out tightly, her teeth snapped against one another as her dark eyes meet baby powder blue.

“You need to leave,” she grits out tightly, her teeth snapped against one another as her dark eyes meet baby powder blue.

“Excuse me?” the strawberry blonde startles at her abrupt approach and hard tone.
“You need to leave,” she repeats, her words more forceful as she can hear the approach of scuffling boots and growling males approach, “Now! You need to leave lady, shit's about to pop off real quick and I don't think you'll be up for it.”

“I'm sorry, I don't think I understand—” the blonde mutters with her perfectly maintained brows knitting in confusion.

Growling low in her throat, she rakes her fingers roughly through her messy brown locks and glares at the taller woman, “You see those guys?”

at this she cocks her neck backwards, into the alleyway, ever so slightly as to not rouse suspicion from those whom advance. When the blonde woman nods gently, she explains quickly, “They've got you in their sights. I don't know if they wanna rob you or something worse. But they've been amping each others scents up, revving up for a fucking fight or fuck—I don't know. Do yourself a favor and get out before they—”

She doesn't get to finish her sentence before the two men suddenly fall upon them both. One is quick to push her aside and though the push isn't too hard she goes flying where she weighs little to nothing at all anymore. The words 'This ones ours whore' ringing until she hits the ground hard. She rolls and slides in the muck and the grime for a short while stilling only until a pile of broken bricks stops her. Her ears fill with the sound of males posturing and trying to intimidate another into submitting to their wills.

The sound makes chills of fear and disgust swirl in the pit of her stomach. A dawning sense of dread slips down her spine when she cranes her head upward to eye the scene before her. The blonde has been cornered. Her pale white shirt pressed up against the grime riddled walls of this place. The two Gamma's have boxed her in allowing her little room to retreat as they growl down at her.

“What's a posh looking girl like you doing down here on this side of town? Slumming it?” one of them growls down at the blonde.

“No,” the blonde replies with utter ease, as if she wasnt staring down two near feral Gammas with fight pheromones leaking out of their every pore, “I am not slumming it. I was visiting a good friend of mine.”

“Oh?” one Gamma asks, his voice hard and rough from where he's grating it hard to produce those growls that don't come to him naturally.

And while their running off at the mouth, standing in defiance, posturing as if they were some gritty worn down Alphas, she's wrapped her hand around a good enough sized brick and has inched her way closer to the trio. The Gammas, they don't hear her approaching because they're too busy acting like dicks growling like teenage kids. They don't scent her for the blockers are good with neutralizing that bit.

So she sneaks up to one of them, the shorter one. The one who's head she can better reach. Pushing all the strength, all the anxiety and all that flowing adrenaline into her legs—she jumps up. Her hand, brick and all, comes down hard on his head with a dull thud. The Gamma she hits falls over like a felled tree.

“What the—” the remaining Gamma sputters, his growls immediately cut off, “You fucking whore!”

He lunges then; his fist comes flying at her. An angry slop haymaker that misses her by miles as she tilts out of the way. In her hand sits her knife waiting for whatever should come. But she simply bares her teeth at the Gamma. Long shiny canines that are longer than a Gammas or a Betas. Canines
that gleam under the dingy light that manages to filter in. She bares her teeth at him and rumbles that unholy growl from the pit of her belly.

With a jerk back he freezes. His eyes going wide as he rakes his eyes over her. His face paling as he takes in the defensive and more than aggressive stance she has adopted. There's no doubt in his mind, this was a fight he will lose. Because, in his head, she's an Alpha by the intensity of that growl alone. So, he turns tail then dragging his friend by his foot to flee the scene. That sick sense of joy she gets for making others jump at her growl floods her. For a moment, a sense of twisted pride washes away the sludge of the suppressors and lets her feel something nice.

“"I guess I should say thank you," the blonde woman’s voice suddenly cuts through the left over tension.

In a flash, her dark eyes find her. The blonde no longer stands pressed against the dark walls but casually with her hands so carefully extended on her sides. There sits a lopsided smile that screams of awkwardness and a light gleaming in her pale eyes.

“At the risk of sounding like every damsel-in-distress cliché ever made,” the blonde begins, her smile growing wider as she straightened her shoulders—proud and regal, “How can I make it up to you?”

“Uh, not necessary lady,” she tells the beautiful woman quickly. Feeling suddenly unworthy of standing before the blonde and having that brilliant smile directed at her.

Shaking her golden head the woman says, “No, I insist! You saved me from a rather risky situation. One which, I have no doubt, would not have ended prettily for all involved. So please, let me at least buy my Knight in shining armor some lunch, as thanks. After all, it’s not everyday a girl gets saved like that.”

A heavy and dark no sits just at the edge of tongue. She wants to tell the blonde—beautiful and warm as she looks—nice and wonderful as her face looks—to get the hell out of here, that this is no place for her, but, she cannot. Blame it on her wonky state—stretched and twisted as she is with the muffled heat and the drugs in her system—looking into that inviting smile makes every frayed nerve calm. Looking into those peaceful blue eyes makes the weariness in her bones melt away.

And now that she stands so close to her, she can finally make out the womans scent. The woman’s scent is made of warm chamomile and ginger. Like freshly washed sheets set to dry on the warm baking sun. She smells so calming, so inviting, so wonderfully pleasant—she's glad she's just recently dosed herself. Otherwise, she would have long since jumped the woman and assaulted her by plunging her nose into the crook of her neck. That scent makes the jumpy/jittery/paranoid set of her anxious hindbrain still. The fog that has settled over her eyes clears as she breathes in that scent and allows her to slow her racing heart, if only for a moment.

That smell—like the blondes voice—tastes familiar. It tugs on the long ignored—long abused—instincts of her true nature—true dynamic.

So, she blames that scent for the way she jerkily nods her head and follows the blonde out of the alleyway.

As they exit the seedy little street she conducts her business the blonde tosses over her shoulder, “Now, what would my Knight like for lunch?”
So can anyone guess who the blonde is????
Or Scott for that matter???
(Did I involve more Heroes? I might've.)
^_^

So yeah, this chapter just kinda came at from left field. I was hoping to get some momentum going but it just wouldn't do. Every time I tried to hurry it up I absolutely hated it.
Oh and if it feels wonky, as far as flow, blame it on my son and his need to blast K-pop 24/7 and forcing me to watch the music videos with him. (He's a major fan of Taemin.)
Also, Law & Order has become my permanent muse for this story so if it bleeds through, I apologize for none of it.
Hope you guys enjoyed.
Hope you'll drop a line, or something.
Thanks for reading!
-Ani<3

[P.S. This story has been so fun to write. I am enjoying myself immensely.]
"Well, hate to piss on your progressive parade, but what I do is exactly who I am,"

What's the harm, she'd thought, Especially when she smells so good.

She isn't expecting for the blonde to usher her into a sleek looking black benz. Thanks, on the street, did not include being swept off to some fancy looking restaurant with a name she couldn't begin to pronounce. This was all a little beyond her.

All of it leaving her to feel like a fish out of water.

There's white pressed and gleaming cloth draped over their little table. Pristine silverware so polished she can see her reflection off the back of the spoon. The people that file in reek of money in their expensive suits and pretty dresses. The air smells like something sweet—too sweet—artificial and decidedly expensive. It makes her scrounge up her nose in displeasure. Secretly she's glad she's got the drugs dulling her senses now.

(her sense of smell has always been both a blessing and a curse. She can scent people from miles away—not literally, but close enough—so she was never really surprised with the approach of a Beta, or worse an Alpha. But, that sense has always been a double edged sword. In the throes of a heat it became hell. To be able to scent whatever viable specimen was in her general vicinity.

Now, in a place like this and a time like now, she's a little more than relieved.)

"So," the blonde finally speaks, after she's sent the waiter away with a delicate wave of her hand, "let's introduce ourselves first. My name is Virginia Potts. But, my friends call me Pepper."
For a moment she stays quiet. Her eyes roving over the blondes perfectly tanned face. Searching for something dark and malicious that might explain why she's wound up in such a high quality joint. Was the blonde secretly in the sex trade and about to sell her off? Or were her organs in danger of being hacked out and sold at a nominal fee. But, she finds nothing but that warmth again. She smells nothing but chamomile, ginger and tastes like the warmth of a lazy morning.

“Lela,” she slowly announces, her voice sounding harsh and rough—rougher than a woman's voice had any right to be—sounding ugly against the blondes soft voice, “My names Lela.”

There'd been a moments hesitation before she had uttered her name. She'd thought of maybe donning a fake name, as she often did on the streets, so easy to wear Carmen, Lola, Ana or Sofia with her ethnically inclined face.

“Hmmm, Lela,” the blonde—Ms. Potts says, tasting her name on her tongue. Pepper's American accent making it lift where it shouldn't. But, she ignores it—because it happens more than she'd like to count—and allows Ms. Potts to continue onward, “Well, Lela, I'd like to formally thank you for that little altercation back there.”

“It was no big deal, really. Anyone would've done it,” Lela grumbles, her right hand going to scratch the back of her neck as she chewed on her bottom lip. Her nicotine addiction rearing it's nasty little head as she shifts uncomfortably on a soft cushioned chair.

“Well, I beg to differ. There's not many people out there that would willingly risk their sense of safety for a total stranger. Least of all against two revved up Gammas like that,” Ms. Potts adamantly tells her. Her light brown brows furrowing as she pinned her with those baby blue eyes.

Shrugging her shoulders while feeling decidedly out of place, Lela mumbles, “If you say so dude.”

“I do,” Ms. Potts states with a firm and confident nod of her head. With a smile she leans her body forward and asks, “So tell me a little about yourself! I'd like to get to know my knight in shinning armor, as it were.”

Maybe it's the situation she finds herself in or the whole of the events that have transpired in the last couple of hours. Maybe it is the absurdity of the question or the hideousness of the answer. Whatever it is, it kind of makes her snap. It makes a bitter sarcastic laugh bubble out from the mid of her chest out past her chapped lips. A twisted small smile spreads on her face. A reflection of her bitter self and all.

“You want to know a little about me? I'm a whore,” she says with a wave of her ringed left hand. Bringing more attention to the state of dress she finds herself in this afternoon. A tight red halter top, made of some spandex type material, hugs her torso and ends just past her small breasts. Over that was her ever present black leather jacket. On her waist she dons a faded black jean skirt. One that she's altered to make shorter for...convenience. On her feet she wears her usual black boots because she wasn't about to pull on those high heels. (Heels slowed her down when she needed to book out of risky situations.)

She is dressed gritty; nowhere near as refined as the blonde before her; her lips smeared in blood red lipstick covering up the splits and cracks of her dried flesh. Her eyes lined in black liner that smears out around the edges from rubbing her eyes in weariness. (It doesn't look half bad most days. Looking more intentional, for the smokey eyed effect.) There's no way around it. She's dressed just as a hooker ought to be.

“What else is there to say about me?” she asks sardonically. Her tone is as bitter as the smile stretched wide on her face.
The blonde, for all her elegant nature, jerks back in surprise. Her powder blue eyes widening and her pale pink lips dropping open in a silent, 'Oh'. But, the blonde is well mannered it seems, for she is quick to school her expression and offer a simple smile and a soft, “I see.”

“Yeah,” Lela drawls out nice and slow, her hands rummaging around in her jacket pocket for her zippo and her cigarettes. When a white stick dangles from her lips, smoking and filling her lungs in beautiful toxic fumes, does she finally finish, “I'm no knight. Just your garden variety Hooker.”

“Surely, that can't be everything about yourself?” Ms. Potts argues, her eyes taking on a soft look, “For instances, I am the head CEO of a multibillion dollar company, but, that isn’t who I am. I'm Pepper; I'm nearing my thirty-fifth birthday and I am adamantly refusing to acknowledge it. So I'll never repeat that again. I like to binge watch Friends episodes on my down time, but, lately I've begun to take up Penny Dreadful. I like to paint when I can and I've just recently taken up Kick Boxing.”

Blowing out a lungful of smoke Lela remains quiet long after Ms Potts—Pepper stops speaking. There's such an earnest expression across those beautifully tan features while Pepper waits for her to speak. An expression of hope and honesty that makes everything in Lela cringe up in reflex.

Honesty was for suckers in her experience. An all too easy in for every monster with a razor blade, brass knuckles or desperate means.

“Contrary to popular belief, I am not a robot who does nothing else but sign papers all day long. I am a person underneath all of this,” Ms. Potts waves a hand at herself, heedlessly—elegantly, “Once upon a time, I was just some kid from Terre Haute, Indiana. Who ran around barefoot and ate twinkies on the side of boloney sandwiches. People might've called me white trash then. But, What I did and what I do now, does not define me. Nor should what you do for a living define all that you are.”

Her words—Pepper's words, so simple and uttered so carelessly firm—hit her in the gut like a stray brick being chucked. By reflexes alone, Lela scowls at the blonde and brings her cigarette to her lips.

“Well, hate to piss on your progressive parade, but what I do is exactly who I am,” she grumbles roughly. Her dark eyes fixing themselves on the waiter that dithers just behind Ms. Potts. A young man dressed sharp in his crisp white shirt and black slacks. His brown eyes meeting hers only narrowly before they flashed down to his hands where he rearranged plates and utensils.

The scent of distress hanging about him and sitting heavy on his slim shoulders. Clearly, the young man—a Gamma by the smell of him—had sharp ears, for he had heard he rather loud declaration of what—or who—he was.

“Hmm, yes well… Are you new around here?” Ms. Potts questions, neatly and beautifully changing topics with nary a drop of awkwardness in her tone, “I only ask, because your accent, it isn't from around here. Is it?”

Every inch of her coils tight with tension at the question. Such an innocent, seemingly, harmless little inquiry that traveled down a dark pathway into her past. By all means, Lela should lie and offer something in the total opposite direction. Or better yet, she shouldn't answer at all. Lela should just get up and leave the blonde woman alone to eat her supper.

But, she only need to glance upward and catch herself in that clear honest gaze for her resolve to falter—ever so lightly. The smell of crisp cleanliness drawing her in like a lost mouth to a lone flicker of candle light.
“I just pulled in, about four five months ago, I'm from Texas originally,” Lela answers honestly. Honesty, such a strange sensation on her tongue.

Two blonde, perfectly manicured, brows rise up in surprise at that, “Oh? You don't really sound...Texan.”

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes and only barely succeeding, she scoffs lightly while she flicks her ash onto a pristine white plate, “What do Texan's usually sound like? John Wayne-ish with a dash of Clint Eastwood thrown in?”

“Wha—no! I just, I thought the accent would be...heavier?” Pepper stumbles with a wide smile and a light laugh.

“I'm from the southern southern part of Texas. A no named border town, we have our own little twang compared to the northern most parts,” Lela tells her as a reluctant smile slowly tips the end of her lips.

“Hmm, I guess that would make sense,” Pepper concedes with a wide bright smile of her own. Acting, as if, for all the world Lela had just imparted her with grand enough insight to rival that of Ghandi's.

And just like that, slowly but surely, the conversation is steered—by Peppers expert hand—over all manners of things. Things like, how is Lela enjoying NYC and all it's many historical sights. Things like, what part of Texas is she from and did everyone ride around on horses. Things like, what was to be ordered over the meal.

All of it flowing so smoothly, laughs shared here and there, that Lela almost forgets that before today she's never seen or spoken to this woman. The discomfort she felt coming into all of this—the jittery drive of the suppressants and H-blockers—leaving in a snap. All of it falling away as if it never existed over the two prime cut T-Bone steaks Pepper ordered for them both.

Everything about the woman, her smooth words, her radiant smiles, her calm demeanor, laying her restless nerves to bed. Sitting with the woman—speaking to her and simply acting as if she was not some starved rabid beast on the corner of a dangerous street—made her head feel fuzzy. Like slipping into a warm bath, that was Pepper, warmth and care enveloping you simply with the scent of her peaceful Beta chamomile and ginger tang.

Lela's half way through inhaling her mammoth sized order of meat before she realizes just how sated she feels. Carefully, she allows her eyes to flicker upward and over to the blonde that sits adjacent to herself. Pepper eats slowly and refined, her fork and knife working carefully through her half burnt meal. Every so often blue eyes pull up and a warm easy smile spreads across her gorgeous face.

For the life of her, Lela can't figure out why she feels so...at peace with this woman—this stranger. She blames it on that scent. That smooth and easy scent that glides over the artificial garbage hanging in the air. Lela blames it on the scent and the irrational emotions that it causes to swell up within her.

“So,” the sudden break in silence causes her to startle forward, if only by a centimeter, Peppers clear blue eyes fixed upon her face, “I've been sitting here trying to reason with myself, this whole time we've spent eating, that what you do with your life is none of my business. Because, it isn't, it's your life and your body. You have a right to do whatever you see fit with it. You make your own choices. But, I can't. I cannot. Nope.”

Furrowing her dark brows, Lela swallows the seasoned mashed potatoes sitting on her tongue and asks, very confused, “Okay?”
“Lela, darling, you look like you're fresh out of highschool—you look like a kid,” Pepper exclaims, her hands flashing up and out in her outrage. Her fork and knife abandoned upon the gold trimmed porcelain plate.

“Pepper,” Lela starts, and oh how strange it was to have that name roll so casually off her tongue—as if it, better yet. She had been saying that name all her life, “I'm twenty two, I'm not a kid.”

“Twenty-two?” Pepper repeats, shock evident in her sky blue orbs as they trace the jagged lines of her face, “Well, that hardly makes you an adult! Still, I cannot in good conscience finish having this meal with you and then toss you back out onto the streets. I'd feel as if I was throwing you to the hungry wolves, as it were.”

Waving a dismissive hand of her own, Lela leans back in her chair and tells the blonde, a wry smile spread coldly across her lips, “If you're worried about me winding up dead, or worse, I'll tell ya here and now: You aint got nothing to worry about. I've been half raised by those wolves you're so worried about.”

Something akin to anguish causes the elegant planes of Pepper's face to twist and pinch as she drops her glare onto her uneaten meal, “That doesn't exactly comfort me Lela.”

“I'm sorry?” Lela offers with an awkward shrug, “But, it's the truth Pepper. I know I don't look like much, but, I'm a fighter. I can handle myself.”

A wiggle, something like the slithering of a dirty little earth worm, slides across the recess of her hindbrain. The shriveled up dead things—repressed and beaten shits—of her true nature attempt to stir to life at the smell that suddenly comes flooding out of the blonde woman. Distress, the bitter stench of it filling up her nose and making her insides squirm.

It's not the first time she's scented the smell of a Beta's distress. Rare though they may be, according the to the social media, it's a regular occurrence when one lives the life she does. Hookers, as a whole, come in all shapes and sizes—Pimps too. There's just as many Alphas in heels as well as in dirty wife beaters. She knows plenty of prostitute Betas running around here. Enough of them to have scented them when they run into a wall and get some beatings.

The smell of their distress is always bitter—like vinegar with a hint of something distinctly sulfuric. It's an ugly smell. A wretched thing that's meant to alarm the Pack-Whole. A nasty thing born to make an Alpha Pack-Master take notice and action. A smell meant to alert anyone of danger.

Distress scents in Betas were like bombs waiting to go off. It didn't matter who or what your walk of life, if a Beta distress scent was raised it was like a beacon to all other dynamics. A call for help and aid of whatever kind. A tricky thing to deal with if anyone was doing anything illegal. But a helpful tool to stay alive should the need for it arise.

“You might want to chill out a bit there Beta,” Lela tells the blonde sternly through tight lips, “I won't be subjected to some bullshit arrest on unlawfully distressing a Beta because you lost your shit.”

The mention of the strict law—and the non-mention of its harsher punishment—snaps Pepper out of her dwindling state. It takes a total of eight deep breaths before the smell begins to subside and clear away. If any passer by took notice, no one raises a stink over it. All stays nice and quiet as Lela glares at her surroundings.

“I'm sorry,” Pepper half stutters out as she places her elbows upon the table top. Her head hung and her shoulders slumped, but, her clear blue eyes boring holes into Lela's head, “I just want to help
you. I don't want to let you walk out of here back—back to that kind of life without...without helping you in whatever way I can.”

“Look,” Lela starts, pushing away her empty plate in a rough movement that had no business in such a swanky place like this, “If you think you owe me, because of that shit back there, you don't. I didn't do it thinking to hang one over you. I just...”

She falters there, because, really why had she helped Pepper back there? Back there, Pepper had just been some naive little blonde who wandered down the wrong alleyway. Lela could have simply minded her business and turned away. It would not have been her first time ignoring something like that for the sake of survival or simple reluctance. The streets breed monsters only ever caring about their own survival. Stepping in and stopping those doped up, revved up, Gamma's had not been a smart move.

There was no reason for her to step in, but, she had. Why? Lela doesn't rightly know.

“It was the right thing to do, that's why,” Pepper finishes for her when the silence stretches out too long.

The right thing to do? The words almost make her laugh. Lela hasn't done anything right since the day she presented and probably way before then too. None of Lela's actions were ever right. Nothing she ever did was for the sake of simply helping or any stroke of goodwill. She's a sharp edge, a jagged knife rusted over, a creature molded by the shadows of the backways she haunts.

_But, I did, didn't I_, her treacherous mind supplies against her will. Her stoned out hindbrain whispering black words, _I helped her because no one ever helps. No one ever stops when someone's been cornered. Especially when it's me._

Almost as if sensing the dark thoughts rushing through her brain, Pepper speaks up and half banishes them all away, “You did the right thing by helping me back there. Even when you didn't know me. When you didn't need to and even while it was dangerous. So I want to help you, I want to do right too.”

There's a heavy silence that rings after Pepper has spoken. Her blue eyes swirling with some unknown emotion trapped within them. There's a determined tilt to Pepper's jaw and a stubborn slant to her squared shoulders. All of it making her look utterly gorgeous, Lela's almost blinded by it.

“I can help you, I want to help you, please.” Pepper at last utters in half a plea.

No, sits like a loaded bullet on her tongue as she sits there. But again, she finds herself unable to say it.

Lela should, has all the reason in the world, to tell Pepper to fuck—right the fuck—off. She's not some damsel in distress, nope, not at all. She's not Julia Roberts, Hooker with a Heart of Gold. Nor is she little orphan Annie, with enough good in her to save. She's also not some main character in a poorly written romance either! She can damn well take care of herself. She doesn't need some swanky billionaire to think she can throw her some bills and make her life roses. If ever Lela's getting anywhere it's by the grit on her knees and the grease of her elbows.

Bitterness and anger swell high in her belly and lick up her throat. Turning to lead the exquisite meal she's scarfed down scant seconds ago. She wants to scream at Pepper. She wants to tell her that not everyone is so lucky to get second chances and that Pepper shouldn't squander them on someone like Lela.
Lela who was dirty.

Lela who was so damn damaged.

Lela who was born in the wrong rank.

Oh, but isn't it tempting? So very tempting, for Lela to nod her head at Pepper's offer. How easy would it be for her to sink her claws into Peppers coat tails and ride it the fuck out of the hellish mud she's up to her neck in.

biting back the acid that threatens to spill past her sharp teeth, Lela forces out a lie as civilly as she can, “Pepper, you seem like a nice person, you and I? You and I are two different kind of animals.”

Well, not all of it is lies.

“I helped you because if you got killed, or worse, then they'd tape that block off for however long it takes to clean it all back up,” Lela tells the blonde, “and it may not look like much to you, but that alley right there, that's my bread and butter. Most of my revenue comes in by that corner right there. I helped you out of necessity. Nothing more and nothing less.”

That, was mostly lies. Lela was no stranger to standing in barely dried blood and still managing to turn enough tricks to pay the motel bill.

Undeterred and neither shocked or entirely pleased, Pepper holds her ground as only a tyrant of business can and tells her as plainly as she can, “Liar. But, be that as it may, I still wish to help you.”

Oh, and doesn't that just throw her for a damn loop. Because, what? Pepper knows her fall of sixty/seventy minutes and already is sniffing out Lela's lies and that's dangerous. As dangerous as a loaded gun held to Lela's bony chest.

“Why?” Lela asks, going for gruff but winding up sounding just as she felt—winded.

“Because, I can,” Peppers tone is firm as unyielding mountain, her eyes steady as sky in the middle of summer days, “Because, what's the point of having all that I do if I can't help one single damn person? Because, there was a time when you are who I could've been. Because, if I don't help you...who will?”

As previously entertained, the thought to tell Pepper where to stuff it, comes unbidden to the forefront of her mind. Instead what comes tumbling from her lips is a laugh. One that isn't weighed or twisted with the helplessness of her shit storm of a life. A laugh that makes her sides hurt and stretches the cuts on her lips until they bleed. A laugh that makes her feel like she's gone topsy-turvy and should seek professional help.

After she's caught her breath she wheezes out a breathless, “I thought I was supposed to be the Knight today?”
Chapter End Notes

Oh My Effin' God's and Goddesses!!!!
I thought I had already published this chapter! On a damn whim I checked it out and realized I had put this in the draft section!!!!
FORGIVE ME!!!!

Please let me know what y'all thought on all of this.  
(This had been a doozy to write! It was supposed to go so dark towards the end, but, I decided against it because after leaving it behind to gather dust, I figure you beautiful people don't deserve my nonsense!!)

-ANI <3
Shit Decisions

Chapter Summary

"Taking on Alphas, getting them in your bed, are risks she shouldn't be taking—are risks none of the working girls like to take on—but are ultimately what they have to deal with. And though she can take care of herself in a fair fight, being locked up in a room with a hormone driven Alpha rarely ends the well for her."

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Non-Con and after math.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-8 (or so) months later-

“So,” he begins, only after catching his breath, his eyes roaming over the naked expanse of her torso, “I’m curious, are you one of those who believe?”

“Believe?” she parrots back from around the butt of a lit cigarette dangling from her lips. Lazily she wipes the sweat from her brow and tries her damnedest to move away from the naked stranger lying across the bed from her.

Nodding his head the stranger carefully lifts his light brown gaze to meet her own dark eyes as he explains his strange question, “A true mate believer, are you one?”

She cannot help the involuntary scoff that leaves her lips at that. Her eyes rolling in a thoroughly dramatic and sarcastic manner as well.

“I'll take that as a no?” he questions, his lips turned up into a sardonic smile.

“What's there to believe?” she flips around on him, something old and bitter rising in her chest, “That somewhere out there, there's some kind of perfect mate for you—made for you. Who's scent is utterly and truly compatible with yours unlike any and all who’ve come before them? A mate who can form a true bond. Do I look like I'm a seven year old? That shits the stuff for bad princess movies. Shit rumors worse than Sasquatch.”

“They aren't rumors,” the man argues sternly, his brown brows furrowed and his plain features pulled down by the offended frown he know sports, “There's tons of proof of True Mates. Scientific
articles are always published about them. About how the *bonds* between *True Mates* are actual fact. A real link that surpasses mental and emotional states—"

“I'm pretty sure they lied,” she snaps, angry for no other reason than the fact that something so fucking stupid and absurd—like *True Mates*—was being argued to her by none other than a fucking John.

She knows she should stop. No good ever came from arguing with Johns this late into the evening. Less so when the said John was an Alpha. And he was, the stranger lying less than an arms breadth away, was of an Alpha deposition. His scent thick and musky almost, reeking of testosterone and burnt leather. A scent meant to overwhelm and subdue those of lesser dynamics.

It wasn't often she took on Alpha's as clientele, but, there were times when she was hard pressed for the cash. (Like she was now.) She didn't take them on for the fact that Alphas, almost always, come stalking with a goal in mind. Always looking for something smaller than them to mount, knot, and dominate if only for the night and by the grace of the money in their wallets. A distinctive need driven by their nature to look for Omegas even if all that's available are Betas and Gammas made present.

Taking on Alphas as Johns always came with the risk that they might want something a little more than fucking and knotting. Sometimes Alphas came on the brink of their Rut. Looking for somebody to keep for the high tide of their hormone driven craze. Alphas on a Rut was not something one wanted to do with a stranger. Things got dangerous then.

She has enough scars and mended bones to remind her why Alphas in season were bad decisions in the making.

But, she hasn't eaten in nearly five days now, aside from that sandwich she fished out of the dump the other day. (Though she'd thrown it right back up the moment it went down, so she doubts it counts.) Taking on Alphas, getting them in your bed, are risks she shouldn't be taking—are risks none of the working girls like to take on—but are ultimately what they have to deal with. And though she can take care of herself in a fair fight, being locked up in a room with a hormone driven Alpha rarely ends the well for her.

And this guy, he's starting to smell like he might be on the cusp of a rut any day now. The lingering taste of hormones sitting heavy in the air around him. No doubt, this is the reason why he's slammed down five hundred dollars to keep her around till morning. No doubt, this is the reason why every time he bends her over there's a little feral energy that makes his hands tremble just a tad.

“Well, I believe,” the stranger tells her, crossing his arms underneath his auburn head. His eyes now fixed on the popcorn texture of the seedy motel room he's rented out for the duration of the night. Flicking the growing ash of her cigarette away, she eyes him carefully, taking in his relaxed posture and the way he lounges in naught but his bare skin upon the harsh material of the rented bed. No line in his body—that is neither toned nor unfit—shows signs of stress or anger. For all instances and purposes, the stranger—whose name he refused to give out—was as calm as could be. And maybe, if she wasn't well versed in the ability to sniff out those minute changes in scent, she would have missed it.

The strangers scent, that was thick enough to nearly suffocate, had turned just a tad bit sour. Sour like milk left out in the summer heat. Sour like he was displeased and offended but was trying to reign in his ire. Sour like he wanted to argue further but was trying not to really fight when what he wanted was lying naked beside him. Sour enough to make the hairs at the nape of her neck stand on edge. Sour enough to make those flight instincts in her kick up. Sour enough to wake a deep
disgusting need to bare her throat in submission for her misstep flare up as well. Sour enough that if not for her iron clad will of control on her nature were not there, she would be forced to present herself to him on the smell alone.

Thankfully, her dynamic does not rule her. She's been out on the street, witnessed enough bullshit, and endured enough horrors that she does not cower as she rightly should.

Ignoring the throb in her head that screams at her to run and hide or present and submit, she inhales a thick heavy cloud of smoke and lazily drawls at him, “Well, that's all well and good, but I'm pretty sure you're paying me to fuck you, not argue about the hypothetical existence of True Mates.”

Her words seem to nearly startle the man out of whatever daze he found himself in. His head snapping to the side so that he might glare at her with enough intensity that would have cowed her in her younger years. These days, she finds herself challenging gazes like that. Answering each glower, every aggressive growl, with one of her own.

“No,” he bites out, his features twisted and nearly angry, “I'm fucking you.”

Heaving a smoke filled sigh, she twirls her dying cigarette and passes an unimpressed look over the angry Alpha. She can see the tense pull of his muscles and the tightness to his jaw. The tight grip he now has on the yellowed sheets underneath his body a telling sign. But no more than the stench of his scent now pouring off him in waves. The smell of burnt leather and something distinctly illegal invading every inch of the air between them.

Blame it on years of bad habits, of leaving with blood on her teeth and busted knuckles, but she's got an ugly need in her to fight even when she should lay down and take it. The voice of her mother nagging, pulling and biting on her mind—forcing her to stand up straighter and square her shoulders for a fight rather than hunch in and play the peacemaker.

“Sure,” she drawls out, flicking the butt of the cigarette somewhere into the far corner of the room, “Whatever helps you get it up and ready to go.”

There's a beat of silence that then ensues. A ring of pure and utter nothingness that falls like a spell. Loud enough to drown out the chatter from the next room over. Loud enough that she can barely hear the rabbit beat of her heart. It last barely a second or two before it breaks like a glass cup. A clatter of noise then happens as the stranger lunges at her. His ham like hand wrapping tightly around her neck and gripping tight. His naked body trapping her against the rough texture of the bed. Bearing down on her with his incisors made to rip straight through her throat.

Anger, righteous fury, has morphed the strangers pleasantly features into a twist of ugly things. His shiny auburn hair tousled in a way only a fight can bring. His brown eyes flashing in dangerous warning. The smell of his ire flooding against her face like hot rotted air.

This, she thinks as she sinks her nails into the flesh of his meaty shoulders, is exactly what her nature had intended to avoid.

This, she thinks, as she kicks and scrabbles for purchase, is the reason she doesn't take Alphas as clients.

This, she thinks as she feels him wedge himself between her flailing legs, is the main reason why she hates who she is because her mouth tends to get her into shit like this.

“Stop fighting me!” the stranger yells at her, his lips barely able to close over the. With a rough shake that makes her own sharp canines snap against her tongue and cause it to bleed, she stills. Her wild
eyes meeting his in a show of defiance.

“Get off of me you piece of shit,” she hisses, refusing to cow when he growls low and vicious onto her face.

“No, I paid for you, now I’m gonna get what I paid for,” he bites out, his hand crushing down on her throat with a cruel amount of strength and power.

Barely able to breath she manages a growl of her own, enough of one to make her sound like a pissed off Beta rather than a pinned down Omega. Desperately, she fights against him, the fear building up within her chest.

Memories of a time she has willed herself to forget begin to flood her mind. Of eyes like chocolate and a smile like a razors edge. Of a scent that once smelted of home but now is always synonymous to pain and bloodshed.

She fights, fights as she always has, with teeth, knuckles, kicks and nails. She fights against this stranger with all the strength she has, but, there is none to be found. Not anything real, after all, she hasn't eaten in so long, hasn't slept right or taken care of herself as she ought to have. Especially now, that she's hopped up on suppressors since her heats coming on sometime soon.

But in the end, all she accomplishes is a few good punches, some half ass knee blows and scratches to the mans face. All this does is ensure that the John gets angry enough to land a few blows to her own face and some to her ribs. It prolongs the inevitable…

When the blunt end of his assailing limb forces it's way back into her, he growls out in sick satisfaction, “Like I said, I'm fucking you.”

Memories of her childhood are always tinged in an amber tone, sepia almost. Color removed and distorted by the haze of anxiousness, fear and hunger. But, most often than not, by Pain. Faces, people, and places swirled deeper shades of copper by her mothers unstable state and the havoc she wrecked.

Even back before she presented as the dreaded O, her home had never been a happy one. Her mother Sara, the Alpha, had herself come from a rough life. A life where she was raised by fists and fists alone. So Sara had grown up tough and mean—like any good Alpha in her neighborhood ought to have. Whatever nurturing nature she might have had, was killed under the reign of her grandfathers roughened fists and her grandmothers indifference. But still, when it rains it poured when it came to the shitty lucky of her family.

Because, maybe, after so many years standing on her own, maybe her mother would have been alright. Maybe, after she found a place for herself in the muck and the grime she would have raised her baby semi-alright. But, then there came that flood. Baby blue's they call them, what her mother had gotten after giving birth. (Something that happened more often than the media liked to say it did, to Alpha women that gave birth.)

Usually, there's treatment for it. Hospitals don't like sending an Alpha woman home unstable because that's how you wind up hearing about the baby in the bath tub or the gammas with the missing windpipes because they stood too close. But her Momma hadn't had her in the hospital; it was in the back of a stolen minivan where Lela had thrown her first garbled shout of life. So her mother hadn't gotten any treatment. She hadn't gotten any medication. She sure as shit hadn't gotten any help.
So when she feels particularly nostalgic and lingers on memories of the past, it is often blurs of pain that she encounters. Anxiety and Fear being the chiefest of emotions she harbored as she ducked under their overthrown table to avoid her mothers flailing limbs. Hunger and Fatigue causing her stomach to gnaw at her own body as she sat in a dark kitchen wondering why her mother hadn’t bothered to restock the fridge in over two months.

Sepia seems like the proper tone that exposes, in ugly detail, her mothers many addictions. Her mothers random bouts of madness and unadulterated rage swirling away whatever had been hued with tinges of life. So, thinking back on it, blaming it on the fact that she's that ever dreaded dynamic for all that has ever gone wrong in her life—feels like a bit of a cop out.

Of course, being that fucking O never did help any. But her troubles started long before she presented. Still, sepia seems to be the only light in which she can recall things from that long ago. She can't rightly remember the proper shade of her mothers eyes, skin or hair. Or what color their home had been back before the paint had flaked off.

And she only ever thinks of this when she's doped up on her suppressants. Because, as their name implies, the drugs suppress things. They take away the whole and leave mild impressions of what is there and what should have been. When she's on them she feels like she's walking through a particularly thick gray fog that sucks the life and color out of everything. It reminds of her childhood and the memories she harbors in her head.

(More so now that she is nothing more than a massive ball of conscious pain.)

But what she clutches in her hand seems to be the only thing unaffected by that strange pull of the drugs. A white, pristine and crisp, card sits in her hand. The elegant scrawl of Pepper's handwriting standing out starkly against the little card. Her number is printed over the top, as well as her full name, but nothing else. What Pepper has written over the back empty space is her personal number. A number, Lela has a sneaky suspicion, that is not usually so casually and freely given. The fact that Lela grips it—as tight as only someone in pain can clutch—in her dirty hand makes something in her stomach roll.

The grime on her fingers are rubbing off on the white of the card. Mucking it up, tainting it, Lela is tainting it. Tainting the white that came from Pepper. Everything in her wants to toss it away from herself. Make it go away so that she can no longer ruin it. Everything in her makes her want to rid Pepper of her only tie to Lela. Because people like Pepper, people like Pepper, didn't need to be rubbing their shoulders with people like Lela.

Still, Lela finds one of her many faults to be that of selfishness. She is in need now, as she had not been then, at the restaurant with the Golden Goddess. Now, she is in desperate need for something—help.

There's pain with every breath she manages to pull deep enough into her lungs so that she doesn't pass out. Pain that makes it feel as if she's got knives sticking into her ribs. There's pain in every step she takes too. Pain on her thighs from the rings of bruises she's got there. Pain on her neck every times she swallows where he choked her enough to make her pass out. Pain on the bites that litter her breasts and chest where teeth drew blood. Pain on her busted lips and swollen eye. Pain on the welts where leather belt met flesh.

Pain in her womanly core from where he knotted and ripped himself in and out simply to be cruel.

She is a massive ball of pain.

But, her mother's voice is ever present as she walks down the midday sunlit sidewalk of uptown
New York. A voice that demands she not cower even after she has been laid as low as she has. A voice that demands she square her shoulders even if it pulls at the scabs and makes fire lick down her spine. A voice that demands she lift her bruised chin and hold her head high even if it brings her more scandalized stares than she's comfortable with.

The building she walks to is like nothing she's ever known before. A building made of silver steel and shining blue windows. A building reeking of money and so much sophistication it damn near blinded her. A building whose address had been beautifully scrawled across the back of a pristine white card by a drop dead beautiful blonde all those months ago.

She had been sorely tempted, after leaving the restaurant, to call Pepper and tell her yes—fuck yes. She wanted so badly to pick up the phone and practically beg the blonde to please help her out of this life. But she hadn't.

A healthy amount of Guilt and Paranoia had stayed her hand. Kept her from lifting the phone to dial the number and speak to the goddess in the white tee.

She had, though, on occasion—when the temptation became too much—found herself walking past this building in the wee hours of the night. Taking in the magnificence of a place so utterly out of her reach it was staggering. After a while, the temptation faded away to cold and bitter reality. That day in the restaurant had been a dream, a fantasy and a one off. She should have taken the help then and there. Not now, not after so long.

So she carefully buried the card amongst the vials of her suppressors and forced herself to accept the disaster that was her life.

Until…

Until last night, when that John had gone above and beyond what the local grimy clinics were willing to patch up. Until, he saw to it—with brutal calculation—that she be wrecked entirely.

She'd gone, of course, to the free clinic down the more broken parts of Harlem. Was ushered back into an available room for the extent of blood on her face was a gruesome sight indeed. But the moment they began to pull out forms asking about dynamics, asking for legal names and talking about admitting her to a proper hospital—she left.

Most of it she can deal with on her own. She knows how to reset her broken nose well enough—did that on the bus ride to the swanky building. She can clean up an Alpha bite just fine and even stitch it up if need be. But what she can't do is judge honestly and correctly about the damage done to her nethers. She needs a doctor in a fancy white coat to tell her that. She needs a doctor to stem the bleeding, at least for a little while, just enough so that she can run to her motel room and take her Suppressors and Hbs.

But, she knows for a fact that doctor's will no doubt stick their nose where it doesn't belong. He's gonna wanna know about dynamics, he's gonna wanna know a real name and medical history will be looked up. And she'd rather let that beast slumber for as long as she can.

Quickly, she makes her way through the small crowd gathered out front. Dignified suit wearing people—the kind found on the cover of magazines and shit—flashing her the old 'double take' as if they can hardly believe someone like her—and in her state—is walking over to the same building they are. She ignores it as best she can because there's a sense of urgency in her steps. She needs to deal with as fast as humanly possible because everyone knows that Suppressors and Hormone Blockers only help so much. They're meant to cloak and distort the reality of what she is. It does not erase all the natural clues that lay hidden just underneath the fragile shield of her flesh. The longer
she bleeds. The more she stays broken and twisted, the longer someone—anyone—can scent her for what she is.

So fear and anxiety run like rabid dogs through her veins as she climbs the clean steps up into the building. Her eyes focused on nothing more than the glass doors that open automatically. She ignores them in favor for the effort and concentration it takes to put one foot in front of the other when the pain between her legs makes her want to crumble to her knees. She cannot stop and apologize to the people she shoulders past lest they smell her fear and dynamic as she runs.

She needs to find Pepper, ask her—beg her, to help. She needs help—at least something to stop the bleeding. Long enough until she can take something to hide it again.

And she almost makes it, doesn't waiver a moment, until an arm almost as big as that John's had been, wraps itself tight around the abused flesh of her upper arm and yanks her to a halt.

“I think you're a bit lost here, kid,” says the man dressed in a dark tactical uniform. There's no name badge or emblem that states he's a cop, but, there's a certain air about him that screams authority even when the man isn't trying to.

His hard tone and stale Alpha scent make everything in her want to cringe up and submit. The battered nature of her true self too pained and scared to want to fight. Wanting less abuse it's wish is for her to bare her neck in an attempt to please this new Alpha.

But, she grits her teeth and forces out a feral growl out from the back of her throat. Yanking her arm out of his grasp she spits out, “I think you should keep your fucking paws to yourself.”

“Look ma'am—” he starts only to trail off as his wide eyes take in the battered shape of her face and slowly he steps back, his back rigid and posture poised for a fight. Whatever training he has shows clear in the way his hand slips down to his waist to a black holster that carries a weapon of sorts.

“Ma'am I'm going to need you to come with me, you need medical attention, alright?” he tells her. His Alpha scent rearing up and out in a clear attempt to subdue her by nature alone. But his Alpha scent is—in all reality—more nerve grating than anything. He smells artificial. The musk he carries smells like it's come off a can—he smells fake and it makes her want to barf.

No shit, she wants to bark at him. But out of the corner of her eye, she can spot three more men show up dressed exactly as the first. All of them slowly but surely surrounding her to… she doesn't know. It makes her feel like a trapped animal, her hind-brain screaming at her to curl up tight and just fucking submit. But, she's a bit of a self abuser herself, and all this fear clogging up her mind brings out the worst in her.

Blood stained canines are dropped down low and bared. Her head is then tipped down so that no inch of her black and blue neck will show in this fight. She ignores the pain and embraces the adrenaline slowly firing it's way down her taut limbs.

She's two seconds away from lunging at somebody when she hears a sharp bark break the tension strained silence she's caused. Allowing her eyes to stray from the predators at her front, she searches for the source of that Gamma Bark. For only a Gamma could ever hit such placid notes. Notes meant to sooth Alpha's in a Rage, garner the trust of Betas and call to arms their own Gamma kin. And find the source she does, in the form of a strange looking brunette.

Dressed in a simple buttoned up navy shirt, brown corduroy pants, and large thick rimmed glasses, he is the very picture of Gamma elegance. His dark brown curls a wild mass atop his head sway as he all but runs towards the gathered group. His Barks, so smooth—like spilling water from a running
river—echoing as he makes his way.

“S-Stop!” the man half stutters out, his eyes running over the scene in what looked to be surprise as he took it all in, “What's going on?”

“Sir, a level 2 aggressor has been spotted,” the first Alpha, the one who tried to man handle her, declares to the brown haired Gamma. His tone hard and clinical as he continued to watch her with a heavy sense of weariness.

“Ma'am,” the Gamma called to her, his gentle voice pulling at the frantic fear welling in her chest. So soothing his voice was that it almost made her sob.

“Ma'am, you need medical attention,” the gamma tells her, his eyes—hidden behind his large glasses—searching her face, “You need to come with me—”

Handsy Alpha interrupts the gamma then, a bark ripping out of him as he declares, “She must be taken in sir, she could be a threat.”

“Look at her!” the Gamma all but shouts, his bronze skin flushing red a shade as he growled out, “she's a kid! She needs to see a doctor not get thrown in some detention room!”

Detention room…

The words ring in her ear. They make her heart beat faster and the fear she's been feeling since first she walked out of that motel room skyrocketed then. The thought of being locked away, long enough for her true scent to seep out in the form of crimson liquid and saturate a room, makes a savage like growl rip from her throat. Growling in a way only a feral dog can, she grips tight on the strap of her bag as she searches for an exit.

It had been a mistake coming here, looking for help. She should have known better. People like her, people like Lela, they didn't belong here. Look at them, they wouldn't even let her past the front door. They didn't even know the truth of what she was and already—just from looking at her—they deemed her a low parasite not fit for a place like this.

Growling, spitting out growls worthy of dive bar rumbles, she spots the exit she so desperately needs. Just past the third and forth uniformed dick that magically appeared, she spots a side exit. There's an opening between three and four, just big enough that if she moves fast, she should be able to take.

And take it she tries. She lunges, throws her small body between them, summon up what little energy and strength she has stored in her into the leap it takes to push through them. She almost makes it, her booted feet hitting hard against the polished black marble floor—jarring her entire body and injuries. There's a growing tension in her stomach as she rushes towards the automatic doors. A great sense of fear fueled excitement that she's about to make. The doors swing upon easily and her foot just barely makes out the threshold when suddenly…pain.

Pain like fire, pain like white hellish lightening, slams into her body at the exact moment that something impales itself into her upper left shoulder.

She drops like a sad sack of rotten potatoes. Her muscles drawn tight, ripping self made stitches open, she writhes on the ground in horrid pain. She can taste copper running down her throat as her teeth snap down on the sides of her cheeks.

When suddenly it ends, her lids are half open and staring at nothing but black combat boots, she thinks—this was yet another shit decision she's made.
Darkness swallows her whole.

Chapter End Notes

So first things first, SOOOOOOOO sorry it took so long to post. But life....life sucks. Anywho, I hope you guys enjoy, I'm sorry if it feels wonky, but it felt strange writing Lela for some reason. Leave comments, suggestions and the like down below. Hope you all enjoy.
Chapter 10 - Dealing with the Lobby Incident

Chapter Summary

Head of Security must deal with the officer who made a mess in the lobby.

Chapter Notes

So before you read, just know, I know absolutely nothing about military ranks or anything remotely strategic. I tried to come up with what you'd call the main guy in charge of a squadron and I just sat here like this 0_0. I tried to google it but even google was looking at me like 'Girl...wtf you on about?'

Hope you guys can ignore it best you can and enjoy this tiny little snippet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Officer Randell Teems was a relatively average looking man. There wasn’t anything about his countenance might scream attractiveness or lack thereof. In fact, he was quite plain faced and homely even. His marks in his file were a reflection of that too. He was neither the top of his class nor the bottom of it. He was snugly pressed between the average employees at the Tower.

Still, there was something about his dark eyes that screamed untrustworthily. Despite the fact that his papers were squeaky clean, his file impeccable, there was an air of maliciousness about him. Officer Randell Teems, a war vet, an Alpha, a past police officer and current LP at the forefront of the Towers entrance.

Something about the man just rubbed him the wrong way. But he buries it under the guise of professionalism. The incident in the lobby, the one with a Taser and the Kid, having been seen by half the gathered mass was all anyone in the tower could talk about. He needed to get the facts straightened out before the Head Honcho’s deigned it fit to stick their pretty little noses into it and make it an even bigger mess.

“Can someone explain to me what exactly happened out there today?” comes the cool and calm collected voice of the Head of Security, Happy Hogan

“There was a level 2 aggressor, sir,” Teems tells him. His eyes locked somewhere between Happy’s brows and meeting Happy’s own gaze.
Quirking a dark brow in mild surprise, Happy glances down to the state of the art tech his boss has lined his desk with and stares at the footage being played in a silent loop.

There he sees the tiny image of a young girl dressed head to toe in baggy clothes colored in various hues of black. He can see, with the great aid of the insane quality of the camera’s positioned just about everywhere, in complete detail the face of this young girl. He can see her large dark brown eyes. He can see the delicate—barely there—up sweep of her pixie like nose. He can make out the dark tinge of her dark brown lips.

He can see, with startling quality, the utter wreck the girl is. Her dark hair, barely brushing her shoulders, is matted and tangled in dried blood. He can see the angry red bruising of her right brow creeping down to swell the edge of her eye. He can see the dried blood on her broken nose. He can even make out the two splits on her upper and bottom busted lips. He can see, when she whips her head about, the devilish lines across her neck and recognize the lines of fingers.

The image she presents is an ugly one. One seeped in blood and clear abuse. It enough of a sight to roll Happy’s stomach. It’s clear to anyone with a set of eyes what the girl is and it is no ‘aggressor’. Anger laces his veins as he turns his attention to the man before him.

“This civilian was the one you deemed a level 2 aggressor?” Happy questions as he flicked the rolling footage from his computer desktop onto the wall screen with a rough motion of his wrist.

Without issue the footage begins to run upon the giant wall. A wall that had previously been the same deep navy blue matted color as it’s three brothers. (Just another fancy upgrade from the Head Honcho’s.)

Nodding his head Officer Teems informs him without so much as glancing at the rolling footage, “I had reason to suspect she was armed and dangerous, Sir.”

“And why is that?” Happy asks him as he stares at the footage of a battered youth being steadily outnumber and encircled. The blood dripping from her lip spilling onto the smooth gray tiles of the Lobby floor.

“Sir, she was dressed in multiple layers which gave me the impression she might be hiding something in her clothes. She was also bleeding and smelling still of…rage, I didn’t want to risk it sir,” Teems tells him.

“So, you saw baggy clothes and immediately thought, what? Gun? You saw blood on her face, cuts open and the smell of anger and you thought she needed to be forcibly subdued?” Happy demands, his voice raising in his ire.

“Sir,” at this Officer finally meets Happy’s eyes, his expression hard and cold. “She smelled used and dirty. I know that smell sir. She’s a hooker. She had no business in here.”

Happy nods slowly as he pinches his lips together. His gaze wanders from the Officer over to the wall. His eyes silently taking in the tiny little thing in black. He watches—furiously—as his men surround her. He watches as he dips her head down and growls. An Alpha’s form if ever he saw one. He watches the flash of her teeth—sharp lethal little things that resemble the gleam of sharpened bones—and takes in the pure wrath that seems to now be pouring off her trembling form. He watches the wild desperation marring her features, pulling at the cuts and the way she looks for any form of escape.

Happy watches until he cannot. The sight of her tiny body writhing in agony, staining the floor in crimson, an ugly thing he cannot do a fifth time today.
“You can go now, pack your things and get the hell out of this building. From today onward your services are no longer required here at Stark Industries,” Happy tells to the room as a whole. His hands busying themselves with the papers upon his desk.

“You are firing me?!” Teems sputters in disbelief, “You can’t fire me! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“I can, I did and no you most definitely did do something wrong. You tased a bleeding girl because you deemed her unworthy to help. That kind of attitude isn’t tolerated here,” Happy informs him in a stern tone. His eyes hard as steel as he glares the younger man down, “You acted disgracefully and I don’t employee shit bags like you.”

“You don’t employ me,” Teems all but sneers at him. His brown eyes looking down at Happy in a way only self-entitled pricks can manage, “I work for Stark Industries. You’re nothing but a glorified chauffer. You can’t fire me. Only Stark can,” and as if he wasn’t already skating on melting ice, Teems leans ever closer so that Happy may hear him without obstruction, he mutters with dripping acidic disdain, “Gamma.”

With a purse of his thin lips, Happy stands from his desk and looks upon the young face of this man. This Alpha who, taking from the way he is currently pulling Dynamic Rank, is an utter douchebag brought forth from the hate breeding homes of Traditionalists. He stares at this young man’s face and sees in his unguarded gaze all that Happy hates.

Happy now knows why the man rubbed him the wrong way all this time.

Issuing not a single word, Happy’s hand goes flying out towards Teems. Happy Hogan is the first to admit it, but, his round belly and husky build hardly inspire fear in his opponents. For all instances and purposes, he looks exactly what he is: a middle-aged man. His 5’8 height coupled with his—considerably—hefty weight makes for a homely image. The idea that he can be dangerous is almost laughable.

Most of the time Happy doesn’t mind the underestimating looks his physique garners. He thinks nothing of it, most of the time. Ignores it best he can and simply smiles when people make the assumption that he’s just a big old softie.

What Happy won’t and will hear nothing about is his Dynamic. He was born a Gamma. Which automatically means, in everyone’s heads, that he just won’t ever match the strength of Betas or Alphas. He was a Gamma which meant when people looked at him and the position he held they thought it was pity or sympathy that helped launch him here.

But, Happy is dangerous. His soft countenance aside and despite his ‘lesser’ dynamic. Happy was a dangerous man especially when he was angered.

Gripping tight onto the front of Teems’ shirt Happy all but drags him across his desk. Paper and pens going flying in the tussle.

With a growl that was all danger and lethal anger, Happy tells the deluded Alpha, “I hired you, you little fuck, so I can fire you. Now, you get the fuck out of my tower before I spill your goddamn neck.”

Shoving the man away, Happy presses his com which allows the guards of this sector to come filing in. Officer Brodes steps readily up to his desk. Her green eyes meeting his gaze steadily as she awaits her orders.

“Get this self-indulgent prick out of my office. Mr. Teems is no longer employed by Starks industries
and if he is found on the premises without my explicit directions I want him tased on sight,” Happy informs Officer Brodes.

Nodding, Brodes takes hold of Teems’ left upper arm, intending to pull him out of the room. But Teems, the ass, shakes her off in a rough shake, his gaze burning as he glares at Happy, “You’ll regret this you fat fuck! You can’t just fire me like this over some stupid whore!”

When Brodes goes to hold him again, Teems growls and snaps his teeth at her, his anger turning on her, “You keep your filthy fucking hands off me you Beta-Bitch! I’m an Alpha you can’t touch me like that!”

Without issuing so much as a flinch, Brodes turns to Happy and asks, “Sir, Teems seems to be unwilling to cooperate civilly, may we use force to subdue him and escort him from the tower?”

“So by all means,” Happy tells her with a smile.

If Teems leaves with a broken nose and a split lip, Happy has no idea where or how he garnered those injuries. But, he makes sure to smile widely at Brodes when next he sees her in the lunch room.

Chapter End Notes

So who else thought this update was going to be about Happy?
No one?
Yeah...me either.
I started writing an update through Lela's POV. but it felt wrong to just skip over to her when I clearly needed to deal with that asshole and his taser.
Next update should be up soon, hopefully through Lela's POV. But, I don't know guys, this thing has a mind of its own.

as always, I would love to hear from those of you guys who are still reading.
with love,
Ani
Chapter Summary

A quick update where we peek into the head of a doctor and an old friend learns of Lena's whereabouts.

Chapter Notes

So quick apology before you start, I did not--like at all--edit this chapter or even give it the old second glance. So there are mistakes in there and I apologize for it. But, it's in the editing stage that I tend to keep these things forever and a day. And editing, well, it brings out the worst in me where I'll just delete everything I wrote because I grow to hate it.

So I'm sorry if things are misspelled or the grammars wrong, or the sentences somewhere are choppy. But I'd rather give you this now than risk not handing it over at all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Since the incident, there are times in which he thinks the only thing he is capable of feeling is Rage.

Bright hot, bitter and volcanic Rage.

The kind that can break worlds, tear flesh and spill blood. Rage that makes a monster out of him. Rage that only ever seems to feed the…Other Guy. Rage that runs easily enough in his veins you’d think his heart would just give out under the added strain of it all.

Rage…

It fills him good and plenty, but, it isn’t the only thing he feels.

These days there is more than a sliver of happiness rumbling about in him. Happiness found in the Tower. Happiness found among like-minded individuals that understand—if only a smidgen—the heavy burden he must carry for the rest of his days. Happiness found in his lab hidden away from those who do not understand. Happiness because he’s found friends.

Still, some days are better than others there are days where he locks himself away and avoids people for fear of what he might do. There are days when the memories of what he has done, in both his tawny skin or forest green, flood him and he can do little more than fall into a self-imposed trance to
keep the beast at bay.

But the moments that spur a transformation are few and far in between since he took up Tony’s offer to come live in the tower. Of course, he’d initially hadn’t wanted to because their relationship—the one between himself and Tony—wasn’t on the best of terms. Not since the Accords. Not since the sordid ‘Civil War’. Not since Tony had built a near impenetrable room and allowed that Colonel to usher him in by the front end of a high-powered rifle.

Things between Stark and himself were rocky at best.

When the offer had been made he’d thought of several ways to tell the Billionaire where exactly he could shove it. The Other Guy had thought of several ways to painfully make the dark-haired man’s death a bloody and gruesome one. (After all, Tony hadn’t just betrayed him, the Big Guy had felt it too. The trust placed in the Funny Man broken.) Tony’s Accords incident hadn’t just muddled up friendship when it came to Bruce. He had, after all, offered something more significantly more important.

Just thinking about it made his chest ache with the phantom howls of lament.

But, damn if Bruce wasn’t a sucker for sad brown eyes.

All it took was Tony to look at him, heartbroken and miserable, and Bruce had bent. He hadn’t accepted that half assed apology wrangled out of the suit wearing man at the behest of Pepper’s pointed glares and growls. But, the offer to live, work and be snuggly at peace in the confines of Stark’s state of the art Tower? That he had accepted with little more than a sour grimace and a nod of his head.

It still didn’t make him and Tony okay. In fact, Bruce hadn’t had a proper conversation with the man since last he crashed Bruce’s lab and broke a vitally important piece to Bruce’s work. Bruce had promptly banned the man from ever entering his work space and even went so far to take up the issue with Pepper. Because everyone knew, if there was anyone who could properly reign in Tony’s shenanigans it was Ms. Pepper Potts.

The woman was a tyrant of industries and she didn’t take any shit from anyone. Least of all her Alpha.

But, since living in the Tower, even though he had to deal with catching whiffs of Tony’s utterly unique scent everywhere he went, Bruce has found more moments in which Rage is superseded by other normal emotions. Though he’d never admit as much to Tony and would rather have his entire work journal burned if ever asked to admit it aloud, he’s thankful the man has granted him asylum here.

But that’s beside the point here.

The point is, that these days, there is rarely a cause for the Other Guy to really get riled up. The Other guy is easily manageable now where he had not been before. (Bruce likes to think it’s because of the sense of security that surrounds him these days. Of that paranoid fear of being caught, of being taken in to some nameless facility and being hurt having all but dissipated. Bruce likes to think it is because he now has a home that the Other Guy finds some form of comfort and keeps his peace for the sake of it.) Point is, these days the Other Guy is but throbbing headache of pent up energy.

Today, was no such day.

Today, after the incident in the lobby, the Other Guy is revved up and ready for a fight. The image of
the girl, bloody and barely standing, having woken the sleeping green giant. The image of her face, bloody, black and blue, having made the Big Guy utterly and inexplicitly angry. The smell of her pain, of her distress, was bitter like vinegar and something distinctly sulfuric, had been enough to make his duller Gamma fangs ache and drop. His instincts, nurturing and caregiving went to war with those of the Green Man’s who held onto feelings of bloodlust and visions of battle.

Having stood there and witnessed the utter disregard of protocol as a battered young girl was tased till she passed out. The Big Guy was rumbling just underneath his skin. Itching and scratching to be released. To reign terror upon nameless faces and cause the very earth to tremble in his wrath. The Big Guy is growling out words that sound like revenge, like vengeance, like blood for blood. The Big Guy wants to follow the trail of blood out of the building and find the source of those bruises. The Other Guy wants to break bone for bone and not stop.

And not for the first time does Bruce sit here and completely, whole heartedly agree.

Bruce knows though, that he shouldn’t be agreeing with the Green Beast. He knows better than to fan the other man’s fires. But it’s hard not to. When the memories of his mother’s sobs had swallowed whole the entirety of his childhood. It’s hard not to when he remembers what it was like hiding underneath the kitchen table as his father had roared his Alpha rage. It was hard not to agree with the Big Guy when he remembers what it was like to be turned away because his face was to bruised, his dynamic lesser, and he was deemed a casualty and not worth helping. It’s hard not to when he’s sitting where he’s sitting.

The girl, nameless for she had carried nothing on her by way of identification, lies motionless on the black cushioned medical bed. The third largest room in the Medical Wing is where he carried her unconscious body. Ignoring protocols and policies in place, implemented post-SHIELD days, he had not scanned her face, retina, or fingerprints in an effort to figure out who she was and where she came from. He had simply taken her up here, asked Jarvis to label the room a priority and off limits to anyone not cleared explicitly by Bruce, and just sat here waiting for her to wake.

But he was not about to do the rest of it. Not specifically to spite Tony’s damn rules. But because, there were some lines that Bruce would never cross at the behest of Tony. Because Ultron hadn’t worked out well for any of those involved.

So, he goes to task, Bruce, and does what he can without crossing consent lines. He checks that the taser hasn’t gone and fucked up her heart with a stethoscope—no fancy wand/hologram thing Tony insists upon—and checks her eye’s response to light. He cleans up the girls face of dried blood and places butterfly bandages where he can. When he is done he sits back in a chair provided and waits.

Waits for the girl to wake. Waits to ask her about the blood on her jeans. Waits to help her reset the bone in her nose. Waits to ask if he can do a full exam with her permission. Waits to ask her if she needs help. Waits to ask how the girl managed to get the private number of Pepper. He sits and waits in a clinical room and grips the bloodied card in his hand all the while wrangling the beast within him.

“So, have you thought it over yet?” Happy grumbles from where he sits across from her desk. His face is worn and tired, like maybe he hasn’t gotten proper rest in quite some time.
Flicking her eyes away, she goes back to the mounds of paperwork set before her and continues signing her name, “Thought over what?”

“Firing all the human personnel and replacing them with whatever tinker bots Tony has puttering around down in his private labs,” he responds with an exasperated huff of air.

A light smile graces her lips as she continues to sign, “We’ve talked about this Happy, I cannot in good judgment screw with the economy simply because you don’t have proper social skills. Or dislike people on ‘instincts’ alone.”

“My social skills are excellent, thank you very much. And you can’t dismiss my ‘Douche Radar’ anymore! Not after today,” He tells her carelessly as he fiddles with his tablet. His eyes running over the security grid all happily in the green and not blinking that nasty ugly red.

Now that stills her working hands and forces her to straighten up in her chair. Carefully, she puts down her pen and probes easily, “Did something happen today?”

“Huh?” Happy grumbles, lazily lifting his head and staring at his boss.

“Did something happen today?” she repeats.

“Well, yeah, in the morning. You didn’t hear?” Happy questions her, his brows pinched as he had figured—since it was the talk of the entire Tower—that she might have been the first to know.

“I was in a meeting with the representatives of CHNR—” she tells him before he interrupts.

“CHNR?”

“The official bureau of China’s Natural Resources,” she clarifies.

“Ah,” He exclaims softly, “I thought Tony was in charge of that ‘Green Planet’ thing?”

“It’s ‘Green Globe’ actually, and yes he was in charge of it. Before Iron Man was needed off the coast of France for something or the other.” She informs him before repeating herself yet again, “So what happened this morning that would solidify the fact that Mechanical Servants would better serve us, at the risk of plunging half of New York into poverty, then Human Personnel.”

“Well, before I tell you, you should know that the situation has already been dealt with. I personally saw to it. The Officer that caused the incident has been fired and the girl—” Happy starts, his words coming out quick in his eagerness to settle her nerves before he’s enticed her anger.

“Happy,” she interrupts him this time around and waves away his attempts to continue on with his assurances, “Must’ve been some incident to warrant termination rather than a reprimand, just tell me.”

It must be something in her gaze or the years of managing Tony and all his nonsense that’s given her resting face a certain edge to it. A face that just says ‘cut the shit’ without actually trying. A face Happy, as well as actual world leaders, had a hard time denying that face a thing.

“Ex-employee Randell Teems committed an infraction this morning,” Happy informs her, his tone turning entirely professional at the sight of her no-nonsense expression, “He horribly misjudged a situation and overreacted. He used excessive force which inevitably resulted in the injury of an unarmed civilian on compound grounds.”

“Well, shit,” she exclaims with a growl while roughly running a hand down the left side of her face.
‘Just what we need now,’ she bitterly thought. Her mind already filling itself with all manner of lurid headlines and lawsuits.

“What happened?” she demands in a less than polite tone.

Shrugging his suit clad soldiers, Happy heaves a tired sigh, “Teems claimed he saw the unarmed civilian as a threat, tased her when she wouldn’t comply and maybe that’d be the end of it if it wasn’t for the worst of it.”

At her raised brow and tersely pursed lips, Happy continues after a breath, “The civilian can’t be much older than eighteen, honestly, maybe ninety pounds on a good day, and fuck the way she came in…I don’t know how to describe it! She looked like she just came in from war. Bloody from the top of her head to the ends of her toes! I don’t know what the hell she was doing in here. She should’ve been at a hospital.”

“And he tased her?!” she barks out in an utterly dominate note, “He tased a bloody, unarmed kid? What for?”

“Honestly?” Happy hedges, because the honest answer hadn’t made him like the incident any more than she probably will. At her stiff nod, he tells her, “Because the Teems claimed to know the smell of a hooker when he saw one. And as such, she was deemed ‘a nonperson’ to be dealt with rather than to be helped.”

“A hooker?” she repeats, a wriggling nagging cold feeling seeping into the pit of her stomach.

Again, Happy shrugs, “Yeah, that’s what he said. But, I don’t know, I don’t see it. Kids too young and even if she was, that’s no excuse. I wanted to beat him to a bloody pulp right there and then but…”

And as Happy continues ranting and raving she quietly peers down at her desktop. Fear makes her fingers tremble as she punches in her username and passcode. There’s swirling unease in her stomach tying it up into knots. She can feel the heavy thump of her rapidly beating heart. The taste of her own distress a tang on her own tongue.

There’s a bitter anxious feeling in her mind. One that tells her, she already knows the answer of the ugly questions she’s about to ask. But ask it she must. Silently she lets her fingers fly over the keyboard selfishly drawing out the time by doing this manually rather than having Jarvis pull it up for her. When she finds the flagged file with the necessary footage she allows the arrow to simply float over it. Fear freezing her as she stared at the back of a familiar figure.

With a heavy heart, she presses play and allows the events to unfold before her own eyes.

When the truth, that has sat in her since Happy relayed to her the broad strokes of it all, is finally confirmed she feels bile rise up into her throat. Abruptly she jumps to her feet, roughly pushing her desk away from herself and in turn causes several folders and objects to go tumbling down onto the floor.

“Whoa! What’s wrong? Are you feeling okay—” Happy questions quickly, already on his feet and at her elbow to steady her swaying form.

She tells him nothing as she pushes past him and heads out he office door. All but sprinting to the elevator, she ignores the frantic calls of Happy and even the startled queries of her secretary. Without needing to ask ahead an elevator is waiting for her with its door ajar. Tumbling in, she breathlessly calls to Jarvis, “Where is she, the girl from the lobby?”
“She is located in the Medical Wing Ma’am, in room 3B with Doctor Banner,” Jarvis tells her in that unflappable British lull of his.

“Take me to her?” she half begs, her Beta teeth shining, her blue eyes welling, her chest rumbling in her whimpered distress calls.

“Of course, Ms. Potts,” Jarvis easily says as the elevator begins its descent.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed!
Thoughts?
Opinions?
Suggestions?

-Ani
**Unneeded Discomfort**

Chapter Summary

In the process of getting treated something goes wrong.

Chapter Notes

So, I'm gunna be up front with you guys, I'm just going to start posting this story as it comes. I'm tired of abandoning Fic's because my anxiety and depression get the best of me. If I manage to bang out even half a chapter, I'm going to post it. So I'm sorry if the endings are a bit abrupt but I want to keep going for those of you who have stuck with me for as long as you have.

I hope you enjoy.

(Also, I think this might be graphic, but I don't know. And it will be glaringly apparent that I don't know shit about medical stuff. Sorry!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At this point in her life, she’s lost track of how many times she’s been knocked back on her ass and laid utterly the fuck out. She knows, vaguely, that it’s somewhere in the double digits, though; the exact number escapes her.

Still, frequent flier she may be, but it still fucking sucked to get knocked out.

When she comes to it takes a moment for her brain to catch up to all the pain in her body. There’s a two or so second delay in which she thinks, with her eyes closed, that it might have all been some trippy dream. One caused by fatigue, hunger, and the drugs. But then, those three seconds are up.

The pain radiates from the center of her being and then outward. Flooding out of her in waves of hot blistering heat. She can feel every injury with startling clarity and by the gods it fucking blows. With the pain comes the recognition that, yes, it was very real and on the heels of that comes the utter dread that the jig might be up.

*Detention center*, the man in the tactical uniform had said. *Detention center*, he had growled out even as she had backed away attempting to undo her error. *Detention center*, was where they probably stuck her in.
Fuck, her mind whispers.

Fear and anxiety fight each other for dominance within her as she internally scrambles for strength. She doesn’t have any idea what she was going to do once she actually gets up. She doesn’t even know where she might be at the very moment. A detention center or a hospital, handcuffed to a railing awaiting a string of unanswerable questions. A detention room at the local police department?

Quickly, she fights with her lids, as they feel as heavy as lead and utterly uncooperative. They barely crack open a sliver before she’s screwing them shut with a groan of pain. The blinding white of the overhead lights were powerful enough to feel like needles in her orbs.

“T-Take it easy…” comes a voice suddenly, from her left, causing her to jerk upright.

Or, at least, attempt to.

Ignoring the disorientating waves of dizziness that comes spilling into her brain, she wrenches herself up off whatever comfortable thing she’s been laying on. Her vision is swimming but she forces her eyes to focus, at least, upon whomever has spoken. With a bit of a struggle she manages to catch sight of the speaker.

Brown messy curls, sprinkled lightly with gray, is what first she can make out. Brown messy tangles she has a feeling she’s seen somewhere before. Second to come is a soft blue dress shirt and a pair of brown corduroy pants. Third are those large, horn rimmed, thick bridged glasses. Fourth to come is the sound of that smooth Gamma rumble. The sound meant to calm, meant to disarm and comfort.

That sound, she blearily remembers, belonged to the only person who had been willingly to stand between the Alphas that had surrounded her. The Gamma who had defended her and offered his help without hesitance. A Gamma she cannot scent because of the overwhelming smell of sterile equipment.

“I wouldn’t…I wouldn’t recommend you move around so much,” the man tells her in a stuttered and flustered sentence. He’s standing to her left and nearly eye level with her from where she lays on some kind of cushioned medical slab.

“You should lay back down,” he states softly. His dark brows pinched as he stretches his hands outward towards her.

On hard instincts alone, she growls at him savagely. Her teeth are bared, her neck hidden, her fingers pointed like claws and her eyes screaming murder. The rough sound that spills from her throat would make a feral dog proud. There was no elegance in that growl, no petty show of dominance, or power. Only that she was a wild thing, a dirty street thing, and she wasn’t about to let a hand near her lest she bite those pretty fingers clean off. She’s in pain, so much pain she can barely stand it, and she doesn’t know where she is.

Or if they know yet.

“I’m—I…” the Gamma man starts, his mouth opening and closing as he attempts to search for the right words the situation called for. His dark eyes flashing as they raced over the expanse of her face, “I’m not going to hurt you, I just want to help.”

“Where am I?” she hisses, ignoring the flaring of pain in her side as she forced herself into a sitting position.

“You’re in the Medical wing of the Stark Industries,” the man informs her with a pinch furrowing deeper into his brow.
“That Alpha prick,” she growls, her eyes flashing about the room—a clean white and gray sterilized room, the kinds found only in hospitals or doctors’ offices—searching for the man with the taser, “he said something about a detention center.”

Confusion and then something like aggravation slips onto the Gamma man’s face—rage swelling bright and bitter in scent waves finally leaking out of him, “Officer Teems has been dealt with, you don’t have to worry about him.”

“I’m not worried about him,” she half bites around her words as she swings her legs over the edge of the cushioned slab, “I just wanted to know if I was going to run into his bitch ass on my way out.”

“You’re leaving!” the Gamma exclaims in an incredulous shout. His brows climbing high into his hairline, “You can’t leave! You need medical attention!”

“No shit,” she snaps as she takes a steadying deep breath and allows her body to slip down and off the high raised table.

The landing, slow and soft as she had attempted to do it, leaves her breathless. The slight thump of her feet hitting tiled floor has pain flaring bright and loud in her body. Black spots in her vision arrive at the action of standing upright too. Her vaginal area is throbbing and pulsating in ways that only make her knees weak and her head swim.

“Look, I know things didn’t go so well when you first came in, but, let me help you! I’m a doctor!” The Gamma quickly argues. His tanned face flushed in his hurry to get her to lay back without ever actually putting his hands on her.

His hands, browned skinned and large, hover about her person but never dare to actually land anywhere. The man is, by no means, a large man but now as she’s standing she sees him wholly. He is of average height. His build is lean and nothing too muscular. There’s something utterly homely about his person. A soft and delicate aura to him only amplified by the scent he carries.

Now that she’s standing, and standing so close to him as she is, she can make it out. Like baked apple pie. He smells of sweet cinnamon and just a dash of paprika. It’s a scent that is inviting. He smells like a home might after a long day on the bitter cold streets. Warm and safe. It is unlike anything she’s ever smelled before.

“I shouldn’t have come here,” she tells him, her eyes wrenching themselves away from his flustered face. Quickly they search the room for her bag. There’s a rapid tap to her heart as her search comes up empty for the first two or three seconds. In that bag, that ratty black and torn back pack of hers, lies one of the six remaining vials of her suppressors. She needs that bag here and now because she doesn’t know how long she’s been knocked out. She needs that bag because she needs to dose herself up before everyone and their mothers figures out what she is on a passing sniff.

“Where’s my shit,” she growls out at the Gamma man.

“What—you mean your bag?” he fumbles as he turns completely around, baring his back to her without hesitation, and unearths her missing bag from a cabinet in the wall.

Before she can snatch the bag out of his extended hand, the Gamma man stills and fixes her with a firm stare, “Please don’t leave.”

His eyes, soft brown, warm and hidden mostly behind his glasses, hold such an honest expression she balks at the sight of it. Her body freezes and she struggles for a moment under that stare to find the proper curses to properly tell him to fuck off.
“I know I’m just a stranger to you, but, My name is Bruce Banner and I’m a doctor and all I want to do is help you. Let me just patch you up before you head back out,” he tells her.

Against her better judgement, with the smell of apple pie, cinnamon and paprika fucking with her brain, she nods her head in an ugly jerky motion. There’s something about that scent—so comforting, inviting and utterly sweet—that disarms her. Much like that Golden Goddesses’ had. It makes her want to curl up and just simply be. It makes her want to rest her head and leave the ugly habits she’s carved into her skin behind.

“No questions,” she tells him, her tone hard as steel.

Nodding his head, he gingerly pushes up the bridge of his glasses further up his nose, “If anything I do makes you feel uncomfortable I’ll stop and you can go, no questions asked.”

“No names, nothing on paper,” she continues on.

Again, he nods his head as he hands her that ratty black back pack, “I just want to help you, honest.”

With the arm loop in hand, the small weight of her bag pulling at the muscle in her battered arm, she nods her head, “Fine.”

Without another word, the Gamma man hands her a paper like green gown and ushers her behind a soft sheer medical partition that—literally—pops out of the white wall. Carefully, she undresses and gathers her dirty, bloodied and stinking clothes into a neat pile. Her bag sits upon the entirety of it all.

Slowly, and with the Gamma man’s help, she finds herself back onto the gray cushioned medical table. They remain quiet, both her and the doctor, even as she is cleaned up. Her busted nose, that throbs and she cannot breathe through, is reset—professionally this time around—with an ugly crunch. Her jaw is looked at, for the swelling on the left side of it looks to be tripling. The cuts on her head are cleaned of the glass that was embedded into them. The little gray tin cup on a little sterilized table filling itself almost half ways with green hued glass. They move on, soundlessly, to further injuries.

The Gamma, despite the initial nervous stuttering at the beginning, conducts himself in a manner she can only call: proficient. His hands do not tremble. His eyes do not waiver or linger for too long. His cool expression does not belie a thing. Even his scent is carefully managed.

For all the world, this Gamma carries on his doctoral duty of cleaning her up, like he’s always come across such carnage as this.

It is almost…admirable, she thinks.

The silence is only broken, when the Gamma speaks, his eyes are trained on the needle he is threading and not on her.

“Do you maybe…want documentation? Should you wish to report this.”

“No,” she half growls at him.

He doesn’t offer a comment, simply nods his head and tightens his lips. When the needle is threaded and the Alpha Bites at her shoulder and back sterilized, he goes to work. She can hardly feel the needle slip through her flesh at first. She can only focus her attention on keeping quiet, on not simpering, on not revealing the fact that she is so wildly hurting.

She could slip, in the middle of this all, reveal her stupid fucking secret when she’s gotten this far.
So, she bites on the inside of her cheeks and trains her eyes on the off-white tile with patterns of swirls of gray ink in them.

When the welts on her back are bandaged up and the Bites properly sealed, he tells her in a tone that is nothing but soft and soothing, “You should lay back.”

In a rough movement, she turns to eye him. Her expression must be one of confusion and apprehension, for, he explains himself without her prompting.

“You need to be examined, the amount of blood you’ve lost can only indicate that the damage was extensive.”

She opens her mouth to speak, to tell him no, to tell him that this will be enough. Fear of being caught, of somehow being found out by some tiny physical difference in her vaginal area, whirling about her. What if he sees her and figures it out. What if that’s all it takes?

“You can say no, I won’t force you,” he interrupts her mental downward spiral. His expression so honest and sincere, “But, I cannot, in good conscious, allow you to leave without a brief examination, at least. Your injuries could be extensive and there is a high possibility rate that you could get an infection. I don’t want to frighten you but the mortality rate for something this serious is well up in the—”

“Fine.” She interrupts him harshly.

Without a word, she lays back. Ignoring the burst of pain in her back and the blazing heat of discomfort in the pull of her newly acquired stitches. She lays back and awaits the Gamma man’s next moves. With a swish, stir-ups are almost magically conjured and attached to the table. Silently she and the Gamma man fixe her trembling legs upon them and her bottom is scooted down until it sits just at the edge of the table.

Her eyes fix themselves upon the smooth ceiling above her and does her damnedest to stifle every whimper building in her chest. She bites, savagely, upon her tongue when something unforgivingly cold is placed into her. She digs her nails into her palms when pressure is applied. She allows tears to spill sideways out of her eyes when it feels like something akin to pure fire has been tossed into her vagina.

“S-Stop!” she all but shouts, flying upwards into a sitting position.

There’s a cold sweat on her forehead and trickling down chest and spine. She wants to cry and beg the Gamma man to keep his fucking hands to himself and to let her up. His care so far was good enough. The fear of pain out weighing the thought of potential death.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” the Gamma man exclaims; his brown eyes are wide behind his glasses. His gloved hands—crimson smeared—are out over his head as if she has pointed a gun at him.

“Stop, just...stop,” she growls out, her brows pinched and her lips trembling. She entertains the thought of maybe kicking him away and getting off the slab. She thinks about putting back on her clothes and booking it. She thinks it over in her head and dismisses it. Because, even if the Gamma man hadn’t told her, she knows just what can happen when injuries like this, to this extent, are left to fester.

She remembers a Beta Girl, Danielle or Daniela, and the brutal way she had been beaten and assaulted. She remembers how the Beta Girl had barely made it past four days before they found her dead in her motel room. Puss and other gross shit leaking out of her vagina.
She doesn’t want to die like that.

So, she grits her teeth and tells him after a while, “Sorry, it hurt.”

“Do you want something for the pain?” the Gamma Man asks her.

“No,” she firmly informs him.

Shock is written across his brow as he tells her, “I would advise for it. I need to continue on and I don’t wish to make you feel any unneeded discomfort.”

“Buddy,” she bitterly laughs before raking her hand through the right side of her hair—the only side not littered in stitches and staples, “My entire life is unneeded discomfort. But…”

And that’s when she feels it. Like a slow slide of liquid suddenly spilling out of her womanly center. Her head is suddenly top heavy and flops backwards as her words get lost on her tongue. She feels her heart slow and the images of the Gamma Man’s face slip in and out of her line of sight.

“Are you…”

She hears his voice echo somewhere far away.

Something like a loud and shrill alarm is going off in the distance.

The touch of a hand on her shoulder a faraway sensation as more of that liquid slide feeling comes spilling out of her.

The last thing she hears ringing in her ears as blackness falls on her is, “…she’s hemorrhaging…”

---

Chapter End Notes

Please feel free to comment!
- Ani
Old Bonds and Knights

Chapter Summary

Does Lela make it out of surgery?!

Chapter Notes

Warning!
I did not EDIT!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Her breath is coming out in quick pants as if she’s just ran the entire length of New York, twice. In truth, she’s only run the small distance between the elevator and Medical room 3B. It’s a short run, one she can do without any problem considering all the training she’s been doing lately, still she’s out of breath. She blames it on the dread in her veins. Her hands tremble and she feels the length of her upper canines extending as she rushes to the room.

The smell of blood if thick in the air and she fights hard not to inhale it through her nose. And even if she inhales most of it in her mouth and not her nose, she knows.

The girls scent is a unique one; one that she can spot and name in a heartbeat. Even if their encounter had been less than a handful of hours. She remembers it clearly, can still taste it distinctly in the air around her. Her scent was made up of something bitter and hard edged like an aged whiskey or even like matches being struck to light. She also smelled of drying flowers something like flowers that had long since withered up and dead. Chiefly, though, she smelled strongest of cigarette smoke. Still, underneath all of that, there was something smooth and nearly sweet like. A true scent marker of who the girl was but it was hidden by the harshness of a hard life.

All of it, mixed together, was a scent that screamed Lela.

A scent that had, in the short time she had gotten to know the younger girl, burrowed itself underneath Pepper’s flesh. A scent her hind brain can conjure up without hesitation when she lays awake at night and worries over the caramel colored lady. A scent that made every nurturing, maternal, instinct rear up for a fight that was not present. A scent that scram of something familiar, of something strangely reminiscent of family.

It was, is, a scent that makes her run faster because that scent isn’t the only thing in the air. She can smell blood. Too much blood.

“Madam Potts, it appears there was some complications with treating the Girls injuries. She has been transported to room E5.” Jarvis tells her suddenly.
Freezing so abruptly, that it is only by a miracle she doesn’t trip and fall, Pepper turns down another corridor and heads in the new direction, “What kind of complications?”

“It would be improper of me to relay the details in your current environment,” Jarvis announces to the whole of the corridor before silencing.

Dread drops like a heavy lead cannon ball into the pit of her stomach. But, she nods her head without another word and rushes forward. Idly, in her panic, she wonders if maybe she should call Tony. Her fears making it so that she needs the reassurance of a Pack Member. More importantly, her Pack Alpha.

She shoves the thought aside, roughly. A growl rumbling in her throat as something akin to anger paced up her spine. The force of her reaction at the mere thought of Tony, almost has her reeling back, because last she checked, everything between her and her Alpha were well and good. (Well, as good as they can be when he was a deliberate pain in the ass.) Still, they hadn’t had arguments as of late that would warrant such a response from her. Analyzing the reason behind such a random emotion flies right out of her head the moment she catches sight of a familiar head of chocolate curls.

“Bruce!” she calls out before she’s even ten feet before him.

In a flash, Bruce turns to take her in and in turn she is able to drink in the sight of him. What she sees makes her blood run cold.

The blue of his dress shirt is drenched nearly black with the amount of blood. The soft brown shade of his pants too is covered in that mess. His face is tight with emotion as he turns to look at Pepper skid to a halt before him. His eyes unreadable behind those too large glasses. The scent of his distress, his anger, his sadness, his frustration and failure a thick and cloying scent in the air. (Like rotted lemons.)

“What happened?” she croaks out in a breathless voice.

“There was…she uh—” Bruce begins only to teeter off, his hands roughly raking their way through his messy curls, “I was just…there was so much blood, I…”

Pepper knows by heart the protocols in place for a number of situations involving Bruce, and in turn the Hulk. She knows that by all right and reason, he is the first to be removed out of stress inducing or anger enticing situations. She knows Bruce is the last person someone is to be hostile with. She knows, that if Bruce needed to be involved with something, it meant there had to be a pitcher of Rose Tea around. Pepper ignores all these protocols and all but shakes Banner by his shoulder to get him to focus.

“The girl from the Lobby incident, she was with you,” Pepper tells him, her poppy blue eyes boring into his dark scattered eyes.

Nodding his head, he stutters, “Uh, y-yeah, I…I brought her in to be examined. I was dressing her injuries.”

“Jarvis said she was moved here to E5 after complications,” Pepper clarifies and then demands, “Why? What happened?”

removing his glasses, Bruce pulls away from Pepper and finds one of the metal chair that lined the Emergency Treatment corridor. He falls into with all the grace of a shot bull. His body falling with the weight of his weariness and with all the aid of gravity.

“That girl…” Bruce says to the tile floor, his head bowed and refusing to meet Peppers gaze, “That
girl was brutalized. I just wanted to help her. I could smell the blood and the beginning of an infection. I talked her into letting me treat her and then she could leave. No questions asked."

“But I must’ve reopened a wound. I must’ve torn something in her when I was checking. She started to hemorrhage right there and then. So much blood came rushing out of her…I—I thought I had killed her.”

“Brutalized? How?” Pepper whispers, dreading the answer, thought the clench in her stomach tells her she already half suspects.

“The kind only cruel men can do,” Bruce whispers right back, barely lifting his gaze to look at her, “she was covered in botched Alpha bites, half of them were oozing black. And the damage to her vaginal area…I don’t know how that kid managed to walk in here on her own two feet.”

Pepper can feel her heart twisting in her chest. Bone aching despair entering her being like a jagged knife. She can hardly take a breath in to steady her swirling mind, but, she stubbornly does as she asks, “Who’s with her now?”

“Dr. Manveer Kahanna,” Bruce answers with a tired sigh, “She’s a surgeon that specializes in operations this severe. She just started and kicked me out.”

Pepper doesn’t know if she answers or not. She knows only that the buzzing energy that brought her flying her leaves her suddenly. She drops with as much grace as Bruce had into the chairs beside him. She can feel her heart slowing and steadily sinking into her stomach. She can feel the whimpers of devastation finally being voiced. She can smell, in her own scent, the evidence of her heartache. Bone crushing guilt laces every single one of her tears as she sits there.

Without a word, Bruce hands her a crumpled piece of paper stained in something brown. It takes Pepper a moment to gather it in her hands and a while longer for her to recognize it completely.

The scrawl of her own handwriting glares at her from under the browning blood. Tears slip and fall from her face like wild rivers.

*~*

How long they sit there, side by side, Pepper does not know. She does not check and she does not call out for Jarvis to tell her. She simply waits there and stares at the silver door that leads into the emergency/operating room of E5. She knows it is long enough for the staff in Medical to discretely gather a change of clothes for Bruce and to hand it over to him. Bruce changes in an empty Emergency room but sits right back into his previous spot and does not offer a single word to her. Pepper wouldn’t have answered either way.

There is a heavy weight in her hand that keeps Pepper from rising from her seat. A weight that sits like the whole of the world upon her lap. A weight that feels like guilt, like failure, like disappointment and something like murder. A weight that comes in the shape of her business card covered in blood.

She has laid it out on her lap. The stark contrast of that ratty, torn and wrinkled card has against her finely pressed black skirt is almost laughable. Everything in her wishes to toss that card out. To take it somewhere and burn it. To make it so that it no longer existed. But guilt keeps it on her lap. Keeps it there so it can glare up at her and mock her with her failure.

Tears gather in her red and swollen eyes.
The comforting smooth rumbles of the man at her side keep her from falling into her own pit of despair entirely. His presence is so calm, his scent so warm, causes her to find comfort in him. The old frail bond still echoing between them too.

Once, not too long ago, they had looked upon each other and had seen the future of their pack. Pepper would have been proud to have called Bruce her Pack-Brother. But then the Accords had happened and the world went to hell. Friends turned against one another, countries rose and fell and Bonds were inevitably broken.

Before she can delve too deep in those thoughts, silver doors that lead into E5 burst open. A clatter of noises spill into the otherwise silent corridor. With rushed movements only ever conjured up by those in the medical profession, a figure dressed in light green scrubs heads in their direction.

“Uh, excuse me, Mr. Banner, you wouldn’t happen to know her medical history, would you?” the man in the scrubs asks, his words half muffled by the face covering he wears.

“Wha—no. No! I just meet her this morning! She didn’t even give me her name,” Bruce exclaims at first and then stands abruptly, “Why? What’s happening?”

“Well, it’s been very touch and go. We started her on a blood transfusion but we haven’t yet gotten to stop the hemorrhaging. She just keeps bleeding and we don’t know why. Dr. Kahanna wanted to know if had sometime of illness or was on a certain type of medication that would effective her bloods inability to clot. And—L” the man starts only to trail off as he spared a glance back to the silver doors.

“And what?” Pepper demands as she straightened up and stood, her spine rigidly straight as she glared the nameless faceless man down.

“The doctor noticed some irregularities in her…injuries. We needed to make sure she wasn’t…well, you know,” the man vaguely tells them.

Arching a blonde brow Pepper acidly tells him, “No, I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“Dr. Kahanna thinks she might be an Omega,” the man informs them in a hushed tone, as if afraid some passerby would glean the information.

Shock litters both Pepper and Bruce’s face as they take in the information.

“And why is that?” Bruce asks, as he is the first to shake off the surprise.

“Low cost suppressants have been known to not mix well with certain types of pain medications and some antibiotics. They can thin the blood down,” the man says.

Nodding Bruce mutters, “I see.”

“Well, as Dr. Banner has explained, we do not know her Medical history nor do we know of her Dynamic. So simply treat her as if she were on suppressants and make her well,” Pepper suddenly demands with a bark when it looks as if the man is simply standing there, idle.

“Yes ma’am, sorry,” the man says before rushing back into the operating room.

And just like that, She and Bruce are left alone once more. Both in their respective seats and staring at the silver doors.

*~*
The next time the silver doors open, it has been well over fourteen hours. This time she knows only because Jarvis has deigned it fit to bother her every hour, on the hour, to go down and get some rest or something to eat. She’s ignored every single one of his none to gentle prodding’s to go.

When they open, it is because Dr. Kahanna herself has stepped out. The woman is dressed in green scrubs and donning a surgeon’s cap upon her thick black hair. Her richly mocha face is pinched with weariness and a hard day’s work. Her black brows are pinched in a way that can only convey concern. The doctor walks easily over to them.

Pepper and Bruce rise wordlessly from their seats standing shoulder to shoulder like the Pack they might have been.

“Ms. Potts, Dr. Banner,” Dr. Kahanna greets them with a dutiful nod of her head, “She’s stable now.”

“How…” Pepper begins only to balk.

As if sensing her inability to voice the question herself, Bruce continues on, “Will she live?”

“Of course, her injuries were most extensive and the worst I have ever personally dealt with, but she will be fine. Barring any infections, she should be able to go home after a month of hospitalization,” Dr. Kahanna announces in her accented voice, “She will be sedated for the next couple of days, to allow the injuries to heal without interruption and the stress of pain. But when she wakes I hope to clear some issues with her.”

Absorbing the information as it flowed, Pepper easily asks, without thought, “Issues?”

“Well, madam, it is not my place to over step my bounds of patient-doctor confidentialities, but it appears this has not been the first time this young girl has seen this type of abuse. The scars on her person tell an unfortunate story of her life,” Dr. Kahanna tells her, “The damage she’s received over the years looks to be irreparable. If she is indeed what I suspect she is, she will need to be informed of the consequences this act.”

Before either she or Bruce can answer the sound of Dr. Kahanna’s name being called pulls the doctor away. With a simple nod of her head the doctor is gone and they are left alone. The silence of the corridor is nearly suffocating. But no more than the knowledge that now sits dark and heavy in Pepper’s whirling mind.

Picking up on her scent, and maybe in the mangy little bond they share, Bruce takes her elbow in hand and steers her into room E5. Silently they enter as the last of the nurse’s exit. The blood and the evidence of a large surgery having taken place mere moments before have all disappeared. What sits in the room now is only the bed, the large machines she is hooked up to and the girl herself.

For the first time in months, Pepper is able to look upon the girl who stole a piece of her heart away. What she is confronted with makes her openly sob. The girl, already so petite, looked don right tiny upon the large bed. Her skin was nearly paper white, blending in with the crisp sheets laid atop of her. Her hair, a deep chocolate shade, hung in a wild tangled snarl upon the pillow top.

For a lack of a better word, Lela looked dead.

With that though running through her head, Pepper rushes to her side. Eager to make sure, despite the monitor of the machines at her side saying so, that the girl was in fact breathing. Laying a trembling hand upon the girl, Pepper can barely make out the heat of a living person. The chill of her skin making Pepper shiver as tears slipped from her eyes.
Dropping herself onto the bed, mindful of the extensive set of wires connected to the girl, Pepper claims the open right side of Lela’s bed. An overwhelming need to stay, to keep safe, to guard the broken girl gnawing at every one of her instincts. Quietly, she cries as she gently combs those tangles out of chocolate colored locks with her fingers.

“How did you know her?” Bruce asks, only after it becomes apparent that Pepper’s tears were not to be subsided any time soon.

“She…” Pepper begins with a hiccup, “She saved me once. She was my Knight.”

Chapter End Notes

So what’d y’all think?

-Ani
An update for a question

Chapter Summary

So I wrote a quick update because I wanted to ask y'all a question and I didn't want to have to post it and have y'all feel duped in any way.

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ THE END NOTES!
PLEASE
PLEASE!
PLEASE!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three days later

Contrary to popular belief, Pepper does not live in Tony’s pocket nor does he live in hers. She does not share a home with him, at least, not anymore. And more often than not, they do go whole weeks without actually speaking face to face with one another.

They had once, been utterly inseparable. They had once shared a work space, a home, an office, and a whole life with one another. Once, they had been such a tightly woven unit their scents were indistinguishable from one another. Her own chamomile scent blending naturally with his distinctly orchid one.

Things were different now. So much had changed. The world had gone topsy turvy and the waters between Tony and herself had grown muddy and vast.

Of course, she trusted him still. Despite the Ultron incident and in the face of the Accords. She trusted him, even if she now kept things from him. Because she knows, Tony did what he had done, with the best of intentions. Still, the road to hell he had paved had been one with built on his ‘good intentions’. And she, those were her friends Tony was locking up. The personal information he had used to do what he had done, gathered from her blackberry without her permission.

The point is, though, there are times that she and Tony hardly speak. A quick email shot back and forth, or game of telephone on Jarvis’ dime, and that’s about it. The longest they’ve gone between actual in-person interaction had been a full two months. Not a hard feat to accomplish when she runs most of the Legal and business-like ventures of the company and he spends most of his time holed up
in his private labs. His time split with that of the Avengers and whatever crisis was breaking.

Their lives, like it had been back when Tony had drowned his troubles in liquor, were lived entirely separate.

Neither of them entirely over the wounds they had received contrary to their often-uttered assurances.

Her being holed up in a medical room, watching over her new charge, for three whole days did not in fact raise any red flags. She conducted her business through her laptop and on the small pull out table she had ordered to be put in.

“You should go home, get some rest,” Bruce says from the left side of the room.

Without glancing up, she knows exactly where the man is. For he’s been in the same place in the last three days. On the other side of the room, on Lela’s left side, he sits, under the window in a cushy deep navy chair. Today’s paper lies in his hand as he works his way through the crossword puzzle. His curls a mess, his dress shirt rumpled, his slacks some variant of brown and his usual glasses sitting on the bridge of his nose.

“So, should you,” Pepper murmurs as she eyes an email sent to her by their executive manager over in their Californian branch. When the numbers do nothing but jumble with one another, she turns to really look at the man. His disheveled appearance amplified by the dark bags underneath his eyes.

For as long as Pepper has been here, seated upon her own navy-blue chair, so has Bruce. He has stood with Pepper, at her elbow, watching as various wires and tubes were changed upon Lela. He stood with her, wordlessly, as Pepper cared for her. Never giving reason as to why or for what. He simply stood with her and wrangled tea when she felt the weight of guilt crushing her chest inward.

Why, has sat on her tongue for the entirety of the three days. Why, she wants to ask every time he tucks the new sheets around Lela. Why, Pepper almost asks when Bruce steps out only to come back with lunch. Why, she wants to demand of him, when he covers Pepper with a blanket when she dozes off.

“Why haven’t you gone home Bruce?” she questions him softly, pushing away her laptop table and focusing on the other man.

Shrugging his shoulders, Bruce tears his gaze away from her, his shoulders sloping downward, his face neutral and his scent perfectly contained, “Well, I have what the experts think are a mild form of insomnia, I figure why be at home doing nothing, by myself, when I can do nothing here with you and keep you company while doing so.”

She, better than anyone, knows how integral Bruce was to the Bio department. She knew, better than anyone, how he was needed for most of the work being pumped out of there. She knows his absence from it all was not being taken as lightly as hers. She knows he has turned off his cellphone. She also knows that Bruce has explicitly asked Jarvis not to inform him of official pages while he is in the room with her. So, she pulls no punches.

“Liar,” Pepper accuses him easily enough, her gaze piercing his.

His tanned hands easily folding the black and white paper so that he may pull his glasses off. His gaze wanders to the figure on the bed and as he takes in the sight of a battered, purple and blue, waifish figure his body tightens. The corners of his lips tipping downward as he frowns with disapproval His eyes are gentle when he turns to look at Pepper. His scent a steady wave of comfort as he tells her:
“I don’t know what to tell you Pep. I don’t know why I’m here either. I don’t know the kid, not like you do, but every time I look at her all I can see is the way she hit the ground in a bloody mess. Every time I get up to go, I remember her face, the way she had looked at me for help before they surrounded her. Even when I close my eyes I can see the bites she wore, the bleeding lashes on her back, the horror of her body and I can’t force myself to leave.”

A shuddering breath spills from Peppers pink lips, her eyes falling down to her hands upon her lap. She had read, against her better judgement and Bruce’s advice, the medical report on Lela. She read what some nameless monster had inflicted upon Lela’s person. She read and cried and cried. Still now, she can feel tears building.

“and if that’s no enough to keep me here, rooted to my spot, I have to look across this…” Bruce continues on, only to have his words fail when his eyes meet hers. Nervously wetting his lips, Bruce seems to steel himself as he confesses, “We may never have been Pack—officially, but, I do still…I still care about you. And when I see you, looking so broken and grief stricken, crying yourself sick—I can’t find it in me to be anywhere but here. At your side until this is over.”

There’s a great big lump in Peppers throat. A lump full of emotions and words better left unsaid. A lump Pepper fights to swallow past. Her hand carefully wiping the side of her face that has grown wet with tears.

With great difficulty, Pepper finds her courage and tells him, “Thank you Bruce.”

Shrugging his shoulders awkwardly, Banner says as he rubs the back of his neck, “What are friends for, huh?”

"Pack," Pepper corrects him, her shoulders straightening as she gathered her strength and lifted her chin. Her eyes taking on a determined glint as they wandered from the doctor to the figure on the bed, "That's what Pack is for."

Chapter End Notes

Hey, I know, this chapter went no where. But like I said, I wanted to ask y'all a question and I thought about doing a post with just the question but I know what it feels like to see an update in my email only to find an authors quip. Instead, I thought I'd write out a quick chapter and pose my question as well. A little trade, as it were. A scene for a question. Quid pro quo? No? (Did I use that right? Idk, I have no formal schooling.) Any who~~
Right, My question.
Who do y'all want Tony to be paired up with?
Tony/Pepper?
Tony/Bruce?
OR because it's 20-fucking-17
Pepper/Tony/Bruce

Please PLEASE answer. I'm in a semi writers block because my anxious depressive ass is fixating on this and won't let me move forward.

Any and all suggestions are welcome!!
-Ani

P.S. I feel like you all should be made aware of the fact that I have a severe dislike to the ting known as 'Timelines' and as such will not in any way respect it.
Caught Waking

Chapter Summary

Lela finds herself in a room with a familiar face.

Chapter Notes

hope you guys enjoy
See end notes for the apology

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waking, after a definitively long time, is always something of a fucking hassle. It isn’t like what she’s read in those broken spined novels bought off second hand stores. They always say something like ‘being enveloped in cotton’ or ‘submerged in water’. Right now, she wants to know what kind of fairy like drugs they were on that made them feel something so calm and peaceful like. Because at the moment, she’s calling bullshit on that seeing as to how she’s just on the verge of waking from something like a dead man’s sleep.

The closest she can think of to compare it to, while still being caught in the clutches of it, is as if someone is slowly dragging her out of a pit of wet concrete. Her arms and legs are brick heavy as if damp sand were covering every inch of her.

Unconsciousness fills her mouth and nose, makes it so she can barely open her eyes or lift her limbs. There’s a numb feeling in her legs and her back like maybe she’s not moved in more than just hours. The pin like pain suddenly filling the flesh currently laying on something contradicts this numbness, of course.

Everything aches in a way that can only be described as bone deep.

Idly, she contemplates allowing that unconsciousness, thick and oppressive as it is, to bury her entirely. For it to slither it’s thick suffocating self-down her throat and keep her in the dark forever. She doesn’t want to feel that pain again when she wakes. The pain that was everywhere—all over her body and in her soul—the pain in her ribs, in her hands, in her back, in her throat and in her broken weeping womanly center. She doesn’t want to wake to that pain again. She also, most
importantly, doesn’t want to wake to that other type of pain.

The pain that she woke with, lived with, breathed with, and existed harboring in her heart. She doesn’t want to wake only to go back to shooting up paint thinner laced Hormone Blockers or snorting Suppressants until her nose bled.

But, like most things in her life, she has little control over the pull of consciousness. She keeps getting dragged, feet first, into the land of the savage living.

Nothing gets easier the more awake she becomes. Opening her eyes feels like she’s rubbing them with something salty and grainy, tears gather at the edges of her eyes. Light floods her eyes when she finally manages to blink away the tears. What she sees does not surprise her, a white ceiling and florescent lights, the tall tale markings of a hospital room. But, then again, it could very well be the nurses ward in some type of detention center for all she knew.

Some type of habit, hard wired directly into her worthless dynamic, causes her to pull a lungful through her nose. Her mangled hindbrain searching out whatever others could be lurking just around the corner. Her hindbrain, battered as it is, is seeking the scents of friend or foe. Reaching out to scent musk of a nearby Alpha, the cool waves of Betas or the earthy smell of Gammas. Her nose works to map out the layouts, searching for unmated, unclaimed and viable sources of compatible scents. A low burning feeling is slowly building in the pit of her stomach.

What she finds is the tang of cinnamon, apple and paprika. A scent so space heavy she can taste the sweet apple flavor on her tongue. It’s vaguely familiar. Something uncomfortable shifts just underneath her skin. A low echoing want to sniff the air more and bring it fully within herself. Urgency suddenly falls upon her then, urgency to lift her head, move her limbs and wake fully.

It doesn’t occur to her then, as she lifts her head to survey the room, why she is spurred on.

Despite the ache in her bones and the pull of drying stitches, she hauls herself upright. Her head spinning all the while as she’s caught her swaying upper body by gripping tight upon the large plastic railings of the bed. Through her swirling vision, she can make out wires, an IV, and many other things running form her body and out to machines of all sizes and types. Forcing her eyes to focus she peers about the room and takes in the settings of a rather extensively outfitted hospital room she’s in.

The walls of the room were painted a nice robin eggshell shade that went well with the deep blueberry colored chairs. Everything else was painted in an off-white color or that of nearly translucent pastel blue. There was sunlight, midday light, streaming into the room from the large bay windows on the left side of the bed she found herself in. A door, at the far end of her bed, was only slightly opened allowing her the briefest sliver of a private bathroom. Her ears prick at the sound of someone messing about in there.

Distantly, she thinks, it is the prettiest hospital room she’d ever woken up in. She wonders what the bill will end up looking like. And then…

That thought just spills right out of her head as the scent of spicy cinnamon, apple pie and paprika rouse her decrepit hindbrain. She can feel the stirrings of something primal coming to life. Like a flicker of a lightbulb improperly installed. Threatening to take life entirely before sputtering out again and again. The scent, barely even musky, but so utterly appealing, is the scent of an UnMated Gamma Male. The ring of pheromones, not even vaguely suppressed by even a body wash, makes her canines descend. The end trail of that scent pulling her attention to the bathroom where some faceless person moves about.
The ache in her bones, the coiling heat in her belly, the slithering itch underneath her skin intensifies now that she is awake in full to taste that scent.

A rumbling growl begins in the mid of her chest and threatens to bubble up her throat and out into the room. A rumbling cry of…of…

She freezes stalk still as her brain races to catch up to her blathering thoughts. That cry—that bullshit assed cry—dies in her throat quick, as it had begun to build. With the speed of a jet runners’ engine, she backtracks every thought over a second time. From the moment she began to gain consciousness to the moment she captured that delectable scent, she plays it all back. What she finds makes her want to coil back into herself and wrap her hands around her own throat.

For the better part of a full month, she had been suppressing her heat. She’d been pushing it back with her blockers, with her suppressants too, cutting them with heroine and lacing the rest of it in low grade cocaine. It had had her well and truly fucked up, but it had kept it—her Heat—from showing up like it was now. A displeased growl, acidic and deadly, shakes her chest as she grinds her elongated teeth against one another. Her finger nails digging themselves into the hard plastic of the railings.

The Gamma must hear her growl, or by chance alone, is brought back into the room. It is then that she is confronted with the sight of him and his tantalizing scent in full.

Immediately she spots curls, wide glasses, brown pants and a rumpled dress shirt. Immediately, heat blurred brain or not, she knows that Gamma man and suddenly remembers why she thought that apple pie scent was familiar.

“Banner,” she hisses out through her clenched teeth as she fights the weakest side of herself. Bitter anger swells up in her, self-loathing running hot and wild in her veins, as she internally batters her weak dynamic to grow a fucken pair and just keep it all together, “Doctor Banner?”

Wide brown eyes take her in with shock fluttering fast and free across his modest and tanned features. His lips, soft and gentle, part like a fish out of water as he tries—but fails—to find words. Eventually, he stutters out as he lurches towards her, “Y-You’re awake!”

His movements are too fast, too aggressive, and in and of itself—while in her weakened state—makes for an ugly response. But her battered mind, hindbrain or not, still remembers the abuse of the previous Alpha. It pulls at her to make herself small. To bare her throat and whine. It makes her flinch hard. In doing so, it also causes deep and bitter hate to swallow her whole. Rage so sharp it could peel paint floods her veins. Revulsion so bone deep makes her teeth drop for more than just her teetering heat.

Her mother’s voice whipping at her with her disgusted tone, ‘You fucking weak Omega. Fight you useless bitch.’

A savage roar is ripped from her throat as she snaps her teeth at the approaching doctor. Her eyes fixing themselves square upon his shocked gaze. Her chin dipped down so that there is no mistaking her reaction for that of a friendly one. Despite the pain, and with anger fueling her movements, she has pulled her body up into a position where the IV’s and cords strain. Her body tense and pulled taut as she warns the UnMated Gamma that she is not about to be approached for any reason.

Her stance is no better than a rabid dog when backed into a corner: Wild and dangerous.

“I just want to help,” Banner explains, his hands up high as if she’s pulled some type of weapon. His expression pinched and lost. His scent exuding nothing suspicious other than calming notes.
Through clenched teeth she growls at him, “that’s what you said before.”

“A-And I mean it still!” The doctor defends himself. His head tilted low in a clear sign of submission. His shoulders dropped and his neck in no way protected.

The sight is enough to make her physically sick. She’s seen acts of submission day in and out in her long life. From a Beta’s and Gamma’s alike, she’s seen them drop their shoulders, tilt their heads to the side, their scents becoming warm and soft like. For cops, for bigger and more dangerous people, for food, for money, for drugs, and for a place to sleep at night.

The sight has always made something engrained, etched into her fucking DNA, slither. That Dynamics, higher than herself, submit so readily makes her want to do so to. Her neck becomes loose, her body wishes to drop, her knees become weak and her mind empties itself out.

It takes every ounce of her strength to keep her neck facing forward, her spine ramrod straight and her scent anything but malleable.

“What the fuck happened?” she hisses at him through her canines.

“Your injuries, they were far more intensive than I had initially thought them to be. You began to hemorrhage on the table, you had to be rushed into emergency surgery,” the Doctor tells her as he slowly lowered his hands. Soft brown eyes slowly meeting hers, his gaze gauging hers to see if she would attack him.

“Did you patch me up?” she demands of him.

Nodding he tells her, “A specialist was brought in to treat you, Dr. Manveer Kahanna.”

“Why a specialist,” she questions without thought, her throat still shaking with those near subatomic rumbles.

Nervously, a pink tongue peaks out from between the Doctors parted lips. His eyes flashing form her face to the large bay windows and the New York Skyline. She can taste his apprehension clearly hanging in the air around him. When she growls at him he straightens his caving posture and tells, “S-She’s a specialist for the… type of ah… injuries you’ve ah…endured.”

“My type of injury?” she hisses back. Her body curling into itself as her mind races.

‘They know’ is a black-fear smeared mantra running through her jumbled mind. The word ‘Specialist’ having her heart thump like a rabbits foot against her ribcage.

“Ma’am,” The doctor says, a heavy sigh slipping past his lips as he pinned her with a steady unwavering stare, “You were raped.”

His words ring in the silence that seems to drop like a heavy wet blanket on the whole of the room. The word, ugly and dark as it is, seems to hit her like a stray brick being chucked off the empire state building. She feels it hitting her mind and rattling around in there like a stray bullet. It makes something nameless, weighted and hollow echo in her.

The clang of a graveyard church bell being rung.

She doesn’t like it, that word. She’s never liked it. Never liked that it could happen, did happen, and nothing could be done about it. She hates that word like she hated her Dynamic. She hates that word like she hates her mother and her father, whoever he was.
She hates that word because her brain immediately syncs up that word with the word ‘victim’. She hates that word because her mind implies that she really is weaker than others. A word that proved she was just a thing to be used when people chased their pleasures.

She hated that word like she hates herself.

“I wasn’t raped,” she half snarls, her lips pulled up over her fangs in her rage.

The doctor looks equal parts horrified and uncomfortable, but he continues on, “Y-Your injuries were intense and severe enough that the only logical conclusion is that you were—”

Before he can finish she growls at him, something hollow rattling in her chest as she ignored and denied the racing thoughts in her mind, “I had a bad run in with a John. Plain and simple. I wasn’t… I wasn’t.”

“Ah,” Dr. Banner mumbles awkwardly as he stuffed his hands into his khaki slacks and chanced a glance down to the off-white tile floor, “I see.”

Dr. Banner looks as unconvinced as she herself feels.

Risking a centimeter back into a mildly comfortable position, Lela completely ignores the clear displeased sour notes radiating off the Gamma Man and informs him, “I want to leave.”

“Y-You can’t!” Dr. Banner abruptly shouts, his eyes wide. Noticing the darkness in the heated glare she pins him with, he is quick to explain himself, “W-Well, you can, I mean. You’re not a prisoner. I just m-meant that it would be detrimental to your healing process!”

When he is met with only silence and her glaring eyes, he babbles onward, his scent clearly distressed and his hand half flailing about, “I mean it would be harmful for your healing process. Detrimental…it means to cause harm. You know...bad?”

“I don’t care what it means,” she growls at him, ignoring the pull in her chest that winces when Dr. Banner does. The stuttering well intended Gamma Man that smelled of apples and cinnamon did not deserve the hate she uses in every growl directed at him. But she needs to leave. She needs to go before they figure out the worst thing about her. Something they already might know considering a specialist was brought in to treat her.

A specialist who might know exactly where to look to find out what she was without a doubt. A specialist that would undoubtedly uncover the worst of herself and have her finally officially labeled as a damned dynamic. A specialist that would make all the years in the muck and the grime utterly fucking pointless.

Wordlessly, she begins to pull on the wires attached to her body. The clips to the jelly patches firmly pasted to her skin undo without much of a fight. Her IV, pumping liquid nourishment, is the only thing she does with any amount of care. The needles halfway out before the doctor is rushing forward towards her.

“Stop! Wait!” he yells, his gamma barks of distress ringing in her ears as he hurries to still her hands.

Growling like only an alpha can, she causes him to freeze. His eyes are wide as she snaps her teeth at him. The thundering noise spilling from her throat a far cry from a welcoming noise. It’s a dangerous thing, that growl, one that was knee deep drenched in blood. It’s a roar worthy of a dive bar brawl and it causes the Gamma to freeze in place as she rips her IV off.

“I want to leave,” she informs him through tightly clenched teeth.
“I’m not saying you won’t,” the Gamma tells her, breathing in through his mouth a deep breath and releasing it through his nose. His eyes, dark and deep like rosewood bark, bore into her for in them lies some fathomless emotion she cannot begin to understand.

In those eyes, she can see his concern for her well-being bleeding out into the lines etched into his brow. In those eyes, she can see his fear before it manifests itself in his scent in notes of freshly shaved lemon peels and rotted birch wood. In those eyes, she can see his care for her, a stranger, burning and pleading for her to see reason.

“Ten minutes,” he suddenly says, his voice—smooth and comforting like running water over river rocks—pitched low and careful as he continued to meet her glaring eyes with surprising ease, “I’m just asking for ten minutes.”

A ‘No’ sits on her tongue as heavy as a rotting watermelon. ‘Fuck no’ is half being mouthed out as she stares into those guileless eyes. A ‘Fuck you and your ten fucking minutes’ stands at the ready as she grips in her hand a bloodied IV needle.

There is a million and one reasons she should tell this gamma man, this Dr. Banner, No. A million and one ways she can do it and with utter fucking ease.

But, locked in that concerned stare, her tongue is weighed and caught still.

At the sight of her hesitation the good doctor jumps, “Pepper…” that name makes something sharp twist in her chest, “stay at least until she can see you. She’s worried.”

“Worried?” she questions, her body having fallen lax at the mere mention of that golden haired goddess.

Memories of clean laundry, sun kissed skin and sky tipped eyes makes something like yearning spill into her caving chest.

“She’s been here since you were first brought in. Won’t leave that chair for fear you might wake and be alone,” Banner tells her, as he inches ever closer to her. His hands, soft and sun browned, are warm when they pull the needle from her frozen fingers.

“She’s been waiting for me?” the question she had hoped would come out gruff and laced in a half growl. It is not. It comes out in a half whisper and her heart stirs and her hindbrain gives a futile kick.

The thought of Pepper, beautiful sweet and kind Pepper, sitting at her bedside makes some cruel emotion twist in her heart.

“She has and the least we can do is give her ten minutes to finish her shower and race her way back down here,” Banner mumbles as he takes a seat to the left of her bed. His eyes never wavering from hers. No lie hidden in his scent as he carefully sent a wobbling smile her way.

She’s tempted, spurred by her paranoia and her fear, to bolt up and out of here. (Wherever here is.) Pepper and her kindness be damned, but, she does not. She thinks back to the hope, a flicker of candle like flame, she carried with her as she stumbled bloody and broken through New york city streets. She thinks back to Pepper and her smiles and her promise to help. And she thinks, more than anything, about those eyes being weighted down by worry. Worry over her, a half person, a useless little thing, a dirty little Alpha poser.

Her temptation dies at the hands of her mind consuming guilt.

“Ten minutes,” she growls, her eyes turning hard and her teeth bared yet again, “If she’s not here by
then, I’m biting my way out of this place.”

Banner, mild mannered, awkward as he may be, as calm as his scents may be, is not at all surprised by her threat. He simply nods his head graciously and smiles.

Chapter End Notes

okay seriously you guys, I am SOOOOOOO sorry.
I took my computer in because for whatever reason every time I turned it on it would shut down for no reason. It ended up taking forever to get it fixed and then when it was, I didn't have the cash to pull it out. Then I got it out and guess the fuck what?
All my files, every single thing I have ever written, POEMS STORIES CHAPTERS to every fucking FIC I have ever given life to was GONE!!!!!
I have never cried so hard in my life.
So I know this chapter seems a bit disjointed. But I owe you guys a chapter and I will not let life beat me the fuck down. No wayyyyy, I have invested too much time, energy and love into this shit!!!
so yeah, sorry it took so long!!!!!
I hope you enjoyed!!!!
let me know in the comments what y'all thought!!!

XOXO
Ani
Chapter Summary

“Trust me doc,” Lela begins, a cruel type of smile spreading across her mouth as she eyed the beautiful Beta before her, “I’ve had worse, I know how to take care of myself.”

It isn’t a total lie. Half of Lela’s life seems to be made up of nursing wounds like these. Of having to patch herself up in the safety of a motel room. Of having to bite back a cry of pain when someone fucked into her a little too hard. She’s an old hand at this by now. And as much as she hates it, as much as it burns her, she knows come four months from now, she’ll probably have to do it again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Once, when she was just a kid, knobby kneed and bright eyed, she’d come across this old woman. Everyone in their little neighborhood had called her a witch. They crossed their chest in the way old superstitious folk always did. They muttered prayers beneath their breath and kept a careful distance from the old woman.

And back then, back before she turned out to be what she is, Lela had always been a curious kid. She’d sought the woman out, looked for her over the crowds of the Sunday morning markets. She’d search for black and white curly hair and wondered.

There was something about that old woman. Witch or not, the old lady walked with such confidence one would think she had the secret of the world sitting at the tip of her tongue. Lela always watched her whisk by with her colorful dresses and skirts. Her little nose trailing after a scent that was a strange mixture of softness and sugar. Lela had been mesmerized by her.

And then she’d learned why people were wary of the old lady. Old she was, but the old lady packed a hell of a growl. Her nicotine yellow teeth were sharp as daggers anytime someone tried to push her out of their way. Her growl worthy of cage fighters. She was all of four feet and some inches of fury bundled up in floral prints. She was wild.

Wild and untamed.

Unclaimed.

She was an Omega, the older folks had whispered in the dead of night. An omega that had been married once. An omega that had seen the brutal parts of a mating and had sunk her teeth into her mates neck and ended it. An omega who had gone mad. They whispered about her like she was some kind of goblin from a horror story. Like a wild monster walking around in the light of day.
Lela was young then. Could not comprehend why—or how—someone could kill an Alpha that had sworn to protect and provide for her. Lela was young then and so she hadn’t understood. Lela was young so she stopped looking after the old woman. Stopped wanting to steal glimpses of her least some strange misfortune fall upon her head.

Lela was young then and so she never understood the kind of strength an Omega must have had to kill their mate.

Lela isn’t so young anymore now. So she understands now. She wishes the old lady was still alive. She wishes she could walk up to her and beg her for some of that confidence the old crone had in spades.

She could use it these days, even a drop would do. Especially now, laid up in a hospital bed and at the end of a medically stern hazel gaze.

There’s a certain type of strangeness fluttering around in Lela’s blood. Making her both drowsy and painfully alert. Every word out of the dark skinned doctors mouth is going in one ear and out the other. She doesn’t understand half of it. Couldn’t care less what’s being said. Her attention is firmly placed on the clock above the in suite bathroom. The one that says she’s only five minutes into her ten promised.

Everything in Lela would love to blame it on the drugs she’s been given. Nice and beautiful little mind numbing pills she’d tossed back dry and quickly. But she knows better. It’s her heat, fast approaching. Nipping at her heels like rabid angry dogs. She can feel the damnable itch just beneath her flesh. Aching for something, anything.

Lela grits her teeth angrily at the sensation. She needs to get the fuck out of this enclosed room. She needs to make the mad dash back to her motel room. She needs t not be here. Where any passing Alpha or Beta could take a whiff and peg her for what she is.

“Ma’am, are you listening,” the good doctor asks in a tone that is both offended and outraged. Her dark brows pinched as if she knows that Lela isn’t.

Wetting her dry lips, Lela pulls herself closer to the edge of the bed. All the wires that had been tying her down are gone now. One well-placed growl had stopped the nurses from stopping her. She’d ripped everything off of herself the moment Dr. Banner had fluttered from the room. His soft brown eyes filled with worry and a small dash of fear.

Slowly, Lela had redressed herself. Pulled on her ratty clothes—clean and fresh smelling—one piece at a time. Every movement had been laced in pain. The stitches and staples in her flesh were drying, but nowhere near ready to be pulled out yet. It’ll be another week before she can take on Johns. Her cunt practically burned when she bent down to shove her boots back on.

“Your injuries were extensive,” the doctor tells her, tone hard edged.

Without looking up, Lela merely bites out, “So I heard.”

“I wouldn’t recommend you moving at all. You’ve only spent a week in recovery. You need to stay bed ridden for at least a month!” the doctor exclaims. Her tone growing frantic as Lela rose to stand.

“Trust me doc,” Lela begins, a cruel type of smile spreading across her mouth as she eyed the beautiful Beta before her, “I’ve had worse, I know how to take care of myself.”

It isn’t a total lie. Half of Lela’s life seems to be made up of nursing wounds like these. Of having to patch herself up in the safety of a motel room. Of having to bite back a cry of pain when someone
fucked into her a little too hard. She’s an old hand at this by now. And as much as she hates it, as much as it burns her, she knows come four months from now, she’ll probably have to do it again.

The heavy knowledge has a growl building up in her throat. Lela aches for something to bite into and tear. Her fingers curl tight into the hem of the long sleeved shirt she’s managed to pull into place. Her knuckles go white with the intensity of her grip.

Heaving a tired sigh, the doctor—Kahanna—grits out, “Ma’am, I have to ask, are you—We, no, I have reason to suspect you are an Omega.”

The word serves to freeze Lela in place. That disgusting fucking word makes everything that had gone soft in her turn into wicked venom tipped spikes. Her body goes tight with tension. Fear spikes her heart into a rabbit beat. Her teeth grow long as she feels the danger in the air grow heavy. Bile rises in her throat, hot bitter and acidic. Lela can practically taste it already.

Turning, slow and dangerous, Lela eyes the good doctor and spits out as calmly as she can, “No.”

If a single word could burn, then this one did. Lela glared, murderously, at the doctor before her. She pushed every ounce of her revolting hate into that two letter answer. A growl, deep, angry and vicious laced it. Made it so that there was no wriggle room for anyone to question it.

Dr. Kahanna looks unconvinced, but nods her head in one jerked motion. Slowly, the doctor informs her, her mouth working carefully over the words she says, “I am not asking so that I can label you, officially. From what I understand, you asked Dr. Banner for an unofficial consultation. I just need to know if you are so that I can better treat you.”

“You aren’t treating me,” Lela growled out, her lips pulling up into a time worn snarl, “I’m leaving.”

Lela would be fucking damned if she was going to be caught here any longer than necessary with a Doctor who thought she knew best for her. She’d rather hunt down that Alpha fuck who put her in here and ask him for another round.

“Again, I would advise against that,” Dr. Kahanna repeats. Her scent going sour and ugly with her distress and frustration, “If you are an Omega—”

Snarling like a rabid beast, Lela snaps her teeth at the doctor. If she could muster up the strength to fight, Lela would dig her teeth into the soft junction of coca rich neck meat. But Lela is nowhere near ready for something like that. Instead, she reaches out to grab hold of her bag. Her leather jacket is draped over the back of some plush looking couch to the left of her. The flight or fight instincts are roaring up in her head. She wants so badly to fly away from this situation, to turn tail and run. The longer she stands here the more the doctor will keep spilling that fucking word out for the whole of the world to hear.

Everything in her is screaming at her to run. To fucking jet as fast as her weak legs can push her. To flee back into the safety of some dark alley where doctors couldn’t make her do shit. Soon someone will walk in, smell the distress in the air and know. They’ll fucking know! And there won’t be a damn thing Lela could do about it then.

But she doesn’t do that. She can’t.

‘You hold your fucking ground Lela. You keep a challenger in your sights. You meet them head on and never bend your head’ her mothers voice roars in her head.

That mangled piece of herself, slowly waking now that she hasn’t properly dosed it dead, is pulling at her. It wants to run away like a scared wounded little thing. But Lela will be damned if she’s going
to give that fucking doctor more of a reason to believe she’s anything but the Gamma Lela pretends to be.

So Lela forces herself still. She irons out the unease and fear from her figure into something hard-edged and dangerous. Turning her body, so she’s facing the doctor in full, Lela widens her stance and plants her feet. Carefully, she raises her head and bares her teeth in a nasty snarl. A challenging growl slips from between her too sharp teeth.

Her body language screams aggression. No onlooker would be dense enough to miss it. It’s the markers of an Alpha on the brink of a feral break. Lela’s displaying all the markers that’d get an Alpha locked up on any given day.

The doctor, kind and patient as she had been when she first arrived, spots it in an instance. Her hazel eyes going wide in fear soaked surprise. But she doesn’t budge. She holds her ground too even if her shoulders shake and her fear is tangible in her scent.

“I’m not a fucking omega,” Lela spits out the word like it burns her damn mouth to hold. Which, in all honesty, isn’t so far off the marker.

Dark lips go white with how tight they are pinched into a line as Dr. Kahanna issues a clipped, “Fine. If you insist on refusing treatment, I won’t force you to stay.”

Freedom, so close Lela can almost taste it, lies just outside of the door. But the doctor doesn’t move. She stays rooted in her spot. Her eyes far from having let the issue drop.

“But, I will tell you this,” Dr. Kahanna continues on, crossing her arms over her chest as she raised her own head in a small version of a challenge, “if you were an Omega, you should know, that this trauma has left you horribly scarred. The chances of you ever successfully carrying a pregnancy to term has significantly dropped. If you do not look after yourself, if you continue to use back alley suppressants and blockers, you’ll likely sterilize yourself before the year is out.”

Gritting her teeth, Lela curls her lip in disgust and grips her jacket tight before shoving her arms through the sleeves. The words aren’t exactly the great big threat the good doctor thinks they are. Lela cannot dream of a worst nightmare for herself than to be pumped and bred like some broodmare. She knows it’s what people want Omega’s for. For their weeklong heats. For their pliable scent. For their fertility.

Lela knows, fears it every day she wakes. That someone’s going to get close enough, that her suppressors are going to somehow fail her or that she’s going to grow sloppy, and someone will catch her. That they’ll force her into another bond, put the bite on her and claim her like a thing. A thing to fuck and use, to pump full of semen until kids just start walking out of her fully formed.

It’s a fucking nightmare that hangs above Lela’s head like a shining blade of the guillotine.

Lela can not think of a sweeter relief than to find herself sterile and barren. To know that she’ll be useless in that department. Because what Alpha would want her if half her reason for existing just didn’t work?

“Go fuck yourself,” Lela hisses out.

Rage bubbles hot and wild beneath her skin. Prickling like molten hot needles aching to spill out lava from her heated veins. The soft state the drugs had put her in is firmly being crushed beneath the heel of her temper.

“I don’t wish to offend you or…” Dr. Kahanna starts only to trail off as Lela snatched her bag off the
bed and pushed past her.

“Wait!” the doctor half screams. Her brown hands reaching out to yank Lela into place.

Snarling, Lela pushes the doctor off and away from herself. Adrenaline lends itself to strength Lela didn’t think she had. She whirls around in her rage and slams the good doctor up against the wall. Her teeth, sharp and dangerous are bared perilously close to the doctors face. One wrong move and Lela knows they’ll shred whatever piece of meat they happen to close over.

“Please,” Dr. Kahanna starts, her voice pitched low and placating. The scents she’s pumping out are half soothing but still ring sour with her fear. Yet, the doctor meets her eyes steadily enough as she continued on, “At least let me give you some proper suppressants before you leave. If you leave in the condition you’re in…your scent—”

a savage growl spills from Lela’s stretched lips as she roughly pushes away from the doctor. Fear makes her heart race, makes her mind jumble up and scramble. She knows where the sentence she’d cut off was going. She knows that her scent must be clearing up. She’s spent the last couple of days with fluids running through her body. It’s flushed out most of the acidic of the black market suppressors she’d been on.

Lela knows if she were to step out into the open, any passerby who leaned in close enough would be able to make out the truth she’s so desperate to hide. She knows this just as much as the doctor does.

But she also knows, if she accepts the doctors help she’s admitting what she is. That she’s that fucking dreaded dynamic. That she’s the lesser of the whole. That she’s an unclaimed, dirty, broken and used Omega. That she’s something to be looked after, cared for, a thing to lock away and use when someone so wished. She’d be admitting it if she took anything from the doctor.

As tempting as the offer is, Lela isn’t that stupid.

All doctors are law bound to report Omega’s and Lela would be damned if all her hard work would go up in smoke because of it.

“Fuck off,” Lela growled out before making her escape.

As Lela pushes past the threshold, the clock over the bathroom marks ten minutes. Glancing both ways, Lela spots an elevator and makes her way towards it. There’s a couple of nurses moving about, dressed in at least three different sets of scrubs. A soft lilac hue, deep burgundy red and chestnut brown. They barely glance her way as she flees.

Which is good. Lela’s heart is running a mile a minute. She can feel it beating a ragged beat against her still sore and tender ribs. Every quick stomp she takes sends spikes of pain throughout her body. The pain in her pussy is making her want to vomit with every jarring motion. Thankfully, Lela’s got an empty stomach. If she pukes, it’ll be nothing but stomach acid at this point.

The elevator is luckily empty when she walks in. The silver doors slide shut with barely a sound. Smacking the L button Lela leans back against the railing and forces her heart to slow. In total, the elevator ride isn’t all that long. It goes straight down.

But Lela’s in a wild panic. Everything the suppressors had washed away in sepia are becoming sharp edged. She can smell just about everyone that’s been in the goddamn elevator since it’s installation. She can smell, Alpha’s, Beta’s and Gamma’s. She can smell them and they make her want to cry out.

Biting her tongue until she can taste blood, Lela leans her clammy forehead back against the cool
metal of the elevator. She wills her panic away with a growl and bitter frustration. Lela knows it’s dangerous to be so wildly out of control of her emotions and scent. She knows if she keeps it up, she won’t make it past the guards in the lobby.

When the doors ping open, she forces herself up and almost crashes into the waiting figures before her. Catching herself, she glances upward and takes in the startled expressions of two model worthy strangers. Beautiful as their faces might be, that isn’t what renders her shock still.

No, it’s their scents.

The first to assault her is the red heads. She smells like ginger bread and something spicy and wildly unnamable. There’s something there, just harsh enough—like gun smoke—to suggest the woman herself was a fury—was a Beta. It makes her hindbrain slither.

The second comes crashing into her like a tidal wave. The dirty blonde man smells of both black licorice and strawberry bubble gum. The two scents warring against one another to be known first. Lost between those two scents is the distinct tang of salt water. It’s a strangeness all wrapped up in a Gamma whirl.

Locked in place, Lela stares up at them two. Her hindbrain—her measly fucking dynamic—wants her to drop to her fucking knees before them. Her worthlessly dynamic cries out for those scents—so heavenly divine—to wrap her in something warm and soft and leech from her the pain of this world.

A cry builds up in her throat, reedy and desperate. But Lela crushes it down with unforgiving hatred. Biting down on her tongue, drinking back her blood, Lela shoulders past the quiet pair and continues on her way.

The guards in the lobby don’t even glance her way. Which is good, she’s not ready to do a repeat performance. Though, this time around, she’d like to sink her teeth into that fucker that knocked her flat. Her eyes flash over the faces but come up empty.

Somewhere, someone, finally gives Lela a break. Because the moment she steps past the front doors, Lela is doused in a rain fall the likes of which could raise Noah’s ark. A half delirious laugh bubbles in her chest as she practically sprints towards the nearest pharmacy.

She finds one four or so blocks down from Pepper’s building. She flies in and snatches the first bottle of rubbing alcohol on the shelf. She loads four more into her bag before sealing herself in the restroom. Gracelessly, Lela upends the entirety of the bottle over her head.

It burns when the liquid rushes down to the stitches on her neck and continues down. By the time the bottles empty, Her hair is soaked and clinging to her skin. Roughly finger combing the strands back Lela tosses the bottle into the trash and pops another open and continues to douse herself. Lela’s halfway through the second bottle when someone starts knocking on the door.

Gritting her teeth, Lela stashes the bottle back into her bag and steels herself for the trip back to her motel room. The alcohol will cover what the rain won’t drown out. It’ll keep her safe until she can shot herself full of poison.

Shouldering her way past a disgruntled employee, Lela flies out of the pharmacy like a bat out of hell. She ignores the cries at her back and sprints down the street. Every injury she’s got is screaming in protest. But Lela bites down harshly on her cheeks until she can taste blood. Right now, she doesn’t have the luxury of taking anything slow.

She needs to get back. She needs to get her shit back in order.
It’s only when she’s in the safety of her motel room that guilt wriggles—wicked and twisted—at the back of her mind. She can’t help but wonder if maybe she should’ve stuck around long enough to thank Pepper or something. She’d promised Dr. Banner ten minutes. She wonders if maybe she would’ve accepted their help if Pepper had been their with her pretty sky blue eyes. Lela wonders, wonders if maybe she should’ve taken the help from Dr. Kahanna anyway. She wonders if that old lady would've snatched that golden opportunity with both hands. Lela wonders what that old lady would think of Lela and all her bullshit cowardly moves.

She wonders...wonders...and wonders...

But she stuffs those thoughts down until they suffocate with the rest of the shit Lela won’t touch.

Needle in hand, Lela mixes a vial of suppressants and lines her veins with it. It burns going in after so long of not using. When it does little to dull her senses, as it should, she forces some black sugar to chase it. And that’s when all the thoughts of Pepper and Dr. Banner just slip and tumble straight out of her head to be dealt with on a different day, week, month, year.

---

Chapter End Notes

Life is a cruel hellish beast.
But here’s to hoping I can keep posting!
-Ani
Bruce struggles with the words. Struggles with his indecision to air out Pepper’s and Lela’s business. One for Pepper who had refused to even let Tony know the reason for her absence in her workdays. The other for Lela who he’d sworn he would to ask question. That there’d be no paper work. No evidence of her ever-stepping foot into the building.

Something nameless and ancient twists in his chest at the thought of betraying either woman.

“What do you mean she left?” Pepper’s voice, so usually filled with calm and serene compassion, is composed of barely controlled growls.

Her eyes no longer resemble the open sky but the shade of a frigid deadly winter. Her hands are curled tight into fists as if she’s ten seconds away from swinging at someone. The lines of her shoulders are tense and her stance as aggressive as someone on the verge of violence usually would be.

Rage contorts her face until she looks like one of the world’s greatest dangers. Bruce has never seen her look this close to actual violence. Of course, Bruce has had the misfortune of having been caught between Tony and Pepper a handful of times in the past, but that seemed juvenile compared to this. This looked as if Pepper was seriously considering murder.

It rankled Bruce’s softer Gamma inclinations. But it stirred the wildness that was the Other Guy. It made the beast puff up with something like adoration and dark Pride. That Pepper—*their Beta*—was a force to be reckoned with on her own.

Clearing his throat, Bruce steps up close to Pepper. Tentively, he raises his hand up towards Pepper’s shoulder. He aches to sooth away that ire as well as to fan it. In his throat he rumbles tones meant to calm and reassure. Underneath the palm of his hand, Bruce feels the hard steel of Peppers tension melt away almost immediately.

Bruce does his damnedest to ignore the immediate flush of warm affection that pools in his gut over it. Because here and now was not the place for him to loose his head over it. Now was not the time to inwardly gush over the fact that Pepper and he were mending their bonds after almost a full year of being left alone. Of being left clipped and broken by the actions of another.
Later, he tells himself and the beast, later he’ll revel in the mere fact that he is allowed this. That he has someone who has accepted him for better or worse. That he has someone who will call him pack knowing the kind of danger he harbors beneath his skin.

Instead, Bruce focuses his brown gaze on Dr. Kahanna and asks, “Why did she leave?”

“Well, I offered her to treat her and she became violent. I thought,” Dr. Kahanna starts only to trail off as she winced. A nurse behind her was placing a piece of medical gauze upon the tear at her head, “I offered to treat her for her certain…aliment, and she chose to leave instead.”

“What aliment?” Pepper bit out, her lips tight with her anger and her fury. Her rage smells of burnt rubber and danger.

Bruce half trembles for it.

Locking gazes with Pepper, Dr. Kahanna breezily informs them two, “Ms. Potts you know I won’t breach any doctor-patient confidentialities. That is between myself and Ms. Lela.”

Growling, low and dangerous, Pepper goes to take a step further but stills when Bruce’s firm and gentle hold refuses to let her budge, “Did she say where she was going?”

“No she did not,” Dr. Kahanna bit out through her own set of tight brown lips.

Pepper opens her mouth, clearly intending to continue her interrogation, but when Bruce spots the staple gun being raised he puts an end to it. With a small shake of his head he thanks the good doctor and apologizes on behalf of Pepper as well as Lela. Clearly, the altercation between the good doctor and Lela had been messy.

Carefully and with a steady hand at the small of Pepper’s back, Bruce leads them both away.

When they step into the elevator and the doors close, Pepper drags a deep breath in through her nose. Her eyes flutter close as she issues a deep mournful whine. It’s high pitched, desperate and lost. The sound of it sets loose a wild bout of anxiety. To hear his Beta so distressed makes his chest ache. To hear his best friend hurt over something neither of the two could do anything about made him feel some dark type of way.

Bruce grits his teeth against the feeling and straightens out his spine.

“Why did she leave?” Pepper asks, her eyes still shut, though that did nothing to stop the tears from leaking past and rushing down her face.

Steeling himself, Bruce draws Pepper closer to him. He pulls her lithe body against his and tilts her head so that it lies on his shoulder. Bruce stands toe to toe with Pepper at a comfortable 5’10. The angle should be awkward but isn’t.

Rumbling deep in his chest, Bruce does his best to comfort her before he speaks, “When she woke up, she almost attacked me because she couldn’t recognize me. She almost bit my fingers clean off when I tried to stop her from leaving. She wasn’t in the right state of mind.”

“But we—I could have helped her!” Pepper practically cries out.

And try as he might, Bruce cannot help but think back to his mother. Who had been so soft despite how many bones had been broken in her. He remembers his mother and how she’d held a death like fear for clinics and doctors. He remembers his mother and the way she refused care no matter how much she bled. No matter how much he had begged.
Bruce remembers his mother and thinks that Lela might’ve had little to no choice at all to run. If she was anything like his mother, it was a damn miracle she’d stayed long enough to get dressed.

Clearing his throat and forcing those dark memories away, Bruce runs a gentle hand over Peppers shoulder as he tells her, “Sometimes, people that’ve been hurt like that, over and over again. Sometimes, all they know how to do is run. I don’t think she was running from you. She was just doing what she knows how to do, to keep herself safe.”

“I just wanted to talk to her, make sure she was okay. I wanted to make sure she never got hurt like that again! I just wanted to help her,” Pepper sobbed out. Her tears soak the material of his shirt.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Bruce nods his head and pushes his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, “I know Pep. I know.”

When the elevator doors open and deposit them into Pepper’s level, Bruce is the one to usher them out. Quietly, he passes through the doors Jarvis opens without prompting. When they’re in her living room, Bruce seats them both down on the cream white couch.

It takes little effort for Bruce to maneuver Pepper’s tired body until her head lies comfortably on his lap. Her cashmere throw blanket draped carefully over her body. The grief that litters Peppers usually so light scent gradually begins to bleed out. When the silence between them stretches, comfortable and gentle, Pepper tells him:

“I wanted to offer her one of the empty condos in building B or C. I wanted to offer her a job, to get her off the streets. I wanted to make sure she never got hurt like that again. I just want to help her.”

The pain in Pepper’s voice makes Bruce’s heart bleed. He reaches out, within himself, with his bond, and attempts to soothe Pepper’s heartache away. He offers her his strength—what little he has—in hopes that she finds some balance within herself.

“I know,” Bruce tells her, he keeps his tone as smooth as he can. The rumbles in his chest have not ceased in their attempt to comfort Pepper. Carefully, he cards his fingers through Peppers loose wavy blonde strands. The texture feeling like spun silk.

Those mangled pack bonds they’d shared become less frayed with every little interaction they share. It settles that lost piece in him that he’d thought would remain restless for the rest of his life after his life-altering incident. Somewhere hidden deep in his chest, he can still feel the half formed bond belonging to his Alpha. It’s torn, ragged and broken. He aches to mend it.

But Bruce isn’t ready. Not at all, to face Tony and to confront the long discussion they’ve both been avoiding. Bruce knows, Pepper feels the same way. That Pepper has just as frayed a bond towards their wayward Alpha. That she’s just as reluctant to fix something Tony has broken.

Bruce has a sneaky suspicion, that that is the reason why Pepper longs so much for a girl that is practically a stranger. Her Beta instincts are reaching out. Trying their hardest to secure fixed bonds within her. To find stability as she avoids the bond that keeps her awake at night.

Quietly, Pepper whispers into the silence of her living quarters, “She’s a prostitute, Lela. She saved me from some Gammas that wanted to mug me. She picked a fight with them. Broke one of their noses with a brick to keep me safe. She put herself in danger for me and she…she didn’t even know me. She just jumped into the fray because she probably thought I was going to get hurt.”

Humming lowly, Bruce nods his head and offers simply, “She sounds like a good person.”

“She’s just a kid, twenty-two years old. And you saw her. You saw the kind of hell she’s living
through,” Pepper bemoaned as she pressed her face harder against Bruce’s thigh, “I just want to help her.”

“Get some rest Pep,” Bruce tells her softly, “We’ll figure things out when you wake up.”

And like that, crying and with Bruce’s fingers running through her hair, that Pepper falls asleep. Bruce waits a solid twenty-five minutes before he dares to move. Silently, he slips out from underneath Peppers unconscious form. Tucking the blanket tighter against the blondes body, Bruce makes his way towards the kitchen.

Peppers place, unlike so much of the rest of the tower, is one of the few places one could call cozy. There was nothing inside that was sleek, chrome or new age. It was all soft rounded corners and comfort. Much like the woman herself, Bruce thought.

Her kitchen was well worn and used where Pepper made a point to cook her herself and whatever Super-Hero stray found themselves in her path.

Quietly, Bruce makes his way into the kitchen which as good ways away from the living room. Enough of a distance that he knows when he pulls out his phone, Pepper won’t hear. Using his speed dial, Bruce places the call to the only other listed contact in there outside of Pepper, Tony and one Lab Technician.

The capitalized letter ‘N’ reads back at him as the call connects.

‘What’s wrong?’ is the first thing that she says when the call picks up after it’s first ring.

Biting back a rueful smile, Bruce runs a tired hand through his moppish brown curls and huffs out a breath, “Nothings wrong, Nat.”

‘You’re calling, so obviously something’s wrong,’ Natasha drily quips.

Which, well, yeah—true. Bruce hardly ever made use of his phone. He didn’t like to carry it around and most days it stayed on his bedroom dresser. He never called people. If he needed something from them Bruce usually asked Jarvis to relay the message.

But after the week long stay at Lela’s beside looking after Pepper, he’s gotten into the habit of keeping it on him.

“Are you—are you busy right now?” Bruce asks, his eyes flashing over to Pepper’s sleeping form. There’s a small beat of silence before Natasha answers, ‘Not really, no.’

“Where—can I meet you? Are you in the tower?” Bruce asks, inching his way back to the threshold of the kitchen that bled into the open dining area.

‘I’m headed down to training room 6D, meet me there in ten minutes.’ And with that the call ends.

Heaving a soft and silent sigh, Bruce heads back into the living room. He debates waking Pepper and informing her of where he’s going, if only for a short time. But then his soft brown eyes settle on Peppers tear streaked face. They soak in the darkness that underline her swollen eyes. Bruce kills the idea of waking her the second it arises.

Pepper needs to rest, if only for a couple minutes longer.

So he grabs a pen and paper and scribbles down where he’s going and with who he’s going with.
Silently he places it on the coffee table and then leaves Pepper’s apartment.

When he’s out in the hall he calls out for Jarvis, “You’ll let me know when she wakes?”

“Of course Doctor Banner.”

And with that he sets off towards the training grounds.

*~*

Like most things that come from Stark Industries, the training grounds are made of the most advanced technology. It seemed nothing was beyond Tony’s ability to redesign. Everything from the punching bags to the archery posts were digitized one way or another.

It was almost ridiculous. Well, at least Bruce liked to think so.

He finds Natasha exactly where she said she’d be, in training room 6D. She stands in something made of black, form fitting and entirely tactical. Her black boots present on her feet as she brandished what looked like black police batons in both hands.

Like always, the crimson haired assassin looked as gorgeous as ever. Her soft red waves were pulled up into a neat ponytail high upon her head. The ends falling to brush her upper back. Despite not wearing a lick of makeup, Natasha looked as ready as ever to step out onto a runway and have legions of people drop to their knees before her.

And by the confident tilt of her head, Natasha knew it well.

Bruce is in no way surprised to find Clint at Natasha’s elbow. He sits, dressed in a similar fashion as Natasha—only his suit a soft navy blue—on a bench. His unstrung cross bow lying across his lap. His dirty strawberry blonde hair glimmered faintly under the florescent lights above. On his handsome sun kissed, befreckled, face he wears his ever present half grin. If Bruce didn’t know Clint to be one of the worlds top assassins, he’d liken the mans face to that of a beach models. Clint held such a youthful face when he smiled.

“H-Hey!” Bruce calls out awkwardly when he gets close enough to them.

He doesn’t really need to call out to them, Bruce knows. The room is empty save for them three. And Bruce knows, that the moment the door opened both assassins had acknowledged his entrance without ever looking up from their separate tasks.

“Hey Doc,” Clint jovially calls back. His grin stretching out wider on his face, his cheeks dimpling, “What brings you down here? You finally taking me up on that training sesh?”

Bruce cannot help the way his face wrinkles up at that thought. His expression alone must be his answer because Clint merely barks out a happy laugh.

“C’mon Bruce, I’ll go easy on ya!” Clint cajoles, his bright hazel green eyes glimmering with his mischief.

Shaking his head, Bruce tells the man, “Ah, no, no thank you. No need to risk riling up the Other Guy.”

“Bruce,” Natasha starts, her voice a rumbling husk as her eyes briefly glanced up and away from her black batons, “You haven’t had an incident in over a year. Once small sparring session is likely to break that streak.”
Hunching his shoulders, Bruce ducks his head and rubs nervously at his neck. Lips pinched into a frown he nods and says, “Well, no, maybe. But I like to err on the side of caution. For everyone’s sake.”

“Well, the offers always on the table Doc. You ever need a gym partner I’m here,” Clint announces without preamble as he rises to a stand and claps Bruce firmly on the back.

And with that, the archer wordlessly and seamlessly, excuses himself to the targets that line the back wall. His bow now strung and his quiver strapped to his back.

For a moment, Bruce is left standing silently before Natasha. His words caught on his tongue as he tried to work out how he was supposed to ask what he needed to.

Issuing a soft sigh, Natasha places her weapons into the holsters at each thigh and turns to him in full. With her hands delicately placed on her hips she raises one impeccably manicured brow and wordlessly prompts Bruce into motion.

Nervously, Bruce wets his lips and steadies his resolve. He wasn’t doing this for himself, he reminded himself. He was doing this for Pepper. Pepper who was so out of her mind with worry for this young girl. Pepper who was laid up on her couch after crying herself to sleep.

“I need a favor from you,” Bruce tells her as firm as he can manage it.

“Oh?” Natasha hums, her jade colored eyes sparkling in some nameless emotion, “What kind of favor?”

“I need you to find someone for me,” Bruce informs her, his eyes briefly glancing up and away to where Clint is firing away arrow after arrow and always hitting dead center.

“And what would you like for me to do when I find this person?” Natasha asks.

It’s less of *what* she says as opposed to *how* she says it.

Contrary to popular belief, Natasha—international spy and assassin—was a woman of very few words. She, like with most things, was very direct with her words. If she could get her point across in two words and a small inflection, then she’d do just that.

For the first time since Bruce had placed the call, he takes the time to double back on his words. For a small second, he regrets the less than eloquent manner in which he arranged this impromptu meet up and the choice of his words now. For the first time in a very long while, Natasha and who she used to be—one of the lone graduates from the infamous Red Room—hits him square in the chest.

Bracing himself, Bruce shakes his head and meets her brilliant green eyes, “I just want her found, for Pepper.”

“And why does Pepper want her found?” Natasha asks blithely. Her face remains perfectly impassive, as if she hadn’t just insinuated that she’d murder a stranger as a favor to a friend.

Bruce struggles with the words. Struggles with his indecision to air out Pepper’s and Lela’s business. One for Pepper who had refused to even let Tony know the reason for her absence in her workdays. The other for Lela who he’d sworn he would to ask question. That there’d be no paperwork. No evidence of her ever-stepping foot into the building.

Something nameless and ancient twists in his chest at the thought of betraying either woman.
But Natasha needs to know why, has a right to know, if she’s going to carry out what he needs her to.

“A girl came in here and she was…” Bruce takes a deep breath through his parted lips. His left hand runs ragged through his hair, turning the curls loose and frizzy. With his right hand he pulls his glasses off his face and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“She came in here, over eight days ago. She was—_god_, she was _brutalized_. Torn from head to toe. And after the incident in the lobby, she had to go into surgery. I can’t give you the details,” Bruce stops himself to send Natasha a firm enough stare so the woman understands he means it when he says, “It isn’t my place to say.”

Natasha merely tilts her head regally, understanding blooming quietly in her hard eyes before she asked, “What happened to her, did she leave?”

Nodding, Bruce continues on, “Early this morning when she woke. She shouldn’t have been able to move. But she got herself dressed and left before Pepper could even reach her. Pepper wants to help her; she wants to make sure she’s all right. I need you to find her for me. I need to make sure she’s okay, for Pepper.”

For a long while, silence rings in the training room. Interrupted only by the ring of Clint’s bowstring and the thump of arrows finding their marker. Bruce takes a moment to pull another deep breath in through his nose. In doing so he catches the briefest of scents that surrounds the Beta before him.

Natasha, Bruce has noticed, has never had much of a scent. Whether that is because of her line of work or if it’s a product of her creation, Natasha barely smelled of anything. Bruce could blame it on his duller Gamma abilities for not being able to pinpoint a solid scent, though. To him, Natasha smelled faintly of gun oil and something warm and sharp.

It was faint but Bruce could make it out well enough if he tried. And usually when he did, it did little to settle any of his anxieties. For Natasha’s scent wasn’t meant to comfort and calm. It was a tall tale marker of a dominant Beta with a spine made of steel.

Eventually, Natasha pulls her heavy gaze off him. Her eyes flicker down to the black tactical bag on the bench Clint had once occupied. Tilting her head away from him, briefly showing the pale hollow of her neck Natasha asks of him:

“How much do you have on her now?”

Pursing his lips, Bruce admits, “Next to nothing. We have her first name but nothing else. Not even Pepper knows.”

“What’s her name?”

“Lela.”

“How sure are you that it isn’t an alias,” Natasha prompts.

Shrugging his shoulders, Bruce tells her honestly, “I don’t. But Pepper seemed pretty sure.”

With a curt nod of her head, Natasha mutters beneath her breath, “I’ll get what I need from Jarvis.”

“Thanks Nat, seriously. I—I don’t know what to do. Pepper, she’s…she’s a mess,” Bruce stumbles as he attempts to convey his thanks. He fumbles as he attempts to put into words the swirling anxiety bleeding into him from his newly reinstated Beta, “I don’t mean to put this on you, to call in a
favor anything…but I don’t know how else to look for her.”

Shaking her head, Natasha flashes him a small gentle smile that warms her eyes and softens them a fraction. Waving her hand in the air, Natasha puts his worries to bed with a simple, “Don’t worry about it Bruce. Shouldn’t take me long to catch this bird.”

“Thanks Nat,” Bruce huffs out in a heavy breathe, his knees half buckling in his relief, “Seriously.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Natasha smiles ruefully before gently sending him on his way, “It’s fine Bruce. Head on back up to Peppers’. I’ll call you when I find her, to let you know.”

And with an awkward nod of his head, Bruce turns on his heel and heads up back to Peppers. But not before flashing the crimson haired beauty a grateful smile that he hoped conveyed the intensity of his thanks.

Not for the first time is he glad he took up Tony’s offer to be here. In the Tower where he was able to find a Beta that cared for him almost as much as he cared for her and friends who he could ask for favors from without thought.

*~*

The training room falls silent once the doctor makes his hasty retreat. And in that silence, Natasha turns her head over to the archer now silent and still. Her eyes, sharp as daggers survey him closely before she asks carefully:

“How much of that did you catch?”

“Enough,” Clint informs her with a small shrug of his left shoulder and a barely there frown. His eyes, a strange mixture of honey and moss, are shimmering with his piqued interest.

Offering her oldest friend a small smirk Natasha slowly closes the distance between them until she stands but two feet before the man and tells him, “You don’t have to get involved if you don’t want to.”

“Probably not,” Clint agrees, because after all, Bruce had asked Nat for the favor. The doctor had never even mentioned Clint’s involvement. But Clint’s a faithful and loyal Gamma. He’d walk through fire with his Beta if it meant she never had to go through anything alone. So he smiles sure and steady as he shouldered his bow and said, “A little recon mission should keep us pretty busy until our next orders come in.”

Natasha smiles, slow and indulgent as she placed a light hand on the archers shoulder. She squeezes gently before nodding and turning away from him, “I mean, how hard can it be? It’s hard for anyone to stay off the grid these days. Even for a spy.”

Issuing a small bark of laughter, Clint grins and falls into step with his Beta as he groaned out, “I got made once Nat and that was like eight years ago! When are you going to let it go?”

“She was twelve Clint and it was a flip phone,” Natasha sniped with a small grin of her own, “and did you see the look on your face? I’ll let it go when I’m dead.”
I mean, when you're drowning you just gotta go with the flow...right?
-Ani
Chapter Summary

"Clint looks up at her, his honey and green eyes, like he understands. Like he gets that the world is breaking off pieces of her soul day by day. He looks at her like he wants to reach out his hands and fix her back together again."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

---

One Week Later

Unconsciousness pulls at her body, making it feel as if some great big hand is reaching into the mid of her chest and is repeatedly pulling her far enough out, that when it lets go, she snaps back into place. It’s an ugly feeling. It makes her want to grit her teeth and bite hard into her cheeks. It puts her as far on edge as she can manage at the moment, which honestly, isn’t much.

Shuffling in her boots, Lela growls angrily at herself before thumping her head against the building she’s using to keep upright. The pain that flashes behind her lids wakes her up if only for a minute longer. Just enough that she manages to catch the words of an incomer.

“You look like shit,” someone tells her from her right.

Glancing over to the speaker she spots a familiar head of badly bleached hair and grimaces on sight. With a scowl in place, Lela digs through her pockets before she unearths a battered pack of dwindling cigarettes. When one sits, lit and smoking on her lips, she turns to the woman and bites out through a cloud of smoke:

“And you look like a five course meal?”

Snorting an ugly kind of laugh, messily smeared lips part into a snarling smile as Nicky hissed out, “Fuck you too bitch.”

After that, they lapse into silence. The only noise coming from the cars that drove past them and kicked up the puddles at the curb. Every other car slows just enough to chance a peek at them but then speeds up and away. Lela for her part stays quiet. Nicky, not so much. She hisses out cruel curses at them. She even goes so far as to brandish the bird as if they’ve personally offended her for not picking her up.

“What’s with you, girl?” Nicky asks around Lela’s fourth or fifth smoke.

“Whaddya mean?” Lela pushes out of her cotton thick mouth, her words slurred together. She’d laced her suppressors with heroine again. The effect was leaving her entirely too fucked to actually work. But her bill was coming up again. And she was short, again.

Lela didn’t have much of a choice but to head out and earn her bed. Even if it was just blowjobs and
handies. The shit added up in the end.

The good doctor had been right, Lela was way too fucked up to take in any real work. It’s by the grace of black tar and a few oxy’s that she’s even staying upright at the moment.

“You were gone for a while,” Nicky clarifies, her brown eyes flickering over to the side of Lela’s face. A cruel type of interest making them glimmer beneath the shitty orange light they stand under, “I thought you got picked up for sure.”

Shrugging her shoulders Lela merely tells her through a lead heavy tongue, “Had a bad run in with a John. Fucked me up pretty good.”

Laughing, Nicky runs her hands through her fried hair and says, “Fuck, that sucks.”

And well, yeah, it had. It’d fucked her up enough that she needed to be hospitalized in Pepper’s building. A building with it’s own little hospital wing, something that still kind of tripped Lela up if she thought about it for too long. Which she didn’t, Lela did her level best to stuff the memories of the place far enough away from herself that it felt like a faraway dream.

“Yeah,” Lela drawls nice and slow. Her own response as empathetic as Nicky’s.

“Cop?” Nicky hedges because they’ve all run into a least one brutish fuck with a badge at one point or another. Her face gleamed with her morbid curiosity.

“Nah, fucking Alpha,” Lela tells her.

“Shit,” Nicky hisses as her face contorted with real anger. Kicking her heels against a stray rock, the faux blonde mutters beneath her breath, “Stupid Alpha fucks.”

And at least in that, Nicky—and every other working girl—could understand and feel some shred of compassion. For everyone had at least one horror story at the hands of an Alpha that was mean for the sake of being mean. And while Nicky and Lela weren’t what you’d call friends—hardly nice enough to be called acquaintances—they understood what that could do to a person. They both understood the damage an Alpha could inflict. Both their bodies are lined in scars from darker times.

Neither of the two is cruel enough to ever wish it on their worst of enemies. At least, Lela doesn’t like to think she is.

Eventually, Nicky gets picked up by an overeager Beta with a smile that conveyed his nervousness. Grinning wild and proud, Nicky jumps into the car and disappears into the dark. Lela ignores how much she wishes she could put up enough of a fight to steal the John out from under the bitch. She’s doped up to her gills though.

She’s swimming in a narcotic wave, threatening to pass out where she stood. She’s likely to not catch anything today. She’s likely to go to bed empty handed feeling just as fucked up as when she’d left. The thought makes a bitter kind of anger well up in her chest.

In all honesty, Lela knows better than to be out here like this. She’s never so stupid to come out here drugged up. It makes dealing with the fuckers who come looking for her harder to deal with. It leaves her far more vulnerable than she’d like. Far more vulnerable than she’s comfortable with. Far more vulnerable than is safe.

But she can’t loose her room. She needs the cash. She needs to earn something to go out hunting for something to line her veins and kill what her dwindling suppressors are letting bleed out. She has to earn her bed. She has to earn some cash.
Being what she is means she has to earn a right to so much as breathe.

An hour, or maybe something like it, rushes past Lela before someone finally walks up to her and shows interest.

Smoke pinched between her fingers, she tells the man as inviting as she can manage, “You looking for a good time baby?”

“How much?” the man demands. His rumbling voice grates on Lela’s ears. It makes fear spill down her spine slow like molasses. Lela ignores it in favor of earning some cash.

“Ten for a handie. Thirty for a blow,” the words spill from her lips like second nature.

“What if I wanna fuck you?” the man asks, his voice pitched ever lower.

If Lela was even halfway coherent. She’d have noticed that the man before her was aching for a fuck. It was in his voice, in his stance and in his scent. But Lela’s fucked up. She’s not exactly running on all cylinders here. Heroine had a funny way of killing her senses. It’s why she used it to cut her suppressors in the first place. It just dulled everything. It put her halfway outside of herself.

“Sorry, baby. Can’t do that tonight,” Lela mutters over the butt of her smoke. Her eyes droop as she eyes the strangers dark booted feet.

“Well that’s what I want,” the man gruffly informs her.

And before Lela can make heads or tells of the situation, she’s being grabbed by the collar of her leather jacket. In one rough movement, she’s dragged deeper into the alleyway. Her cigarette tumbles down somewhere and sputters out. When she’s tossed against a brick wall a hiss escapes through her teeth. Belatedly, Lela thinks there’ll likely be a hell of an egg on the back of her head in the morning.

Growling, low in her throat, both a warning and in annoyance Lela straightens up and shoves the hands on her away. The movement is clumsy and sluggish. But it gets his hands off of her. The growl alone makes him wary makes him think twice about roughing her up. Because drugged or not, Lela would sink her teeth in if she had to and her growl must speak to that.

“Look baby, it ain’t personal,” Lela starts slow and placating, she can’t afford to leave empty handed. So she dredges up a lazy smile and lies, “It’s just…it’s that time of the month, ya know? It’ll get messy real fast.”

Growling with his own annoyance, the stranger pulls away from her and bites out, “Fuck this, I’ll look for someone else.”

Lela thinks of the money, she thinks about living out on the streets again and reaches out. Her hands catch onto the soft material of his sweater and pulls herself closer to him. Carefully, Lela lets her body slot up against the strangers. She snakes down one of her hands until it catches on his belt buckle and tells him:

“Nah baby, stay here, with me. I’ll make ya feel good.”

Later, probably when she’s sober, Lela will hate her words. She’ll hate herself for having said them. She’ll hate the way she undoes his belt buckle and slips down to her knees with butter smooth ease. She’ll hate the way she unzips his fly and grabs hold of his hardening cock. Later, Lela will hate the way she wraps her lips around him and swallows him down without a second thought.

Later, she’ll burn the heavy musk of his unique taste out of her mouth with a swish of mouthwash.
and a cigarette smoke. Later, she’ll puke up the spunk that she’ll eventually drink down. Later, she’ll scrub her scalp till it burned to remove the feel of his fingers in her hair. Later, Lela will bury this moment in the black sea of other thoughts she won’t ever touch.

Later she’ll fucking hate herself for it.

Later…Later…

But right now, right now Lela earns her room. She ignores the ache in her jaw and the way the blunt end of his dick slides down her throat. She ignores the gruff groans bitten off in the stranger’s mouth. She ignores the pebbles that dig into the skin of her knees. She ignores it for the feel of his cock swelling and signaling his approaching end.

Lela pulls off just far enough, slipping over to his cockhead and fully intending to swallow him down again but doesn’t. Or can’t. Because just as the dude’s about to blow his load into her mouth, he yanks her off and away. His panting breathes sound ragged and ugly in the empty alleyway.

“Get up,” the stranger bites out through a rough, lust addled, growl.

Confusion pulls at Lela’s brows, furrowing them over her eyes. A lazy hand runs over her spit slick lips, wiping away it away as she asks, “What, why?”

Tangling his hands into her hair, the stranger yanks her up to her feet. Pain flares hot and bright as Lela clenches her teeth together to keep a surprised cry from spilling out. Wrapping one hand over her wrist, Lela growls—angry and wild.

“Told you this was all you were getting,” Lela hissed through bared canines. The sluggish slide of drugs currently bogging her down is carefully being burned away. A familiar fire begins to kick up in her chest. It makes her become painfully aware of the shitty situation she’s in.

Huffing a vicious laugh out, the stranger uses his other hand to yank up the hem of Lela’s flimsy dress. He makes quick work of pushing her up against the wall and sliding his hand up her thigh till he cupped her abuse-swollen cunt. Being that she’s not taking on any kind of Johns for actual sex, Lela’s was wearing underwear tonight. A simple black cotton thing made for comfort and nothing else. She hears the stitches of it pop where the fucker twists it in his grasp.

“If I wanted a shitty blow job I woulda stayed home,” the stranger growls down into her face. His breath smelling sour with whatever cheap liquor he’d drank before heading her way.

It isn’t until the stranger jams one lone digit into her does Lela truly begin to fight back. The moment that dry finger breaches her abused flesh it burns. Burns like maybe it’s doused in gasoline and the walls of her vagina are matches striking all at once. There’s a pain filled cry building in her chest as her legs scramble to bring her up higher and the offending—obtrusive—limb out of her.

Kicking her legs out, wildly, Lela snarls with every ounce of hate she has. Because fuck no, she was not doing this again. She was not going to be used like that again. She was not going to be torn open—bloody and brutal—for another man who couldn’t take no for a fucking answer. She snaps her teeth at the strangers face as her free hand balls into a fist and rears back.

Being that Lela isn’t in the best of shape at the moment, there’s no real power behind her hit. Not like it should. Not like there always was. But it’s enough. It’s enough of a hit to cause the stranger to stumble back and away. His head goes craning upward in an arc as she tripped over his own feet and landed on his ass.

Something like dark satisfaction blooms in her chest for all of five seconds before her eyes take in
the dark figure of another man. The man is dressed in head to toe in dark clothing. He’d blend
effortlessly into the shadows if not for the gleam of his strawberry blonde hair. Most of his face is
bathed in shadow but what Lela can make out is a deep frown of pink lips and a hateful glare.

Both of which are aimed at the man sprawled at their collective feet.

“Fucking douche-bag,” the man bites out, his words trembling with the growls that line his throat.

Carefully, Lela straightens herself up, pushes down the hem of her dress and ignores the ache she
feels when she widens her stance. Tilting her body to meet the stranger in some semblance of a
challenge, Lela wills herself still. Distantly, she acknowledges the fact that her heart is beating
harshly against her ribs. Thumping from the mixture of pain, fear and adrenaline the situation had
created.

Her instincts, drugged as they are, are making a comeback. There’s a cold rush pushing at her
forefront to get while the getting was good. Her instincts, fucked as they were, saw the danger—a
little too late—and wanted her to disappear. Because this stranger, who had a hand in incapacitating
the other, could easily take her on in her current state.

This stranger, who appeared from the shadows, was dangerous. Muddled as Lela’s hindbrain was, it
could pick that up clear enough. It was the way in which the blonde man held himself. Quiet and
careful. It was in the way he moved, graceful and effortlessly. He was dangerous and Lela didn’t
need to pull in his scent to know that.

So she steels herself for whatever should come next. She balls up her fists and allows her teeth to run
long. If the newcomer were to come at her, she’d put up a hell of a lot more of a fight then she had
with the other. She’d be ready for it now.

The stranger, for his part, does little to acknowledge her aggression. Instead, he crouches down, sits
on the heels of his dark boots, and begins to rifle through the downed man’s jeans. When a wallet is
found, the contents searched, the blonde glances up and pins her in place with eyes made of gold:

“You like waffles?”

The question throws her for a loop. It leaves her floundering as she pinched her brows in confusion
and tipped the ends of her chapped lips downward into a frown.

“There’s a nice Waffle House a block or two down. Not the best in the city, but hey,” the stranger
tells her with a grin just shy of turning maniacal as he rose to his full height. When he’s standing he
makes a motion towards the unconscious stranger with his dick still hanging out and tells her, “He’s
buying.”

When the blonde man smiles at her the whole of his face lights up. It forces away the darkness that
had shadowed it when he’d been looming over her John. It makes him seem less like a threat and
more like a blessed assurance.

That smile, it disarms Lela like nothing she’s ever come across before. It makes his hard gold eyes
turn warm. It makes her feel warm too. It made every hard edge Lela’s made up of want to smooth
out into rolling hills. It made her want to go all loose necked and soft. Like she was two seconds
away from slithering down into a pool at his feet. It made her tremble with an ache she’s not sure if
she wants to run towards or away from.

It reminded Lela of lazy mid mornings. It reminded her…

It reminded her of somethingshe can’t quite put her finger on. A somethingthat makes her hindbrain
wriggles and slither anxiously. But she ignores it, stuffs that baser part of herself in the darkest corner of her mind for the moment. Because her hindbrains fucked up. It, like herself, is running on a week long bender. And Lela wouldn’t trust anything it spewed in the end because it was the product of that damned dynamic.

Lela blames it on the drugs, on the ache in her vagina, for the way her eyes flicker down to the fucker who’d she’d had her mouth around. Lela blames the drugs for the way her face pulls up into a nasty sneer as she spits out at him. She can’t stomach the taste of him sitting on her tongue anymore. Lela blames the drugs for the way her eyes flash back up to the blonde man with honey like eyes. She blames the drugs for the way she nods her head without thought. Lela blames it on the drugs that run slow through her mind as she follows the blonde out of the alleyway.

She blames it on the drugs because she won’t blame that smile.

*~*

The Waffle House is less of a restaurant and more like a dirty truck stop that slung out food on the side. It smells, even through the suppressants she’s hopped up on and the drugs she’s pumped herself full of. For the barest of moments, Lela wonders about the health code and the many violations she can spot at a first glance. But Lela sits herself down regardless because she’s eaten out of actual dumpsters before and she was still here, breathing.

Without a backward glance, Lela walks over to the far south side of the joint. A place where a heavy cloud of smoke sat overhead. She picks the booth furthest at the end; with it’s back to the wall and the exit. Lela sits herself down against the wall so she can see the entirety of the restaurant while having an easy reach to an exit if need be.

The blonde man follows her in silence. His feet only a half step behind hers. On any given day, that alone would’ve prompted a reaction out of Lela. It would’ve set her on edge and made her whip around with her fangs bared.

But not today. Not when she can barely keep from swaying on her feet. Not when she’s got what she thinks is a fever burning underneath her skin. Not when she’s this fucked. She drops down with little care into the seat of the booth and regrets it immediately. Fire like pain flares from her pussy on up. It swirls her empty stomach and has a cry ready to tumble out. But she bites it back as she spreads her legs to alleviate the pressure there.

With the aid of the florescent lights overhead, Lela can make out way more of him than she had in the alleyway. The man is beautiful in the way only models can be. He has high cheekbones and a sharp jaw. His smile is the type to melt hearts. His eyes, both golden and jade hued, swirl with something entirely unknown. On the bridge of his nose, and high up on his cheeks, Lela finds a splatter of freckles. They glitter as if they are specks of gold dust. Everything about him was golden, a man made of gold. His face, Lela thinks, looked somewhat familiar.

She thinks, maybe she’s seen it somewhere before, maybe.

Briefly, Lela wishes she weren’t so high. She wonders what he’d smell like. That uselessly side of herself slithers just under her skin at the thought. Lela bites down hard on the inside of her cheek to kill it before it bloomed properly.

Instead, she focuses on the blonde man and the possible reasons he might have for bringing her here. Lela’s never been on the receiving end of someone coming up to back her losing side. People on the streets, in this city, were mean. You could get shanked in front of a crowd and by the time the cops showed up everyone had gone on their merry fucking way.
A stranger, stepping into a fight between an obvious hooker and her client was strange. It was suspicious if nothing else.

Belatedly, Lela thinks maybe she should’ve walked away the moment that other fucker went down. Because, pretty as the blonde was, there was danger sitting bright and clear in his gaze. The kind of danger that came with people prone to violence.

Lela wants to ask why they’re here. Why he’s sitting with her. Why he stepped in when he had. 

Why? She almost asks. But doesn’t because a waitress appears at their tableside.

“What can I get you two?” a haggard waitress asks, her brown greasy hair falling out from the messy bun atop her head. She doesn’t bother to meet either of their eyes as she runs a dirty clothe over the sticky tabletop.

“I’ll have a coffee,” the man announces, his voice smooth and casual. It rumbled around in Lela’s head like the echo of a long forgotten memory.

Lela shakes her head to clear that thought away and mutters, “Same.”

With that, the waitress leaves only to return two minutes later with two empty mugs and a steaming black liquid filled pitcher. When the two mugs are filled she produces a menu from underneath her arm and tells them both absently, “I’ll give you two a moment to look it over.”

This time around, the waitress doesn’t return. She disappears behind a swinging door.

Quietly, they sit at the table, the stranger and her. Both of them staring at each other as if, in their gazes, the answers to their questions will come tumbling out.

Tsking her tongue, Lela reaches in her pockets and places her pack of smokes on the table, zippo and a clear plastic baggie. She reaches for the baggie first. Uncaring, she grabs hold of the nearest utensil—a butter knife—and dips it into the open bag. Gathering a large enough lump, Lela snorts it down and wipes her nose with the back of her hand.

When she glances up she expects to find some form of shock or surprise but she finds the dirty blonde stirring his coffee listlessly. His gaze sits heavy on her face despite the fact that there is no judgment in them. Instead, what she see’s is a flash of something like sadness lance through honey and green be-speckled eyes. The sight of it makes Lela burn. Because she’ll stomach a lot of things these days but not pity.

Never pity.

It made the worst parts in herself want to snap their teeth. She remembers her mothers disgusted sneer. She remembers her ex’s degrading words. She remembers the looks she was giving when she was black and blue and still just a fucking kid. She remembers the pity from then and it makes her growl deep and savage. Like a fucking wild thing she bares her teeth at the man.

And like that she takes four more bumps before twirling the bag and hiding it away in her leather jacket. It’s two more than she should’ve risked, really. It was never, in Lela’s humble opinion, a good idea to mix heroine and cocaine. But this whole week feels like one filled to the brim with unnecessary risks.

Plus, as much as she hated feeling wired, cocaine dulled pain and did a hell of a lot better job than caffeine.
In all honesty, Lela hated doing drugs point period. She couldn’t stand the way she rode the highest of highs and fell to the lowest of depths. She hated how she had to keep using them to make her suppressors and blockers last longer. She hated how it was always measuring out the right amount of tar to ride along the medicine. She hated that she needed to use coke to wake her up when she was crashing. She hated it but she’s grown used to it.

Glancing at her face, the man smiles an unassuming thing and tells her, “I’m Clint.”

For a half beat, Lela considers lying. It’d be easy to. So very fucking easy to just use another name. But like she’d been compelled so long ago—seated before a different kind of blonde—Lela feels a strange pull from deep within her own chest. It makes the truth slip past her lips before she can think better of it.

“Lela,” she informs him.

The small little smile the man—Clint—wears grows wider. It’s a brilliant smile that made his eyes practically glitter.

Pulling a white stick free from her pack, Lela lights up and asks through a cloud of smoke, “You make it a habit to play hero, Clint?”

The name sounded fake. Lela regrets being truthful almost immediately.

Clint’s beauty magnifies as he sends her a wry grin. His eyes crinkle up with lines that imply he smiles and laugh more than he frowns. It’s beautiful, Lela thinks, that smile.

Softly sipping from his mug, he shrugs his shoulders and tells her, “When I need to.”

“I didn’t need you to step in,” Lela tells him as she ashed her smoke in the dirty ashtray provided by the diner.

Frowning, Clint offers her a one shoulder shrug before he told her, “Probably not, but I did.”

“Why?” it falls from her dry lips gruff and demanding. In no way shape or form sounding grateful.

“He would’ve hurt you,” Clint says with such surety it makes Lela want to recoil.

Lela bristles like a cat. She can feel herself inflate with her indignity at being thought lesser. Of being pegged for the loser. She figures it has everything to do with being what she is. Of having that hard learned knowledge that she was constantly the dog that lost. And Lela’s made her peace with that, at least she understands it.

She hates it for it to be thrown back into her face by a stranger that didn’t know dick about her. It makes her want to toss the cup full of piping hot coffee into the blondes face. It makes her want to hunt that fucker she just blew and hurt him back. To make him bleed the way she bled not so long ago. To make him understand the kind of pain a person could feel when they were used like that. Broken like that.

It makes her want to scream. In this strangers face. In that Alpha fucks face. In her mothers face. In her Ex’s face. To scream that she wasn’t lesser. She fucking wasn’t.

She was every bit a fucking person as they were. She deserved to be fucking treated like one. She fucking earned that right hadn’t she. After all the bullshit she’s been given in life. Hasn’t she earned at least that much?!
The hand that holds her cigarette trembles with her rage. She can feel her lengthening fangs digging into the soft flesh of her lips. She can feel her face morphing into something that would make her mother fucking proud. She can feel herself become the beast time has created.

“Yeah?” Lela sneers out, her eyes going hard and her face pulling up in disdain, “He wouldn’t’ve been the first.”

The face the Clint wears upon hearing her admission makes Lela’s stomach roll. He looks like someone has just told him all of the worlds worst news all at once. He looks both heartbroken for her and enraged on her behalf. Clint looks up at her, his honey and green eyes, like he understands. Like he gets that the world is breaking off pieces of her soul day by day. He looks at her like he wants to reach out his hands and fix her back together again.

Her second nature half cries out in relief at the sight. It makes her want to reach her greedy selfish little hands out and just yank that golden man closer to her. It makes her want to beg, to barter, and to demand that he ease her pain. To help. To save her.

The thoughts alone make her snap her teeth at the strangers golden face. Angrily, she tosses her half smoked cig into the untouched coffee and then Lela half shoves herself from the booth. She makes for the exit as fast as her legs can carry her. She doesn’t bother turning to check if the blonde follows, she just keeps walking—deeper into the shittiest streets she can find.

The worst parts of herself makes the decision to pick up a fucker at least three times her size. She goads him on until he’s all fangs and closed fists. She keeps doing it until he drags her into some motel room and locks her inside. Wired enough to light two separate cities, Lela goes toe to toe with the man until he splits her lips open and she sinks her teeth into his flesh.

She takes the pain he gives her and trades it with her own form of violence. She puts every volatile thing she’s ever had the misfortune to house into her hits. She kicks and rages like a woman possessed. She tries desperately to prove them—all of them—wrong.

That she may be an Omega—broken and used—but she wasn’t lesser. She can take it. She can fucking take it.

By the time she loses herself to unconsciousness she can’t remember what got her so pissed in the first place. By the time she slips under, barely healed wounds torn open once more and soaking the mattress beneath her, she can barely remember the face of a man that tried to help her earlier that night.

A man who tried to catch a falling star before it crashed and burned. When she closes her eyes, she thinks she see’s that golden smile. She thinks she can hear his warm rumbling voice calling out to her, telling her that it was going to be all right. To just hold on a little longer and everything would be all right.
At this point, I don't know where I'm headed with this. I'm just writing. Let me know what you think because I'm utterly fucking lost. I seriously did not intend for Lela to be this much of a drug user. Seriously.
-Ani
"That shifty itchy feeling underneath her skin intensifies underneath that stare. Her hindbrain, burning and slithering mess, rears up. Begs for Lela to tilt her head down into submission. It makes her burn with the need to whimper—the way she’d whimpered for her mothers approval once—and set it right. Whatever it was. She wants to go belly up and make herself small. She wants to bare her neck and beg for the red heads forgiveness."

“It’s recon,” Natasha tells him, in a tone that would be firm if not for the way her eyes soften when she turns to him.

Frowning, Clint fiddles with the wallet still in his hands. It’s a cheap ugly thing. Fake leather and bad stitches. The kind of wallet that came from convenience stores. It holds in it three whole dollars, a two cards and an ID. He should throw it down the gutter. He doesn’t need it.

Not really.

He’s got the name memorized. He knows by the time he hits the compound he won’t have forgotten it. When he types it into the system it’ll come as second nature.

But he hasn’t tossed it yet. Can’t. Keeps thinking about those too large black eyes. Eyes that would be brown if not for how much darkness sat in them. He keeps thinking of a small gaunt face with not enough color to it—not enough life. He keeps thinking about the way she’d stood her ground even as he’d struggled to regain his composure. He keeps thinking about the girl who hadn’t backed away from him and had met him in challenge when everything around him should’ve been screaming threat.

He keeps thinking about a girl who had no business looking as twisted as she did. He keeps thinking about the way she’d smelled, like pain and sadness. Like the fury of a wild fire caught within flesh. Like the tang of new blood and old. Familiar.

“I know,” Clint finally says.

“You got involved,” Natasha states. Her curled crimson strands sway with the nighttime winds.

Both of them are standing on the rooftop of some abandoned textile factory. One of the few that still remained standing after the whole Loki incident. It’s used mainly as a squatter’s hot spot.
“I did,” Clint agrees. He can’t deny it. He’s invested. He can’t explain why, he just knows he is. He can’t get that face, those desperate growls, out of his head.

“I have to say,” Natasha grumes, her eyes trialing over the ledge of the building and down into the alleyway where Lela had disappeared, “this was not the type of girl I was expecting to find.”

Clint’s brows pinch as he pockets the wallet again, “What kind of girl did you expect?”

Natasha is silent for a moment. Her arms crossed over her chest as she drummed her fingers upon her black clad upper arms, “Not this kind. The wild kind.”

What Natasha won’t say is feral. Not after Natasha had been labeled that so long ago. But Clint hears it nonetheless.

“She’s not wild,” Clint, argues almost immediately, his face going stony when Nat turned to fix her sharp gaze on him.

The gaze is not unlike the sharp and dangerous kind usually found in feline predators. Clint has seen better men than himself fall beneath that stare. So he straightens up his shoulders and explains, as much as he’s able:

“She’s…she’s like us.”

Cocking a dark red brow, Natasha wordlessly prompts him to continue.

Heaving out a sigh, Clint rakes his fingers through his hair and steps up to his Beta until they brush shoulders, “She’s been run ragged.”

“How ragged,” Natasha asks, as if she herself hadn’t been the one to pull up every single thing there was to find on Lela. As if Natasha hadn’t been the one to lock herself away with the digital files for almost two days before she hit the streets. As if Natasha wasn’t keeping the whereabouts of the girl from the man who had asked them to find her. As if Natasha wasn’t as inexplicably drawn to the girl as much as Clint was now.

As if Natasha wasn’t the one who had hunted down the sick fuck who had put her in Starks Medical wing. As if she hadn’t broken the mans jaw and put him on life support. As if she wasn’t invested too.

Huffing out a tired breath, Clint turns so that he faces the redhead and tells her simply, “She’s going down Nat. Burning up from the inside out. She’s going down.”

And Natasha may be impossible to read to an outsider but never to Clint. Never to her Gamma. It’s in her emerald colored eyes. It’s in the way her pouty pink lips flicker a fraction of the way down. It’s in the way the hold she has on her arms tightened for just a moment.

Clint reads her worry as clear as day.

Slowly he presses a warm hand against her shoulder until she turns to face him in full. When they stand toe to toe, Clint looks at her and tries to reassure her as best he can.

“I wanna catch her before she falls.”

It takes a moment before Natasha answers. A moment where she searches Clint’s eyes for something only she could ever find, doubt. When she finds none she nods her head firmly before she ran a pale hand over his face. The touch is gentle—far gentler than a woman with as much death on her hands
to shame Oppenheimer—and smiles.

“Then we’ll catch her before she hits the ground.”

~*~*

A few days later

Lela’s never been much of a drinker. It reminds her too much of people, places and events better left buried. The taste tosses her back to man she’d much rather forget. The stench of it reminds her of her mothers’ angry eyes, slurred words and large menacing hands.

Lela doesn’t drink. But at this point, she figures she should at least to round herself out. Or at least, to follow in her family’s long held traditions. Right now, keyed up as she is, Lela thinks a double shot of her mothers’ cheap whisky would simmer her down.

“Third time this week,” Jay-Jay announces the moment he rounds the corner and comes to a stop before the park bench she’s found herself at.

“Third time for what?” Lela asks. She has a hard time piecing the few words together. Her mind is a mix, a mad scramble, of sights, scents and sounds. She can’t keep her head straight. There’s an itch underneath her skin that keeps on growing. Her teeth ache like maybe they’re about to fall off.

That heat she’s been pushing off, its coming. Headed straight at her like a runaway locomotive. And Lela’s strapped to the goddamn tracks. She’s running out of ways to push it off. Usually, with a steady supply of suppressors and blockers, a Heat only ever came once or twice a year. When the supply of them was as infrequent as she’s been taking them this past month, well, it’s likely she’s going to cycle back up to the norm. Which would be once every two to three months. And Lela’s not ready to go through that bullshit again.

She can’t. She won’t.

To say she’s on edge would be putting it mildly.

“Third time this week you come looking for me momma,” Jay-Jay smiles at her, crooked yellow teeth looking far more ugly in the light of day. Among so much greenery, they both look like ghouls.

Gritting her teeth, Lela pulls herself to a stand and ignores the flare of pain that seems to ripple all across her body. She digs through her jackets till she’s got a smoke on her lips and a slip of cash in hand.

“That a complaint?” Lela gruffly demands of him.

Lela’s never known a dealer to grow concerned over their clients growing addictions. She’s never met any dealer who wanted their bread and butter to start showing signs of restraint. Lela hopes Jay-Jay isn’t the type to grow a conscious over night.

“Not really,” Jay-Jay huffs out as he shoved his hands into the pouch of his faded red hoodie. His pale green eyes roam over Lela’s face before he clicks his tongue and remarks, “Just sayin’. Gave you a weeks worth of coke two days ago. You reselling on the side?”

Mumbling over the butt of her smoke, Lela tells him, “Nah, I don’t got the patience to be a dealer.”

Jay-Jay sends her a suspicious once over before glancing over her shoulder to the empty tunnel just a few feet from where they stand.
“You got anything for me?” Lela asks, her patience wearing at the edges.

She doesn’t like meeting up at any well-lit place. Lela stuck to the shadows cast by decrepit buildings. She felt safer among the muck and the grime. This park, filled with trotting mothers, baby carriages and health conscious folk made her uneasy. She doesn’t know why Jay-Jay is out here selling.

It seemed unsafe.

Nodding, Jay-Jay digs out a crinkled ball of foil; a baggy loaded in white powder and tossed them at her. She catches them effortlessly but keeps her hands out and expecting. But nothing ever comes.

Seeing her expression, Jay-Jay grimaces and says, “Couldn’t find that other shit for you. Told you it was getting scarce.”

“Fuck,” Lela spit out as she pocketed her contraband. Without preamble, she tosses him a smaller wad of fives. Once she’s left empty handed she asks, “You know anyone who has anything?”

“Nah,” Jay-Jay admits as he pocketed the cash. His eyes dart over to her before he adds on, “That should last you a while though.”

Brows furrowed, Lela pulls the cigarette from her lips and ashes it on the ground, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Rubbing at the back of his neck, Jay-Jay looks away and mumbles, “You look like shit babe.”

Something twists angry and vicious in her chest as Lela bites back a growl. Her eyes turning hard as her face pulled into a frown, “And?”

“You look like a junky, didn’t know you to be the type,” Jay-Jay half sneers at her in a smooth tone. His gaze—empty and broken—meets hers with ease.

Lela almost laughs at the words, at the implication that Jay-Jay knew her at all. She almost laughs, but she feels too on edge for something like laughter. So she settles for a scoff and puffs at her smoke until her throat burns with it.

“See you around Jay-Jay,” Lela bites out before turning on her heel and heading down the tunnel.

It’s a forty-five minute walk back into what Lela has been calling her street for a while now. When she gets there its midday. It’s still too early to pull any real money; she knows there’ll be girls hanging around. Since Lela’s got nowhere to be, she heads that way. And though she should head back to her motel room, dump her considerable stash, she refuses to go back.

Jay-Jay might not have been entirely off the marker. Lela usually lined her suppressors and blockers with something. But these days she was shooting up or snorting something or popping something for the fuck of it. She’s fallen off that razors edge of self-medication and into the habitual user side of things.

The thought makes her uncomfortable. It makes the shit lining her pockets feel as heavy as lead weights. But she doesn’t dump them out. She doesn’t because she needs them.

Needs them, to hide what she is. Needs them, to burn away the pain. Needs them, to drown in something that wasn’t pain. Needs them, to just forget that this shit was her life.

When she arrives, there’s at least fifteen other girls already lined up and ready to go. All of them are
scantily clad messes. They look ugly in the light of day. But then, Lela guesses, she’s no better.

She hasn’t had a proper shower in two days. She hasn’t eaten a proper meal in over a week. She hasn’t healed much since she chased her pain with a man whose fists loosened her back molars. The skirt she’s wearing displays the boney jut of her hips and the knobbiness of her knees. The halter top she’s go on slips down every time she moves.

At this point, Lela thinks one could snap a picture and people would think she was a wide-eyed corpse. Lela wouldn’t be surprised if she dropped dead by nightfall. The thought shouldn’t be as comforting as it comes off of, but she ignores it like she ignores most things.

Ignoring the threats that some of the girls throw at her, she finds a descent enough spot and waits for the next car. It takes some doing but eventually Lela snags a white rusty impala that slows down just enough for her to lean into the passenger side. And it’s as she’s spiting out prices that a voice suddenly pulls her up and away.

“I’m pretty sure you’re breaking at least four separate laws.”

The words, spoken so airily, have a certain edge to them. The type only Dom’s and cops can muster on a whim. Neither of which exactly put Lela at ease. It makes her spine go ramrod straight. Her shoulders tense up. The voice forces her out of the passenger window of a would-be client at a snails pace.

Pulling her head out, she looks behind her and finds the prettiest red head she’s ever laid eyes on. The woman looks out of place with her navy blue long sleeve shirt and her painted on dark skinny jeans. A black ball cap sits on her head that obscures most of her face but does little to hide the sheer beauty she has in spades. And while she holds herself with casual ease, there’s something about her that scram “military” about her.

And as much as Lela wants to marvel at the clear and easy strength that radiated off the woman, it immediately makes Lela want to back away and head straight for the flimsy safety of her motel room.

“You a cop?” Lela demands, as she moved away from the car.

The rusty impala speeds away at the three-letter word.

Pursing her lips, the red head shakes her head a fraction and tells her, “No.”

And really, that doesn’t mean shit. Lela’s gotten picked up on solicitation enough times to know a cop isn’t law bound to answer that question with the truth. Whether the red head really is a cop or not, Lela has a sneaky suspicion she’s something. Something dangerous to Lela, to everyone.

Her second nature can spot all the tall tale markers of a dynamic made up of dominant tones. Lela doesn’t need to pull in a lungful of air to know that much. She may be fuzzy headed with her blockers and oxy but she’s pretty sure the woman is trouble incarnate.

So she does the only thing she knows how to do, she tucks her hands into her jacket pockets and books it.

Only Lela leaves behind the gaggle of fellow hookers but not the red head. For the woman follows her with silent footsteps. Lela makes two random turns before she realizes she isn’t about to lose her tail. So she whirls around.

Widening her stance, jutting out her chin, Lela snaps out between a growl and snarl, “You want something from me?”
Arching up a delicate brow, the red head looks at her from head to toe. And never has a simple once over felt so goddamn terrifying. Eyes the deepest shade of green pick her apart in that simple gaze. They sift through all the behaviors Lela has adopted. They pierce through the defenses Lela has spent the better part of her life putting up. Those eyes shred her to pieces without effort.

Those eyes make Lela feel small, defenseless and utterly breakable.

Lela snarls in the face of them. Balls up her fists and growls from deep in her belly.

Something like amusement flashes in those dangerous eyes as the woman tells her, “We have a mutual friends, you and I.”

“I doubt that,” Lela bites out.

A slow smirk tilts the woman’s plush ruby red lips as she takes a deliberate step towards Lela. Never breaking their locked gaze, the woman goes on to say, “Pepper.”

And the name, it forces Lela to take back a step she wouldn’t have otherwise given. It makes her stumble back as if physically struck. It makes her eyes grow wide as she glanced over the red head’s shoulder and then her own. Some part of Lela half expects the golden radiant woman to magically appear out of thin air.

“Wouldn’t exactly call her my friend,” Lela says, ignoring how the growls in her voice have died in her chest.

It isn’t a lie. But it sure as shit feels like one on Lela’s tongue. It burns like maybe it was blasphemy. Pepper and her, they weren’t friends. They’d shared a meal once and Lela had crashed her work place to call in a favor, only to bail. Lela was a lot of things, but not the kind of person one would call a friend.

People like Pepper had no business being saddled with people like Lela. Lela specifically, she was all sorts of fucked up. Pepper didn’t deserve the bullshit that Lela seemed to be made up with.

But something fragile, like hope, like desperation, reaches out from within the confines of her mind. It stretches forth like a wisp of white smoke until it snags.

Before Lela knows what she’s going to say, the words slip out from her mouth, “She send you, or something?”

Shaking her head, the red head tucks her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. The action leaves the whole of her chest exposed, vulnerable. It’s deliberate, Lela notes.

“Banner sent me,” the woman admits, her eyes still fixed on Lela’s own, “They’re worried.”

And that rankles her. That Lela’s caused both brilliant Pepper and gentle Dr. Banner to grow worried over her. A fucking waste of time and space. The knowledge makes acidic guilt seep up from her chest and onto her tongue. Running her tongue over her teeth, Lela offers a jerky nod and informs the red head:

“They shouldn’t be. I’m right as rain.”

The smile Lela flashes pulls at the scab on her bottom lip. It makes the bruises under her left eye throb. It feels ugly on her face. Almost as ugly as Lela feels these days. But Lela makes a show of extending her arms out and displaying her nastiness with something like dark pride.
The red head barely even blinks at the horrid display. Which would surprise Lela, if she hadn’t already noted the steel in the other woman’s spine. It’d surprise Lela if she hadn’t already felt the quiet strength in her from the moment she laid eyes on the red head.

“Clearly,” the woman drawls, sarcastic and dry.

Scowling, Lela shoves her hands back into her pockets and tells the woman, “I don’t need them sending people to come looking for me.”

“Just like you don’t need people swooping in to rescue you from men who have a hard time understanding the word no?” the woman quips. Her gorgeous pale face perfectly passive despite the fire in her eyes.

Sucking her teeth, Lela cocks a hip out and swipes her tongue over her bottom lip, catching the stray drop of blood seeping from her lip, “I can take care of myself just fine lady.”

“Bullshit,” the woman states breezily, in a tone that was harder than iron. Her jade eyes burning holes into Lela’s head.

The smoothness of it tosses Lela for a loop. It leaves her a little lost for words as she clicked her mouth shut. It makes her feel like a child fumbling for an excuse believable enough to hold before her teacher. It makes her want to rummage through her mind for a valid example that showed Lela was perfectly capable of looking after herself. That she was doing things right. That she wasn’t addicted to drugs, that she wasn’t a whore who got her ass beat on a daily biases.

That shifty itchy feeling underneath her skin intensifies underneath that stare. Her hindbrain, burning and slithering mess, rears up. Begs for Lela to tilt her head down into submission. It makes her burn with the need to whimper—the way she’d whimpered for her mothers approval once—and set it right. Whatever it was. She wants to go belly up and make herself small. She wants to bare her neck and beg for the red heads forgiveness. Makes her want to go all soft and submissive.

But then Lela catches herself mid head tilt. She clamps down on a whimper building in her chest with a viciousness that reminds her entirely of her mother and glares murderously at the nameless woman.

Submission, it makes her roar. It makes her sick to her damn stomach that it always makes her tremble. She’s so sick of it.

‘Fucking Omega, pick up your face! Push that shit back, you don’t simper and cower!’ her mother’s voice screams at her.

Pulling up her face into a cruel sneer, Lela bites out, “Fuck off lady.”

And with that, Lela heads for her motel room. She intends to leave the bizarre interaction behind her. The moment the motel comes into view she heads for her room door only to still in her tracks. Her key in hand, she glares at the sight of a familiar face.

Growling, Lela glares up at the blonde man and bites out, “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Lela repeats in a snarl. Fear crowds her head; it sits heavy on her
Putting his hands up in a placating manner, Clint steps away from the door and offers in a soothing voice, “Just came to check up on you, see how you were doing?”

“Why?” Lela snaps.

“I told you, we have mutual friends, you and I,” the red haired woman’s voice sounds out from Lela’s previously empty right hand side.

Fighting down the urge to jump, Lela bares her canines and growls like a wounded thing.

Lela no longer feels like she’s on edge. She feels like she’s maybe free falling into something dangerous faster than she can stop it. She feels cornered despite being out in the open. She feels that runaway locomotive far closer than it had been when she’d gotten up this morning.

Her heat is biting at her heels, three headed and rotten.

“It thought I told you to fuck off,” Lela hissed through clenched teeth.

The growls that leave her lips are inelegant and rabid. They are graceless. They are wild. And on any given day that makes the most confident of DomBeta’s blanch. But when she flashes her eyes between one pale face and a golden one, she finds them barely moved.

It makes her heart race because if they can’t be scared of them she’ll have to lash out at them. And god, as much as she’d love to feel something like pain, she doesn’t think she’ll be able to fight her baser instincts. Not now. Not with the way her instincts are begging to go down. To fall to her knees and beg.

She can feel her hindbrain pulsating in her brain. An angry vicious throb just at the base of her head, slamming against her like wild bull catching a glimpse of a red flag. It makes her want to curl into herself. It floods her head with the need to seek out safety. Her heats always made her want to curl up into the tightest ball she can. Her instincts searching for a safety that didn’t exist.

Her instincts go to war with her blood soaked conditioning. She can feel the itch of her skin intensifying. She can feel the beginning of her approaching heat begin to make her limbs tremble. There are whimpers sitting on her tongue. Loaded like bullets and eager to fire off. Forcing herself taller, Lela growls until she feels her throat begin to tear itself apart.

“Get out of my way,” Lela demands of them both.

She needs to get into her room. She needs to stick a syringe of suppressors and blockers into her veins. She needs to burn a dangerous amount of heroine to chase it. She needs to not be out here when the shit hits the fan.

“Lela,” Clint starts to say something. But his words are lost beneath the wild thump of blood pounding in her ears.

Snarling, Lela pushes past them and unlocks her door with hands that tremble too much. When the damn door finally pops open she rushes in and slams the door behind her. Only it catches when the red head pushes her way in.

“Get. Out.” Lela snarls. Her shoulders bunched up around her head as she whipped around to face the two intruders.
“No,” the red head tells her firmly. Her back straight, she shoulders a hard line and her face pulled into something like war-hardened determination. What she say’s next might as well be a bullet to Lela’s gut, “You’re going into heat.”

Scrambling back, Lela puts her shitty twin bed between herself and them, “No the fuck I’m not.”

“You are,” Clint’s soft words ring in the tension filled silence. He closes the door carefully behind himself.

Lela growls like she’s on the verge of being murdered. She snaps her teeth at them as she reaches out blindly for something to arm herself with. She wraps her hands around the long handle of a lamp that doesn’t work. She grips it in her trembling hands as she screams:

“Get. Out!”

She needs them gone. She needs them to get the fuck away because the levy was breaking. Everything she’s been trying to kill is bubbling up like lava from a volcano. She can feel herself cracking. She can feel the fissures spreading across her body the longer they stood here in her room.

“Lela,” the red head starts, walking forward with slow and careful movements. Her eyes aren’t fear filled, but they shine with something like worry, as she says, “We just want to help you.”

“Bullshit,” Lela throws the word back at the red head. Her lips curl up over her exposed lengthened fangs as she works her way back into the shitty little bathroom.

Whirling around, Lela scrambles over to the back head of the toilet. Pulling the porcelain cover off and tossing it to the floor, she dips her hands into the water and feels for her stash. Her hands come up empty. The tightly sealed plastic bag containing the last vials of her suppressors and blockers are gone.

Desperation lines her mouth as she roars her rage in the small space of the bathroom. Her fingers curl over the edge of the lip of the tank. Anxiety swirls her mind mixing with her anger. Madness coats her thoughts as she dips down to grip the lid of the tank once more and she spins to face the strangers in her room.

“Where the fuck are they?!” she screams.

“Gone,” the red head tells her simply, her arms crossed over her chest.

The answer paired with that blasé expression makes Lela want to break the heavy piece of porcelain in hands across that face. Lela wants to hurt these fuckers. She wants to make them bleed. She wants them to make her bleed. Maybe if she does, maybe if they hurt her hard enough, she won’t fall into the mind consuming fuck-fest that was her coming heat.

A sound, low and steady—smooth and made of the softest feathers—begins to fill the room. It isn’t a growl; it’s nothing like a growl. It’s…Lela doesn’t know what they are. They hit her head like a sledgehammer wrapped in silk. It kills the growls tearing up her throat effortlessly.

Those sounds, whatever they were, made her hindbrain thump harder. It made her bones go loose. It nearly makes the lid in her hand slip from her loosened hands.

“Wha…” the word starts only to dry up on her tongue. Wild eyed, she stares at the two before her as the sound intensifies.

“You just want to help you Lela,” Clint practically coos as he approached her. His hands are up with
his palms exposed. He walks slowly to her as if she is a skittish doe with it’s leg caught in barbwire.

The sounds, Lela realizes through a clouding mind, were coming from Clint. They poured out of him like the rumbling of a large cat. The noise does something to her head. The erratic thump of her heart starts to slow down. Her harsh ragged breathing begins to even out. Her gaze grows fuzzy and unfocused at the edges—at everything that wasn’t Clint and golden.

There’s anxiety building in her chest. Fear of what’s happening—what’s about to happen to her—swirling in the pit of her stomach. But her instincts, so wildly out of control, kill them before they gain momentum. All she can focus is on that sound.

Rumbles, purrs, barely there growls.

They sounded like safety. They felt like protection. They sound like wind chimes in the late night wind.

Lela’s never heard a thing like it before. So she keeps herself still and ignores the paranoia that wants her to move out and away. She keeps still and lets her drooping eyes linger in Clint’s honey brown eyes.

When Clint gets close enough, standing a mere foot away from her, he reaches a hand out. He moves slow and careful, as if one wrong move will break the spell she’s found herself in. Very softly, like the barest of touch, his hand settles on her head. His fingers, long and sure, tangle into her hair and run through them. Clint doesn’t seem bothered by the fact that her hair is oily and dirty. He continues to run his fingers through her dark hair and smiles softly at her.

“Come on,” Clint whispers. His eyes, golden and green specked, catch with her own. They beckon her forward into safety.

And Lela can’t explain it, can’t begin to name why, but she follows. She chases those golden eyes, those gold dusty freckles and the sound of night time chimes.

With a loud clang, the lid slips from her grip and drops to her feet. The porcelain splinters into a thousand pieces. And if Lela was paying any kind of attention, if she wasn’t caught in the clutches of her heat, and if she wasn’t drunk on those sounds she’d have noticed. She’d have noticed that she was being splintered into a thousand pieces too.

The dam blown to damn pieces.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah.
What the fuck am I even doing anymore?
Y’all tell me what you think.
hate it
love it
Let me know.
-Ani
Chapter Summary

The silence that follows his words is hard edged and loaded. It’s very rare—if at all—that Clint finds himself openly challenging his Beta. He hasn’t needed to for years now. He hasn’t needed to put himself between Natasha or anyone else since…well, ever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

 Everything starts rushing past her in a blur. Everything hits her like a delayed memory. None of it feels like she’s currently living it out in real time. All of it comes like a day old memory.

She remembers standing in her motel bathroom, Clint brushing through her hair with those strange sounds rumbling out of his mouth. She remembers gentle, warm and strong hands wrapping her up in something that smelled of sugar and sea salt. She remembers the darkness of a car but not what kind because she was being cradled. The sensation both wildly exhilarating and frightening in its bizarreness.

She remembers being picked up, folded into a ball and pressing her ear up against those sounds. She remembers trying to get out when she heard voices. She remembers sinking her teeth into something that bled. She remembers she’d recoiled from the gentleness of a warm cloth when she’d expected violent retaliation.

She can’t remember when the warmth of a human body leaves her only that something like protest leaves her lips. But the sound is drowned out by those wind chime rumbles. She remembers the feel of warm water as she was slipped into it. She remembers careful and gentle hands—smaller and infinitely more feminine than the ones that wrapped her up—scrubbed her clean.

She remembers the smell of ginger filling her nose, making her go buttery soft and pliable, when something dry and soft is wrapped around her shoulders. She remembers the sinful like texture of a bed made up of clouds settling beneath her.

She remembers someone telling her she was fine, that it was going to be alright, that she was safe. She remembers thinking she didn’t know what the hell that word even meant anymore. She remembers growling at it, mean and angry before she was forced to stop by a growl that sounded like death itself. She remembers that growl forcing her still and plaint. She remembers crying for the wind chimes. She remembers only the feel of large calloused hands running through her damp hair. She remembers the wind chime noise as she slipped under a heady hazy of unconsciousness.

*~*
Quietly, they move through the suit. Their steps, by trade alone, barely make a noise. Less so with the carpet beneath their feet. Still, they make an effort to remain as silent as possible.

Lela sleeps now, or has been for the last two days. Natasha had been right when she’d told Clint that she’d probably die when her heat hit her. That the intensity of it was likely to kill the girl before it dwindled down. Lela had likely been putting it off for over a year, from what they had made out. When it, the heat, crested, it was likely to kill her. It’s what had spurred them into motion.

The girl was all bones and running on dope riddled fumes. They had to do something.

Clint watches, with tired and sad eyes, as the bundle on the large king sized bed trembled in her sleep. Lela herself was the epitome of the word petite. She rose up to a full five feet tall and had to weigh less than 80 pounds. Bundled up in the cream colored duvet, she looked practically miniscule. Like a flickering light about to fade out.

The thought sets Clint on edge. He hasn’t slept, not really, since they brought her here. Since Natasha had rented the floor of one of the cities most discreet five star Hotel. Every time exhaustion pulls at him, makes him entertain slipping over to the large couch and catching a minute of rest Clint remembers.

He remembers the scars, the bruises, the sheer carnage that lined the girls body. For it had been a team effort to get Lela undressed and bathed. Every time Clint attempted to disentangle himself from her willowy arms, the girl would snarl and begin to panic. Every time he attempted to cease issuing his calming purrs, the girls’ heart would kick up and her eyes would flash open.

So Clint hasn’t moved much from her bedside. He sticks close lest she wake up in a panic again. Lest she wake violent again and force Natasha to be harsh and firm with her again. Clint stays close because spy he may be, ex-military mercenary he might have once been, he couldn’t stomach the thought of his Beta being…mean. It made something in him grow wild and over-protective.

Right now, his mind was overrun with the need to provide comfort, to offer reassurances. To keep, to protect, to make safe. Clint has a wriggling need to bundle the girl up and take her back to his quarters. To bury her under the sheets that smelled of both himself and Natasha. Because it was safe there, in his den, in their den. Clint felt wide open here, with Lela in her heat in a five star hotel.

It must show in the way he hovers. In the way he leaves only for the bathroom and comes half running back. It must show in his face, in his scent, because his Beta sticks close too.

Natasha’s scent, ginger and spicy, was always so well contained. Muted underneath military grade blockers, was now fanning the whole of the room. In them he could smell comfort, reassurance, and peace. Clint gathered his courage from that scent. He gulped it down and tried to grab hold of the bond in his chest to express his gratitude.

Because, projecting one’s scent went against every bit of conditioning Natasha learned in the Red Room. And while, they were bonded now, a Pack between themselves, there were times Natasha just couldn’t bring herself to break certain hard learned rules.

“How long do you think her heat will last?” Clint quietly questions his Beta. Without glancing up, he knows exactly where the other is. On the other side of the room, sprawled out on a plush overstuffed gray chair. A book in some foreign language sits in her delicate hands.

“A week, maybe two. Who knows,” Natasha replies, half detached, half tired.

“She needs to eat something,” Clint states, his mouth growing into a tight line as he entertained the
idea of waking Lela. He doesn’t want to do it, the black bags under her eyes speak to months—if not
years—of restless sleep. But Clint knows he’s going to have to do it.

“I’ll call down, order a broth,” Natasha announces as she rose to a stand. When the call is placed,
and the hotel phone down, Natasha comes to stand at Clint’s shoulder.

With that they lapse back into silence. One hand on his shoulder, Natasha squeezes and remains
standing.

“I can’t…can you scent her?” Clint asks after a moment, tilting his head to glance back at his Beta.

A small crinkling of her brow, Natasha takes a deep breath through her nose and then shakes her
head, “No, can you?”

“That’s not normal, right? She’s in the middle of a heat, she should be…we should be able to smell
it,” Clint’s words are lined with his concern.

He doesn’t think they’re unfounded. Lela has been, for the last two days, caught in a heat. And yet,
Clint cannot smell anything beside that bitter tang of chemical, of narcotics and something that
smelled of brush fire. He can smell nothing of pheromones or markers to signify an Omega in heat. It
worried him. It made him want to call a medical team. Someone who could come and help.

Clint almost rises to do just that. But the hand on his shoulder squeezes just a bit tighter, comforting
and solid. It keeps him in his place. No doubt, Natasha knows exactly what he’s planning on doing
by their bond alone.

“She’s been taking those black market suppressors for a while. It’ll take a while before it gets out of
her system,” Natasha tells him. Her voice leveled and sure.

Nodding, Clint swallows down his growing panic and turns to stare at Lela’s sleeping face.

Washed clean of the grime and filth, she looked infinitely younger. Far more fragile than Clint could
stomach. Her complexion is pale which made the fading bruises on her face jump out in harsh
contrast.

Slowly, Clint reaches out and brushes a stray wavy lock of dark hair from the girls face and watches
as the girl stirs slightly. Her eyes, large and doe shaped, part a sliver to reveal bloodshot and glazed
onyx colored eyes. She looks at him through unseeing fever bright eyes.

A growl rumbles from her, threatening and groggy. It’s the kind of growl one found falling from the
lips of a war hardened Alpha and not an Omega. It’s as ugly as it is a marvel to hear. Lethargically,
Lela pushes herself up. Her arms tremble as she forces herself up into a half sitting position. The
promise of violence shines in her eyes as she looks at Clint.

Softly, Clint rumbles from his chest a soothing purr. It’s meant to calm her but all it does is make
Lela’s dry dark brown plump lips pull up into a snarl. Her lips part and flash elongated teeth. They
make to dig themselves into the meaty flesh of Clint’s palm. And Clint knows, by past experience
now, that Lela could sink those teeth in and draw blood.

He has a bite mark slowly healing on her left forearm from when they’d walked into the Hotel lobby.
The sound of the Alpha guard had set the girl on immediate edge. It had snapped her out of her daze
and she’d lashed out. So Clint knows, small as Lela was, heat dazed as she was, she was still a fury.
But just as Lela raises her mouth to snap, Natasha growls out a warning.

The growl is dangerous. Laced in bloodshed and danger, Natasha’s growl could put down entire
armies.

The sound of it makes Clint himself still. It cuts off his rumbling purr in an instant. Because Natasha never growled unless it was absolutely necessary. She only growled that deep dominant thing when she needed to assert her rank. Something that the Red Room had forbidden.

The sound of it makes Lela go shock still. Her half lidded eyes grow wide. And is if all the bones in her neck turned to liquid, Lela’s head falls to the side. She bares her throat in an instant, the whimpers and cries that spill from her parted lips are ugly things. Sad things, pain soaked things. A product of an abused Omega.

Something molten hot, dangerous and angry twists in Clint’s stomach. It makes him want to roar. To lash out and break the bones of whatever fuck had created those cries. That had made Lela as twisted as she was now. The sight of her head falling the way it did, the look of utter terror flashing across her face, and the smell of her anguish are enough for Clint to become murderous.

But he suppresses his rage now. He puts it in a box and shoves it away. Clint focuses instead on purring. He focuses on the rumbles that leave his throat. He focuses on making them soft, comforting and inviting—careful and forgiving. Kind and understanding.

Slowly, he reaches out again. He runs through the silk strands of her dark, dark, hair and puts the young Omega at ease. Almost immediately, Lela’s whimpers and cries die down. They are muffled by the way Lela shoves her face into the mattress. Clint can smell the salt of her tears.

It burns him, the smell. Makes him want to wrap his arms around the girl and keep her safe. When finally she falls back to sleep, Clint continues running his hand through her hair but ceases his rumbles.

“You shouldn’t do that,” Clint tells his Beta, his words soft but his tone firm as steel.

“She would’ve bitten you again,” Natasha remarks, her hand slipping from his shoulder as she moved back to the other side of the room. When she’s seated on her chair, she sends him a resolved glare that shows she is unapologetic in her actions.

Pursing his lips, Clint meets the stare and straightens up his shoulders, “Then let her, I’ve dealt with worse. Stop growling at her like that.”

The silence that follows his words is hard edged and loaded. It’s very rare—if at all—that Clint finds himself openly challenging his Beta. He hasn’t needed to for years now. He hasn’t needed to put himself between Natasha or anyone else since…well, ever.

As much as it pulled at Clint’s bond, he needed to say something. He needed to do something. Clint can’t handle seeing Lela’s head fall back like that. To fall back like she’s a puppet trying to escape the scissors that threaten to cut her fraying strings. Clint won’t see the girl do that for anyone, not even his Beta.

Natasha’s eyes spark with something like dark knowledge as she bites out, “She’s half feral, Clint. She isn’t in the right state of mind. She can’t recognize friend from foe. She’ll sink her teeth into your throat if you’re not careful.”

“If she attacks me, I can handle it,” Clint informs her. Has to bite back the retort that when Natasha had been wild and mean, he’d been able to fend her off too. He seals his lips over the growl that threatens to come tumbling out.

“She’s not some little lost kitty to bundle up and bottle feed,” Natasha growls. Her eyes hard as
Clint feels anger well up in him. A growl of his own wants to rip through him but he bites it down. Keeps it there in the peak of his chest because he understands what Natasha is unwilling to say. Natasha see’s herself in Lela. See’s the product of an ugly cruel world reflected back at her. And his Beta can’t look.

“She’s a hard edge Clint,” Natasha states, her eyes firm in her scrutiny.

Another bout of silence consumes them, sits heavy on their shoulders as they glare at each other from across the bed. Eventually, Natasha’s shoulders lose their tension and slump. With a tired hand, she rakes her fingers through her crimson hair and tells him, “I’m don’t know how to be…soft. She growls like a fighter. She growls like she can take on the world. I…I don’t know how not to meet that with anything except a fight.”

And while something like pride lines Natasha’s words at summation of Lela’s mettle, there is something like sadness too. For the Red Room had robbed Natasha of more than just her childhood, her organs but also her humanity. There was more than one reason as to why Natasha had only one single Pack Bond. There was a reason Natasha didn’t make an effort to seek out more stability. It was mostly because she couldn’t. She didn’t know how to not give into her aggressive Dom instincts. She didn’t know what it was to be gentle and nurturing when the situation called for it. Sure, she could fake it; it’s what led her to be the worlds top assassin. But Natasha didn’t know how to fix when all her hands had been trained to do was break.

And while, she was being cold, being mean, to Lela—At least Clint thought so—it wasn’t that she was doing it on purpose. It was that Natasha didn’t know how else to help the girl.

Natasha had tracked her down, smoked her out and forced her back up against the wall. All of it bleeding with Natasha’s swift determination and aggression, her need to act fast and hard. She knew Lela was—at this point—little more than a junky, they both did. But knowing, understanding the situation for what it was, did not mean Natasha was prepared for what would need to be done. As much as Natasha aches to help Lela, she doesn’t know how. At least, not the way it should be done. In ways that didn’t involve violence and bloodshed.

Clint breathes in a deep breath through his nose and out his mouth. He counts to ten and then rises to his feet. Slow and careful, he makes his way over to his Beta and sinks to his knees at her tennis shoe clad feet. He gently takes up her hands in his and searches her gaze.

Natasha didn’t know how to be soft, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t kind. She had a heart in there, battered and scarred. Clint thinks, he’s never met a person who loved as hard as his Beta. She was loyal, unwaveringly so, to the people she called friends. And Clint was proud, every day he was proud, to call her his Beta. To have the love of a woman who would walk through fire for him if he asked, Clint counted himself lucky for his pack of two.

“We’ll take it one day at a time,” Clint tells her, his smile offering encouragement. Because he has faith in her, the star graduate of the Red Room, the Black Widow, the Red Baroness, who turned her back to face the black of the world that created her and decided to fight it.

Natasha’s face is impassive, barely holding on to any real emotion, but her whirling eyes settle. With a barely there head tilt, she grips onto Clint’s hands with a fierceness that would break lesser men’s bones.

“I’ll be there every step of the way, yeah?” Clint says as he brings her hands up to rub his face.
They don’t scent mark each other often. Because of their jobs and because of their tumultuous past. But Clint dares to take a leap, that right here and now, comfort is what they both seek while trying to tread on a path neither of the two have ever walked upon.

When Natasha drops her face into his hair, to rub and pass each others scent, Clint grins unabashed and purrs loud enough to shake his teeth.

“Idiot,” Natasha admonished lightly, though Clint can clearly hear her smile through her words.

Chapter End Notes

Who thought this update was gunna be Clint's?
No one.
Me either!!!!
I don't know why I wrote this chapter, but it felt right.
Hope you guys like it.
I kinda did.
As always, thank you for reading. Please let me know what you think.
And y'all, seriously, thanks for sticking around. My life these last two years has been hideous. I started this pic while separating from my son's father--a shitty abusive relationship--I got re-married and then got divorced. because the dude was just using me for citizenship--had a wife back in his home country--and then just fucked off to another state while I finalized our annulment. My depression knocked me flat on my ass. Now I've got this ongoing push and pull with my ex where he uses our son like he's a bargaining chip.
I'm juggling two jobs while trying to raise a kid with almost the same levels as anxiety as I do.
If my pessimism shows, that's why.
So I'm posting this as it comes, taking advantage of a lull in my work time.
If I drop out again, please don't hate me guys. I love you all, I love writing for you, but life isn't always kind to us.
-ani
On the Ledge of the Unknown

Chapter Summary

"And isn’t that a funny thought, jumping. Funny like the rest of her life. Falling down. Tipping over and going splat miles below. Her life going up in smoke. All her bloody gory shit amounting to utterly fucking nothing as she became little more than mush on the dirty streets below."

Chapter Notes

----TRIGGER WARNING----
Mentions of suicide. or suicide ideation. contemplation of suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes a total of ten days for the worst of Lela’s heat fever to burn away. In that time, she’s thrown up enough times to recreate some of the most iconic scenes of the Exorcist. It’s been…a mess. Clint knows its Lela going through withdrawal on top of being on her heat. He expected it to be difficult. He understood that going in, that it wasn’t going to be easy.

But at this point, he’d rather face an entire enemy base with nothing in his hands except a screwdriver. It’d be easier, he thinks. Far simpler.

When the fever crests, the worst of it clearly behind them, both he and Natasha breath a collective sigh of relief. Both he and his Beta are growing a little tired of wiping up vomit and sitting underneath tepid water with a trembling body.

Not to say he wouldn’t do it again if the need arose. It’s just, Clint’s tired. He hasn’t gotten any sleep except for the little power naps in between vomity moments.

Still, he’s glad it’s over. At least, he thinks it’s over. Clint’s by no means an expert on Omega-physiology but Lela’s starting to smell better. She’s lost that bitter tang of chemical that had all but sweated out into the soiled blankets. There was still traces of whatever drugs she had once taken, but not so much as to be overpowering. Not enough to be immediately noticeable.

Slowly but surely, the girls scent had begun to bleed out.

Lela, for the most part, smelled of honeyed wine. Of hibiscus and passion vine. She smelled, not sweet—because she still smelt vaguely of a brush fire, but like a green house stuffed full of all the worlds most exotic plants.
It was a smell that was both intoxicating and worrying. It made Clint want to bathe himself in that scent. To wear it until it mixed with his own.

It was the scent of an Omega, clear as day. But it was unlike any Clint himself had ever come across. Omega’s, Clint understands, had scents almost as sweet as perfumes. Cloying and heady. Noticeable from the moment they walked into a room. Lela’s was subtle; one had to really be looking for it to find it. All that honey wine, hibiscus and passion vine sat hidden underneath that brush fire smoke.

Even her scent, Clint muses, was much like Lela herself. A carefully concocted ruse. That brush fire smell, a shield to hide herself behind. The tall tale markers of an Omega who had more than enough Iron in her spine to supply an ammunitions factory.

He marvels at Lela. Can’t help but sit beside her, drink in those subtle scents. Can’t help but want to watch as it changed before him.

“Clint,” Natasha’s voice carries in the quiet of their suite.

Natasha’s sitting at the dining table, a newspaper in hand with her back against the window. The red and violet skies of the rising sun halo her entire head. She’s dressed in a simple burgundy colored shirt and some denim jeans. Her hair is pulled up in a fluffy little bun upon her head. She’s not even wearing makeup today. Too tired to do anything except to dress herself in a new pair of clothes.

Clint thinks Michael Angelo himself could not paint a more beautiful picture than what he sees now.

“Yeah?” he calls out, his voice is rough. The kind of roughness that comes from not sleeping and purring for ten days straight.

Without glancing up, his beta tells him in a voice that left little room for arguments, “You’re exhausted. Get some sleep.”

“But—” Still, Clint tries his hand at it. A protest lines his mouth before it promptly dies the moment those green eyes cut over to him. With a muted nod, Clint heads over to the fluffy gray couch and lies down.

He’s out before he can bother getting into a comfortable position.

*~*

Slowly, Lela begins to wake. Like a bulb improperly installed, she feels herself flicker to life before sputtering out, again and again. When finally it sticks, a wave of fatigue hits her dead in the chest.

A groan works itself out of her chest before she can think of biting it back. Tiredly, she sinks her face into the mattress beneath her. The sheets that brush against her face are sinfully soft. As is the mattress. It cradles her like a newborn. She wants to bury herself in it and just cease to exist.

But Lela knows she can’t do that. Not with what’s just happened, not with who might be in the room. With another groan, she forces herself up and out from beneath the covers that half swaddle her.

Through tired eyes, she takes in her surroundings. What she finds are the making of a swanky hotel room. All of it reeking money and far too expensive for Lela to be anywhere near. It makes an unease feeling settle on her shoulders and anxiety blossom in her chest. What she doesn’t find are the two other fuck-heads that had brought her here in the first place. Briefly she wonders why she’s alone after days of waking and finding them glued to her side.
Slowly, she pushes herself to the edge and up to her feet. She can spot an open door leading into a bathroom so she heads there first. After using the toilet, she walks up to the large granite sink—all of it probably worth more than Lela’s life—and spots a brand new packaged toothbrush and toothpaste. She makes quick use of them before rinsing out her mouth.

When that’s done Lela takes a moment to stare at herself in the mirror. She’s never made it a habit to look too closely at her own reflection since…well, since she presented. She’s never liked the thing looking back at her. Soft and vulnerable little thing with eyes too wide and a mouth meant for breaking.

But she looks, can’t help it in the too large mirror.

What she finds hardly fills her with any kind of ease. Her dark hair—wavy like her mothers—sports a bad case of bed head. Her eyes, too large and sad, sit on cheeks that look gaunt and hallow. Her nose, probably her mothers—she can’t remember anymore—turned up ever slightly at the end. Made her look a child when paired with her eyes. Her lips were big, plump and colored a deep shade of browning red. The soft shimmer of her brown skin has faded away. Leaving her looking washed out sickly.

The shirt she wears is two or three sizes too big. The large collar slips down to reveal the bony jut of her shoulder and her chest. With careful fingers, Lela runs them across her chest. She feels the ridges of bone beneath the pads of her rough fingers. But as she takes in her figure, waifish and emaciated, she feels a bitter type of anger soak her veins.

She doesn’t like it, looking at herself. Makes her want to break the reflective surface before her. Sneering at her own image, watching ugliness spread fast and vile across her face, Lela turns and leaves the bathroom.

Carefully, she walks through the room. In both hands, she grips the navy sweat pants she wears. They’re far too big on her. Both in length and in width. Her thin hands had tied the drawstrings as tight as they could go and folded the hem. But the further she walks, the more the ends unravel.

By the time she makes out of the room, she’s achy and sore, like she’s just been put through the meat grinder. Her breath comes out ragged, like she’s just run a marathon. Her head feels dizzy and heavy. Pain flares in her belly, like a knife has been stuck in and twisted. A throbbing right behind her eye’s signals the beginning of a massive headache. She feels weak, weak like maybe she’s two seconds from passing out.

Only she doesn’t. She remains stubbornly standing as she crosses the threshold and enters what looks like a living room. It much like the bedroom reeks of money. Lela wants to snarl at the sight of it. At the thought that she, fucking she, is in here at all. But the snarl in her chest dies the moment she spots a sleeping figure on the longest couch.

As quietly as she can manage, she steps close. Close enough to make out the man lightly snoring is in fact Clint. His dirty blonde hair gleams in the midday light. And as Lela looks at him, runs her gaze over his face; she notes how tired he looks. There’s a slight puffiness to his eyes and a clear dark fuzz to his cheeks that makes him look infinitely older. He’s dressed similarly to Lela. In a white cotton shirt and dark navy blue sweats.

Cold dread slips down her spine as Lela comes to the conclusion that she’s probably wearing the man’s clothes. She’s in the middle of taking a step back, over to the door that probably lead out of here when she hears a voice call out to her.
“I wouldn’t recommend running.”

Snapping her head up, Lela spots the red head from before. She’s sitting with her back against a too large window with a laptop before her. She’s half turned in her chair, her head looking in her direction. Those sharp as knives eyes pinning Lela in place. She looks entirely different than when Lela had first met her. For now the red head is dressed down in something far more comfortable. Her face is without a drop of makeup. But it does nothing to hide the woman’s beauty.

In fact, she looked far more beautiful.

Licking her dry lips, Lela asks—her voice gravely and rough, “Yeah? Why’s that?”

Without raising her voice, without so much as looking menacing, the woman tells her easily, “Because then I’d have to chase you down and you’d get hurt.”

And it’s not a threat, it doesn’t ring like a threat would, it’s uttered like a simple fact. A fact written in stone, that if Lela were to run then the red head would give chase and catch her. It’s not a threat, but it sits on Lela’s chest like one. Makes the too large room she’s in feel ten times smaller.

“Come sit, room service should be getting here soon,” the red head informs her breezily before turning back to whatever it was she was doing on her laptop.

Slowly, Lela makes her way out of the living room and into her dining room. She picks a chair, furthest away from the red head, and sits herself down carefully. For whatever reason, every joint in Lela’s body aches. She can feel bone grating on bone. She wouldn’t be surprised to hear them actually creak.

When the red head makes no move to continue to speak to Lela, they remain quiet. The red head keeps her gaze trained on her computer. Her long pale fingers, nails painted a deep maroon color, fly over the keyboard. The clack of the keys filling the otherwise empty silence.

The sound grates on Lela’s ears.

Aside from the general ache of her body, Lela feels strung out. Strung out like having rushed through the bitter parts of withdrawal without anything in between to keep her from puking her stomach inside out. Strung out like she’s just crawled her way out of a heat dehydrated and migraine filled. Strung out like she’s in no way shape or form dosed up on any kind of suppressors or blockers.

The thought makes her heart beat fast and brutal in her chest. She hasn’t had some form of suppressors or blockers running through her for years now. She doesn’t know how to deal with her hindbrain sober. She doesn’t rightly want to.

Lela grinds her teeth against the feeling. She digs her fingers into her temples and then her palms into her eyes until she see’s white sparks. She pushes until it borders on painful. The pain grounds her, keeps her from flying out her seat and out the fucking door. Growling, Lela huffs out a ragged breath through her parted lips. She feels like utter fucking shit.

“Why the fuck am I here?” Lela asks the red head, palms still firmly pressed to her eye sockets.

“Because you needed a safe place to go through your heat,” the red head responds easily, the clicking of her keys never so much as stilling.

Snarling, Lela pulls her hands away from her eyes and glares bloody murder at the woman and hisses out, “What the fuck’s that got to do with you?”
Maybe it’s the snarl, or the rage in Lela’s voice—or maybe the words themselves—but it catches the woman’s attention. It pulls her focus from her computer screen and forces her hands still. Carefully, the red head looks at her. Her jade eyes spearing into Lela’s blood shot gaze.

The red head was no small fire, she was a goddamn inferno locked within blood and bone. There was a kind of lethal energy trapped in her gaze. The kind that only ever came from truly dangerous people. It made Lela’s hindbrain slither up and curl into itself.

“If we had left you there, you would’ve been hurt.”

“So?” Lela snaps out, vicious and fast, rage licks up her chest and scorches the back of her throat, “Who the fuck are you to move me around like you got the right?”

“Would you have preferred for us to leave you there? To continue injecting yourself with suppressors made of poison. To continue drugging yourself until you OD’ed and choked in a puddle of your own vomit?” the woman bites out. Her face is perfectly contained, impassive as if she didn’t give a good goddamn one-way or the other.

But Lela’s off her meds now and she’s always been good at picking up the barest of scents. Shit like that, enhanced sense of smell, it came with being the stupid fucking thing she is.

Where the woman had smelled like ginger root, nutmeg and blackberry before. Now she smelled like the tang of gun smoke. Of burnt gun powder. Or something dangerous and wildly angry. Like a DomBeta about ready to flash fangs and step into a fight.

It’s also in her eyes, Lela thinks. The way her Jade eyes grow darker—far more threatening. The woman—the fucking stranger—cared one way or another. And that…

Well, it throws Lela for a loop. It trips her up because there’s worry in that scent. Barely there, but Lela can smell it. Can smell it as clear as she can smell that fucking pungent blackberry trace.

It makes her hindbrain thump like a separate heart beat in her head. That concern, it pulls at something nameless in Lela’s chest. It makes Lela want to go stupid and quiet. It makes…It makes Lela want to reach her hand out and offer comfort and reassurance to the woman. It makes her neck wanna go limp the way it had when she stood before her mother once.

But she snaps herself out of it. Forces it down with such malicious force she might as well punch herself in the mouth for it.

Pulling up her lips into a sneer, Lela places her elbows on the table and tells the woman, “You shoulda minded your own fucking business, you and Clint. I don’t need two strangers swooping in trying to save me like I’m some lost cause. I can handle my shit just fine.”

Snapping her black shining laptop shut with a little more force than necessary the red head turns her full and utter attention on Lela. The red head glares at her with such intensity Lela’s surprised she hasn’t spontaneously caught fire. Pale pink lips thin into a harsh line as the woman retorts, “You’re slowly killing yourself Lela. That shit you’re taking, it’s killing you. And if they don’t do the job then the drugs you use to hide your scent will do it just fine.”

“Like I said,” Lela growls, low in her throat and mean, as she leaned further onto the table. She’s fighting every instinct screaming in her head, but Lela’s not about to back down. She doesn’t think she can, “What’s that got to do with you?”

The woman stares at her then, hard and heavy, but says nothing else.
And while Lela might not be under the suppressors and blockers, it did nothing to stop years of self-conditioning. Getting clean did little to wipe away all of her hard earned behaviors. Sure, her hindbrain—far stronger than it’s ever been, sober as she is—is raging against her to snap her mouth shut. To tilt her head in submission and make herself small. Lela would rather the red head sink her teeth into her throat.

Suppressors or not, Lela was a black little beast onto herself. A glutton for pain, she picks a fight. Something twisted in her wants the Beta before her to lash out at her.

Lela thinks, if she can push hard enough, maybe the Beta will hit her. Draw blood and drop the whole savior bullshit she was spewing. If the Beta did that, did the same shit anyone who’s ever touched Lela then Lela would know what the fuck to do.

Because she didn’t know how to feel right now. She didn’t know how to act in a situation like this. She’s never gone through anything like this. Never had someone show or express concern for her state of being. She’s never had someone whisk her away to some place to make her better.

Well she had, once, kind of. Pepper and Dr. Banner had helped her—hadn’t they. They put her up. Given her medical attention when they hadn’t needed to. Patched her up far more than Lela would’ve ever hoped they would. They’d helped her without a catch. And Lela had bailed because she was an ungrateful piece of shit.

The thoughts whirl around in Lela’s scattered mess of a mind. They make her ache for a smoke, for something to snort, for something to swallow down and slow her racing thoughts. To sink them back into the black sea of her mind.

“I don’t see you saving any of the other junkies down there? I don’t see you bringing in any of the other girls up here, giving them a place to run drugs out of their system. Why the fuck am I so special? What’s in it for you?” Lela sneers as she dug her fingers into her forearms.

The points of pain keep her head from spilling to the side.

The woman looks furious for all of ten seconds before her eyes flash with understanding and her thin white lips unwind. Smiling slow and careful, the red head lets her lids fall half lidded.

Warning flashes bright and hot in Lela’s mind. Danger, her instincts scream all at once. The woman before her went from looking about ready to fly out of her seat, a roar on the tip of her tongue, to leaning back like a disinterested jaguar.

As if the woman knew exactly what game Lela was playing and decided to turn the tables the last minute.

“You’re special because we deemed it so,” the woman informs Lela with all the royal air of a reigning queen.

The words make Lela bristle. They stabbed at her like pointed needles. Piercing flesh until they reached bone.

She does her damnedest to look as unaffected as she wishes she felt. There was a lot of things Lela was these days, but it sure as shit wasn’t special.

“Lucky me then,” Lela sarcastically drawls.

Their conversation comes to an abrupt end there as a knock sounds. Silently, the woman rises and heads for the door. Her bare feet barely making a sound as she went. When she returns it’s with a
“I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I ordered a standard breakfast package,” the woman tells her as she settled the tray onto the table.

When the covers of the plates get lifted, Lela is greeted with the sight of scrambled eggs, pancakes, breakfast meats and French toast. And the sight of it should make Lela hungry beyond words. The set up is gorgeous, expensive looking and fancy. After what felt like months of not eating, Lela should be diving right for it. She should be eating till her stomach fucking bulged with it.

Instead, after having puked till her stomach cramped and a heat as intense as she’s just gone through, it looks like shit. It smells like shit.

It makes nausea roll hot and gross through her. It makes a thin layer of clammy sweat line her forehead. It makes her want to push away from the table in general.

“M’not hungry,” Lela manages to force out of her mouth as she swallowed down an influx of too thick saliva.

“You haven’t had a solid meal in over ten days,” the woman states, her tone going firm and her eyes cutting over to Lela’s face as she tacked on, “You need to eat.”

Ten days.

The thought makes anxiety and acidic hatred crash and roll with her growing nausea.

Pursing her lips, Lela pushes herself up and away from the table, “I’m not hungry.”

“Fine,” the woman tersely snaps out. It sounds like maybe she wants to push it, like maybe she wants to argue, like maybe she wants to force Lela to sit still while she force-fed her. But she says nothing as she sunk back into her seat and watched Lela move.

Ten days.

Paring enough distance between her and the stench of the food, Lela heads for the pristinely built kitchen. Everything glimmers with how immaculately clean it is. It looks like something fresh out of a catalogue. Not a thing built for practical everyday use but for show. Almost like a dollhouse kitchen. Lela carefully runs her fingers over the plum colored granite tops. When she pulls her hand up, not a speck lines her fingers.

With the kitchen countertop between them, Lela finds the courage to ask:

“So am I a hostage now?”

“Not really. Being a hostage, by definition alone, means you’re being held here against your will until a reward is exchanged for your safe return.” The woman informs her blithely. Her delicately long fingered hands interwoven and laid out against her stomach.

“Okay, but I am being held here against my will, right?” Lela pushes, her eyes meeting emerald
Shrugging her shoulders and wobbling her head in a manner that conveyed ‘so and so’ the woman frowns lightly before saying, “In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“You realize how fucked up this is right?” Lela snaps out.

A jittery feeling crawls underneath her skin as she drew closer to the countertop. The ache in her limbs is fading away the more she moves. But the swirl of her mind, of her sobered up instincts, is putting her on the brink of something unfamiliar. Lela aches for a smoke. For something to burn to away with.

“I can understand how you might feel about it, yes.”

Huffing out a disbelieving breath, Lela rakes her fingers through her hair and barks out a cruel laugh. Running her tongue over her teeth, feeling them elongate beneath her tongue she asks, “How long you plan on keeping me here?”

“Not long,” the red head says. It doesn’t sound like a lie but it also doesn’t sound like the truth.

‘Why the fuck am I even here?!’ Lela wants to scream out. But she feels like a broken record already. And somehow she doubts the woman will answer her despite how many times she asks.

Swallowing down the bitterness of reality, of understanding she’s caught between a rock and an immovable red headed Beta, Lela asks, “You got my smokes?”

“You shouldn’t smoke,” the woman says in lieu of answering.

The growl that that prompts is unbridled and hateful as Lela snarls out, “Oh fuck off lady! You’re keeping me locked up here. Give me my fucking cigs!”

Arching a delicate brow, the red head remains unmoved. Her eyes look just a tiny bit amused but she says nothing else. Just keeps on staring at her like Lela’s the one that’s going to back down and away. Squaring her jaw, straightening her shoulders, Lela meets that stare with a cold glare and refuses to budge.

If this bitch thought just cause Lela was off her suppressors, off her fucking blockers, she was going to simper and cower—well, she had another thing coming. Her mother didn’t raise an Omega that went down so easy. Lela knew how to keep her feet planted long before she ever got her hands on the shit.

And Lela can’t even begin to explain it, can’t make heads or tails of it, but something in her wants to be as aggressive as possible. She wants to huff in air and puff out her chest. She wants to curl her fingers into fists and smash them onto something till the tang of her blood stunk up the clean air. She wants to present herself as much of a danger as she possibly can. She wants to bare her fangs—elongated and dangerous—like knives.

Something burns up in Lela’s chest that she’s gotta show the red head she’s capable. She’s worth it, that she’s a fighter. Something burns in her to show she’s worthy of the red heads gaze.

The challenge sits in the open air of the room for all of five minutes before the woman finally pulls her piercing eyes off of her. The challenge, for the most part, dies away. The red head moves on, like it’s barely a confrontation at all, and it makes Lela half writhe in place.

In a disinterested voice, the red head huffs out, “They’re in the first drawer there.”
Immediately, Lela yanks the drawer the woman waves at and finds her battered pack of Marlboro reds sitting in it. Wrapping her hands around the packaging and the zippo, Lela slams the pull out drawer closed harder than necessary. She’s got a white stick dangling from her lips ready to strike up then and there when the woman speaks again.

“The balcony is through there.”

With a lazy wave of her hand, the woman points to a silver curtain. Half stomping, Lela walks over to it and yanks it back to reveal a sliding door. She slips out faster than she’d like to admit. The soft shnick the door hisses out leaves Lela feeling utterly cheated when she attempts to slam it shut too.

But she burns the feeling away with the taste of tobacco and cigarette smoke. The wind whips up her hair and pushes her smoke out and away from her. She shivers when the breeze flutters the shirt she’s got on up and away from her flesh. It’s summer time now. And New York, for the most part is warm.

But Lela’s Texas grown, southern burnt. She comes from a place that’s a solid 99 degrees almost year round. With humidity levels at a constant 80% just to really fuck everyone over. She was born on a day the thermometer hit a peak 112. New York summers weren’t nearly hot enough for her. The winds were too cold.

And it’s funny, in the kind of way most of Lela’s life is bitterly funny, that all her life she hated that damnable heat. Hated the feeling of sweat trickling down her neck. She hated the way the wind carried in unrelenting fire instead of cool relief. She hated it so much she wished she could move somewhere were the sun never graced he sky and it was cold. A place where it snowed deep enough to cover her up. Now that she’s in a place that it isn’t so hot, Lela finds herself missing the warmth.

Lela’s got scorched bones, her mother used to say. It meant she was just as stuck as the rest of her people in the place where they burned their feet growing up. Her mother used to say she wouldn’t have been able to handle winters that dipped anywhere lower than 88 degrees.

And her mother, so very rarely wrong, was right in that assumption. The moment a cold enough breeze hits her, she feels it down to the marrow of her bones. She trembles, her teeth chatter in her mouth, when she’s forced to stand out on the streets in a halter-top and a skirt and the red is dipping down to some cruel one digit number. Lela feels like the cold is reaching into the softest parts in her and squeezing.

Leaning up against the railing, Lela bites back the shivers and smokes like maybe she can swallow down some of that heat. Like maybe if she keeps it in her lungs long enough, it’ll feel like home.

It doesn’t. But Lela’s never been known to be a quitter. Her mother raised a lot of things, but a quitter wasn’t one of them. She keeps on trying, holds the smoke in until her lungs ache, breathes out and then tries again.

Idly, her gaze wanders around her. They take in the sight of too tall buildings and skyscrapers. All of them gray metal and silver gleaming windowed monsters. Creations of man trying to topple the rest. She takes in the sight of cars, of people, so very far below her. Wherever they’re at, they’re up entirely too high. If Lela were to tip over and fall, she’d be dead the moment she touched the ground.

And isn’t that a funny thought, jumping. Funny like the rest of her life. Falling down. Tipping over and going splat miles below. Her life going up in smoke. All her bloody gory shit amounting to utterly fucking nothing as she became little more than mush on the dirty streets below.

It’s funny, like throwing a big fuck you to her mother would’ve been funny the first time she broke a
bottle over Lela’s head. It’s funny, like telling her Ex go to hell would’ve been before he ever laid his
goddamn hands on her and sunk his fucking teeth in. It’s funny until it’s not. It makes a cold smile
pull at the edges of her dry lips.

Something dark stirs in the deepest part of Lela’s brain. Past the whole rational and irrational part.
Hidden deep in that nest made of barbwire and glass shards she finds all the reasons why she should
leap. All the reasons why maybe it’s a good idea.

Because fuck, if ever there was a valid reason to just go down that path, it’s here and now. Trapped
in a fucking Hotel room with two strangers who knew—without a shadow of a doubt—exactly what
Lela was. Two strangers who had yet to tell her why the fuck they’ve gone and let Lela get sober
and clean. Two strangers who could very well be just as bad as her ex, and every hormone riddled
Alpha in the world.

Lela thinks, it’d be easier to jump now. Who the fuck would miss her if she did. Lela’s got shit for all
in this world. Hasn’t made any one real connection since she presented. Always pushing people back
at arms length because what if they found out. What if they knew? The only people who did know
were the ones who decided hurting her was what you did when you had information like that.

God, Lela thinks, it’d be so much easier if she just jumped.

But, like she’s said, her mother may have raised a lot of things, but she didn’t raise no quitter. Lela’s
stuck in this life till it killed her. She’s just hoping it’s sooner rather than later.

Lela’s four smokes in when the door softly pops open. She doesn’t turn to see who it is but she
immediately bites out, “Fuck off.”

“Well, good morning to you too,” hearing Clint’s voice, sleep rough and deep, makes something in
Lela squirm.

It makes her hindbrain go soft and gooey. Lela hates it almost immediately. So she drawls out, “It’s
almost sun down, not morning.”

“Well that’s good. I’d hate to find out you aren’t a morning person,” Clint laughs out as he came to
stand at her left hand side.

Bathed in the glow of pink, violet and indigo sunset light, Clint looks less bedraggled as he had
when he was sleeping on the couch. Though, it probably has more to do with the fact that his eyes
are open and shining and his smile is spread sunny wide on his lips.

Lela doesn’t know why she says it, only that she does, “I’m not, fucking hate mornings.”

“Well, that’s a shame. You’re a night owl then?”

Lela blames it on that smile—the same one she’d followed that night at the waffle house, a night that
felt like years ago—that has her speaking, “Not really. Just like sleeping.”

And with that they lapse into silence. Lela knows, that there’s no reason why she should feel
comfortable in Clint’s presences. He was just as much a stranger to her as the red head in the hotel
room. He was just as much a danger to her, if not more because of that damn smile. But she does.

She thinks it has a lot to do with the memory of his wind chime sounds. With the memory of his
gentle work rough hands running through her hair. It had everything to do with the way he’d softly
cooed at her when she was lost to panic, to her heat, to the pain of withdrawal and everything else.
But she’ll be damned if she was ever going to knowingly acknowledge it. To herself or the man.

“You eat anything yet?” Clint asks after Lela has flicked her fifth butt off the railing and into the wind.

Lela watches it tumble away violently on the wind. Half of her half envious of it for the way it just blows out into inexistence. Lela half wishes she could be flicked away just as easily.

Blowing out a long line of smoke, Lela tells him honestly, “Feel like shit. M’not really up for food.”

“What about something to drink? Tea maybe?” he asks, his voice, rough as it was, was gentle in it’s prodding. Like maybe he was watching his words carefully. As if he knew one wrong thing could tip the gentleness between them into something ragged and ugly.

Lela tries to ignore how that makes her feel both like a grade A asshole and shame. Because Clint, locking her up in a swanky hotel room aside, hadn’t done shit to her. He’d gotten in between her and a John when he hadn’t needed to. He’d helped her through her heat and subsequent withdrawal. He’d helped her, made that wind chime noises every time she was half way coherent. Put her worries at ease with the way they tumbled up out of his chest and into the air around them.

She tries not to think about it too hard. Because she can’t afford to get soft around anyone right now, least of all right now. She still doesn’t know what the hell they want from her. She still doesn’t know why they’ve got her here clean and sober.

“Never had tea,” Lela admits. Her fingers curl around her nearly empty pack. The worn edges give under her grip.

“C’mon, we’ll find one you like,” Clint tells her confidently.

Finally turning away from the fuzzy indistinguishable point far down below, Lela takes in the man beside her in full. Her eyes are hard, her tone firm as the steel in the skyscrapers behind her as she demands of him, “Why am I here? Why the hell am I fucking here?”

Clint’s smile, radiant as the sunset at her back, dims. It’s colored now by the deep shades of indigo that line the sky. His eyes grow darker too, show more green than gold as he looks at her in earnest. His expression is open—honest and entirely too vulnerable—it makes Lela want to flinch back and away.

It makes her baser instincts; born of abuse, blood and black alleys, want to sneer. But her hindbrain unfurls at the sight. It aches, thumps and makes her want to reach out. To offer a whimper, a cry...something.

Clenching her teeth in frustration Lela digs her feet into the rough concrete feel of the balcony tile. She can feel her skin grow raw and prickle with slight pain. It’s enough to keep her from moving. It’s enough to keep her locked in place.

“You needed someone to save you,” Clint says, his voice dropping its cheery disposition and growing somber and serious. Much like when the red head spoke to her, Clint is talking in stone-etched facts.

He says it like there is no other truth. No other argument to be had. Like Lela was a stone sinking in the sea and needed someone to pull her head up before she sucked in too much salt water.

And Lela hates how easily it sums up exactly the kind of shit she’s in. How she feels like most days she’s half hoping someone would come around a corner and tell there’s a better way. An easier way,
a safer way, to hide what she is. To do it without feeling so much pain. Always in pain, she’s always in pain these days. The salt water burns her nose, sears her lungs and chokes her.

Placing another white stick to her lips, Lela strikes and lights it. She breathes in, ragged and desperate before she speaks with smoke tumbling from her lips, “And what are you? My designated savior?”

And it’s meant to come out pointed, barbed and mean but it sure as shit doesn’t. It comes out sounding breathless, ragged and desperate. Sounding as if Lela wants it to be true. As if some part of her—bullshit instincts and dynamic aside—wants someone to reach into the salt water and pull her up and out. To save her before she slipped into a current and was swept into the dark.

Lela’s chest aches, aches like something simultaneously trying to explode out and cave her in. she pushes it aside and suffocates it with smoke.

Clint smiles, slow and delicate. His eyes glint golden as he runs a hand through his spikey messy golden strands and nods his head, “I mean, if you don’t mind. Playing Hero is kind of my thing.”

And Lela should sneer, should snarl, and should growl at the man. Bite at him that she doesn’t need a savior. She doesn’t need a hero. She should shove him away from herself and fly out of this place. But her hindbrain thumps in exhilaration. It makes her go half lidded and soft. It makes the tension in her shoulders swoop out and away with the wind that whips around them.

It’s strange, intoxicating. The way her instincts, all the ones she’s ignored her whole life, die down and settle on their own at the sight of that familiar smile. Pinching the butt of her cigarette between her lips, Lela pulls her gaze from him and back to the door leading into the suite. She’s silent for a moment before she says:

“Still doesn’t answer my question though.”

“You want to truth then?” Clint hedges, his voice kind and steady. When Lela makes no move to answer or turn to him, he continues on, “Banner sent us after you. Told us to make sure you were okay and let him know what we found. We found you about a day after you left the tower, hiding in that motel room of yours. We coulda just told Banner where you were, how you were holding up, but we didn’t. Or at least…we couldn’t.”

“Why’s that?” Lela can’t help but ask as she ashed her smoke.

Huffing out a deep breath that was all kinds of frustrated and exasperated, Clint tells her, “Can’t explain, not in anyway you’ll understand. But Nat and I, we say you. We saw you. Bloody and barely healed, walking around with your shoulders and jaw set. Picking fights with anyone who came too close to you.”

At that, Lela does turn to side eye the man. Her gaze settling on the furrow between two dark blonde brows.

“You wouldn’t back down. You just kept going toe to toe with Alpha’s like you could take them with one hand. It…It was insane! It was like you were chasing after the one who’d put you down for good.” Clint expresses with a certain type of heat settling in his eyes, “It reminded us of who we were, back before we found each other. And we, we couldn’t just walk away.”

“I’m not looking for charity,” Lela growls as she brought her dwindling cig to her lips. Her own brows are pinched and her jaw set into a tight line.

Shame and indignation go to war in her chest at his words. She half wants to take a swing at the
man’s perfect golden face. Wants to split his running mouth open and bloody. See if he says anymore of that bullshit through a mouth full of blood. But she stays shock still, can’t move lest she actually swing.

“I didn’t say you were,” Clint pushes back, looking at her through a set of eyes that could very much tell she was ready to take a swing at him. Eyes that saw the hit coming and was letting himself lean into it.

The look is jarring enough to force Lela back a step. She recoils from it fast enough that she burns her knuckles on the cigarette that slips from her fingers. The pain flashes white hot before simmering low.

Lela knows that look. Has felt enough times on her own face to know where it came from. She gave it to her mother who was always screaming her Alpha rage. Breaking plates so that Lela understood, you don’t speak unless it was something her mother wanted to hear. She gave it to her Ex as he dug in his fingers into the tender flesh of her arms. Hurting her so that Lela understood, she was property and nothing more.

Lela’s never dreamed it could be reflected back at her. Given to her because she was some raging monster, like her mother, like her Ex. A lit stick of dynamite sparking and aching to explode onto someone else.

She doesn’t want to be that person. Has never wanted to become the monster she knew she was looking like more and more everyday. But Lela doesn’t know how to stop it. Doesn’t know how to kill it before it swallowed her whole.

“We just want to help you, because no one helped us,” Clint admits lowly. His eyes are heavy and dark.

If Lela was the type of girl to cry. She’d do it then and there. Drop to her damn knees and weep. Because something in her knows, understands now, why she felt so at peace with Clint and so ready to tow the line with the red head. They were kindred spirits, them three. Creatures molded by abuse. And they want to help her. Save her from the empty ocean Lela has tossed herself into. They want to save her and Lela...

Lela wants to be saved.

Chapter End Notes

Suicide Hotline
1-800-273-8255

Okay, in no way shape or form am I suggesting suicide is 'quitters talk'. I myself attempted suicide when I was younger. Obviously, I made it. But it's pretty
much changed me as a person. I'm diagnosed with a bipolar disorder, or Manic Depression as well as anxiety. I'm not going to sit here and tell you that it's something that magically gets better one day. Because I myself am not better. People like to assume that because I'm a mother now that it's just fluttered up and away, settled into the dirt at my feet because I'm a mother and mothers can't afford to be so sad for no reason. Mothers can't afford to obsess over a clean bathroom like it needs to pass a health board review while I lose two days worth of sleep. Everyday I struggle to pull myself out of bed, ready the day for my son, and not fall to the utter fuckery that is my brain. I know what it's like to want to go down that path guys. It's a long hard road. It's ugly and vicious. What I do know is that if you reach out, if you just talk to someone, let them know you're going down it helps. Reach out for help guys. Please. I wish I had before I did what I did. I wish everyday I could've just hunted down a number and said 'Hey, that bottle of pills is looking mighty friendly right now'. Because, although it's been years, that shit dogs at my heels when I sit still long enough. It fucked up my family too and made every relationship around me turn crooked and wavy. (Shit, we still aren't okay. Like they look at me like I'm not all there. Like I'm some misshaped statue that they turn to hide in the corner when the sunlight breaks through the windows.)
If you reach out, get some help, it helps. It's work though. Hard ass ugly work. But most great things in life are. I mean look at the Sistine Chapel, it's beautiful to look at but it musta been hard as balls to complete. And we know for a fact our boy Michael had an ass load of assistants keeping him upright while he finished. He may have painted it on his own, but not with out help. And yeah Life can be a bitch to deal with most days. But if we reach out, get our selves some hands to prop us up, we can make it. We can make beautiful things together, alongside one another. So keep your chin up my beautiful babes. Reach out if you need to. don't be ashamed. Don't lock yourselves in like I did. Like our friend Joe Dirt says 'You gotta keep on Keeping on.'
-Ani

Suicide Hotline
1-800-273-8255
Fleeting Connections and Destinations

Chapter Summary

"Lela’s heard of them. Knows their purpose. Knows it because every time she got picked up by the police, anyone who smelled like an omega got carted off to the place. Kicking and screaming they’d go. Their minds about to slip through the holes of their ears like slush. Places like that were renowned for their ability to make unruly Omega’s fade into nonexistence. Locking up anyone that was considered defective."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Trust. It’s a simple enough word. Five letters.

Now, Lela my not have graduate high school, but she knew the meaning of it. Understanding the word does little to make it feel any less foreign on her tongue. When her mind catches on it, it pulls and stretches like it’s gotten vowels hidden in between.

‘We just want to help you, trust us.’ Clint had said that first night.

Lela didn’t, couldn’t trust them. She had every reason in the world over why she couldn’t, why she shouldn’t, sitting on her tongue. Every reason why she should’ve run out the door painted on her skin—skin raised and flesh hard—the scars of her ugly life.

Trust. It’s a simple enough word with a simple enough meaning behind it. Five letters simple little letters. Lela should understand it, but she doesn’t. Not really. It’s a word that hardly means anything to her. A word that was empty and rang like a quarter being dropped into a dry well.

But she bites her tongue, keeps most of her fear locked tight in her chest. She doesn’t trust Clint or Natasha. But she’s got little choice in this. She’s locked up in here till the jailers decided to release her.

Reluctantly, Lela is forced to watch the days unfurl before her. All the while she keeps her head straight, her neck guarded and her back firmly to the wall.

Trust, Lela doesn’t think she’ll ever understand that word. Not with the fuckery that was her mind.

*Lela*sitting on the couch when the sound of the suite front door opens and closes. The sound itself isn’t loud. But the suit is quiet now. She hasn’t bothered with the TV all day. She’s still got a weird throb on the side of her head. Like maybe she’s spent the last year without once having a glass of
Which, in all honesty, isn’t all that outlandish. Lela wasn’t the poster child of self-care. She’s taken to sleeping whenever she can. Sitting on the couch, or laid up in that beautiful bed. The wonder-dicks, that’s what she’s come to calling them, don’t seem to mind how little she gets up to do.

Something about the effects of getting off of third rate suppressors, blockers and drugs mixing with her rancid heat. Lela’s little more than a ball of fatigue and fluxing hormones. She sleeps like the dead. Can’t help the way her eyes are sometimes heavy as weights.

Lela also can’t help the rush of her temper. The harsh push and pull of her mood swings give her whiplash. The way she can go from mildly irritated at having Clint trail her steps to spitting mad at Natasha’s invasive need to shove at her pills of different colors and sizes.

It’s been five days since she woke up from her heat. Five days of trying to keep from feeling like a raging psychopath because she could smell Clint’s apprehension and Natasha’s irritation. She’d be worried about it, if she weren’t so fucking exhausted too.

But, Lela’s always been the type of girl to ignore things important like that. So she stuffs her growing worry into a tiny little hole in her mind and refuses to touch it.

Instead, she’s focusing on the wonder-dicks, though, and they’re incessant need to try and force-feed her.

Natasha keeps trying to shove protein shakes or liquefied barf down her throat. Clint insists the way to go is greasy and cholesterol inducing. Neither of the two is happy at the way she nit picks and barely swallows anything down. She can see it in their eyes. Smell it in their scents.

Natasha smells like spent gunpowder whenever Lela leaves her bullshit shakes halfway. Clint smells tangy like rusted pipes when she barely finishes off a slice of pizza.

Lela can smell it all, and it fucks with her head. Makes her want to do something fucking stupid like duck her head down and offer some bullshit assed whimper over it. It makes Lela feel like a kid in front of her mother and father. Two sets of disappointed eyes looking down their nose at her. She bites her cheek at the feeling. Sinks her long canines through flesh until she bled.

Both for the feeling and her inability to really eat anything, there’s nothing Lela can do on that front. Especially the eating thing. She’s spent half her life running on scrapes in between weeks of not eating. Her stomach can’t handle food the way it ought to. Lela wishes she could scarf down that monster-fuck of a burger Clint wrangled for her. But two bites in and something in her belly twisted and pulled.

She sticks to the peppermint tea they brew for her. When she’s feeling especially risky, she’ll make herself a pot of sweetened pomegranate cherry tea and sit out on the balcony with her smokes. Whatever healthy qualities it might’ve had dies with the heavy hand Lela has with the sugar can. She usually takes her drink out on the balcony where she can smoke in peace and quiet. It’s a way to kill time and a nice little reprieve from two sets of eyes that watch her every move. Like hawks, those two. Always keeping their eyes on her.

If she so much as sneezed Natasha wanted to jam a thermometer down her throat. If Lela so much as jammed her toe Clint would come swooping in with those velvet soft purrs of his.

Fucking ridiculous.

And yet, every time it happened, something too hot to the touch would threaten to strangle her. Lela
made a point to snap in annoyance every chance she could. She’d growl every time Clint tried to corral her into the dining room table with his gentle hands. She’d snarl—ugly and mean—when Natasha would hand her vitamins to supplement her diet.

She tries to ignore how her growls, usually so violent and dangerous, sound little more like the growls of an annoyed teenager. Because they sounded mulish, childish and something like peevish to her own ears. Lela would be mad at it, would really put her heart and soul into it, if she could forget that look Clint had given to her on the balcony.

The memory haunted her. Dogged at her fucking heels every time she got an ache for something violent. Kept her outbursts to a minimum. She can still hear the phantom words, ‘trust us’, lashing at her back. Those memories refuse to fall into the black consuming sea of her mind.

Without looking up, or picking up her head from where she’s leaning it against the back of the couch, Lela calls out, “Please, tell me that’s not food.”

Laughing, Clint shuffles over to her. His booted feet thump lightly now where before they’d been silent. It’d taken Lela nearly sinking her teeth into his face for the man to learn he needed to make a hell of a lot more noise when he moved.

“Eating isn’t a chore Lela,” Clint says. He sounds bright and happy. The kind that usually meant he was about to do something he wasn’t sure she’d like.

A displeased growl rumbles up her throat. It barely makes her teeth vibrate, but it’s loud enough to get her message across. Eating might not be a chore but around the wonder-dicks it sure as hell felt like it. Currently, she’s got a stomach full of protein shake Natasha had refused to budge on. One that had been green and tasted like actual blended shit.

She’s not in the fucking mood to eat.

Just like she hadn’t been in the mood for that green medical shake. Just like she hadn’t been in the mood to get sober. Just like she hadn’t been in the mood to get dragged through her heat feet first. Just like she hadn’t been in the mood to stay in a goddamn swanky five star hotel with a DomBeta and her Gamma.

(Because they haven’t said so out loud, but Lela could see it. She saw the way they moved with one another. The looks and touches speaking to something like intimacy borne over years.)

Lela’s growl almost intensifies at her thoughts. It walks a fine line between displeasure, annoyance and true anger. She bites it back to keep from getting into a fight. She’s not in the mood to fight either, not really

She’s fucking tired of fighting. She hates how it boils her blood and makes her feel like she’s rotting from within. Lela wants to stop feeling like that. Like she’s two good shoves from the edge of something dangerous. It feels like she’s been standing on the ledge of something since the day she was born. Two steps away from falling down or getting swept off her feet.

Lela’s so fucking tired of it.

The thump of something landing on the empty seat next to her forces Lela’s eyes open. Looking down she spots a dark duffle bag. She wonders what the hell she’s supposed to do with that before Clint informs her:

“It’s all your stuff. Cleared out your old motel room this morning.”
It’s an innocent enough gesture. Picking up the few pieces of Lela’s life she had left. Packaging them up and bringing them to her. But makes unease settle on Lela’s chest. Because aside from saying they just want to help her, neither Clint nor Natasha had told her why.

She still doesn’t know how long she’s going to be here. She doesn’t know where they’re going to want to take her when it comes time to move. Because Lela may be new at this, but she knows for a fact this shit isn’t permanent. How long could they afford to keep renting out this suite? Anxiety bites at the frayed edges of her chest. It makes a prickly cold feeling crawl up her fingers as she grips the duffel bag and zips it open. Her clothes sit in there, the few pieces she owned, neatly folded and smelling infinitely cleaner than when she’d last seen it.

It’s less than half of what she knows was in the motel room. She can spot nothing shimmery, nothing made of elastic. It’s the last of her cotton tee’s, her underwear and a few jeans as well as socks. Whatever material evidence of Lela’s sordid past remained missing. Snuffed out by Clint’s careful hands.

Lela doesn’t know how to feel about that. So she ignores it like she’s come to ignore most of her problems these days. Without a word, Lela zips it back up and shoves the bag to her feet and sinks back into the position she’d been when the door opened. She intends to go back to sleep. To drop down into the unconsciousness where she wasn’t living through this unknown. But she’s stopped by a voice.

Brisk, to the point and nonsensical, Natasha asks, suddenly appearing in the living room, “How are you feeling?”

“Same way I felt two hours ago,” Lela bites out through closed lids.

“It’s past midday, you need to take your vitamins,” Natasha tells her in a tone that’s two shades away from being an all out command.

And Lela, Lela’s feeling all kinds of upset at the moment, so she growls out, “Is this—Is this the New York version of Taken? You guys trying to get me nice and healthy to sell me off to the highest bidder?”

Natasha and her aren’t nearly as comfortable as she and Clint. Natasha was just as brash and bullheaded as Lela. They locked horns over everything. Constantly sniping at one another. Exchanging glares over the rim of whatever blended monstrosity she’d created. Sometimes, Lela was tempted to toss her head to the side for the Beta. Her hindbrain kicking up and wanting to go belly up for all that power contained in 5’8 pale gorgeousness.

Other times Lela’s worst traits wanted to go toe to toe for real. Wanted to sink her teeth into the creamy pale flesh of Natasha’s neck and rip. Something vile and abuse born makes her ache for Natasha to curl her long fingers into fists and hit.

More often than not, Lela pushed her buttons just for the mere sake of it. Natasha always seemed more than happy to meet Lela in a confrontation. It killed the time and let some of Lela’s pent up frustrations bleed out nice and smooth. Sometimes it bordered on dangerous, a real fight brewing under the harsh weight of Lela’s current instability.

If it wasn’t for Clint’s constant rumbles and smooth voice, they’d have killed each other day one.

“Yes, now we won’t get much out of you if you’re just a bag of bones,” Natasha quips, dry and sarcastic.
And that, it should make Lela way more uneasy than a duffle bag lined with her clothes, but it doesn’t. It settles something in her. Natasha’s dry humor was almost as morbid as Lela’s own. Sometimes it was hard to tell if she was saying something as a joke or not. Lela liked to think it was all in the delivery and in the redheads eyes.

Tsking her tongue, Lela opens her eyes and flashes her sharp teeth in something that couldn’t legally be called a smile, “And here I thought you were doing the lords work. Setting me straight and all.”

“I’m in it for the money,” Natasha informs her with a pretty blithe smile as she shoved at Lela a cup of something steaming and a hand full of vitamins.

Pushing herself up straight, Lela takes the cup that smelled of pomegranate and cherry and snatched the pills up. She swallows them down dry and carefully blows over the warm liquid before tentatively taking a sip. She doesn’t bother to hide the grimace on her face though. Natasha never added sugar into Lela’s mugs. And Lela couldn’t drink it unless it was sweet, obnoxiously sweet.

Lela thinks Natasha does it on purpose, serving her something bitter because she as a goddamn bitch. And, Natasha wasn’t too keen on the fact that Lela openly referred to her as one. When the cup is half drained Lela snipes:

“Anyone ever call you a pill pusher?”

“I’ve been called a lot of things, but never that,” Natasha airily replies before seating herself down on a one seater across the way. She tucks her feet up underneath her. Today she looks just as drop dead gorgeous as all the days before. But more so by the way her teal long sleeve hugs her torso and her dark black leggings. She looks relaxed, comfortable as she sunk deeper in her search for a comfortable spot.

Eventually Clint sinks into the seat beside Lela. His body a hands breadth away from Lela’s own. It’s far too close than what Lela would usually allow on any given circumstance. But it’s Clint. Clint who kept her nice and comfortable while she puked her brains out. So Lela pushes away the instinctive need to spit and growl. She lets it go and lets the silence settle onto her shoulders.

Or at least, she tries.

“So are we ever going to talk about it?” Lela finally asks once she’s swallowed down her mouth full of tea.

“Talk about what?” Natasha innocently asks. Her face is carefully constructed into genuine confusion. Her ruby red lips slightly down turned as she wrinkled her nose. Even her scent, ginger, nutmeg and black berry, almost smells of bewilderment. It’d be believable if not for the way her green eyes glitter.

Natasha knew damn well what Lela was talking about.

Gripping the handle to her mug a little harder than necessary, Lela tersely says through tightening lips, “The fact that I’m still here, with you two.”

“Ah,” Natasha softly exclaims, her face smoothening out with faux understanding, “That.”

“Yeah, that,” Lela snaps out.

Again, Lela and Natasha find themselves locking gazes. Their eyes hitting a challenge that neither of them initiated but would gladly welcome.
Clint, ever the peace maker, is the one who speaks, “Well, we were waiting until you were a little…healthier—”

“For what?” Lela interrupts harshly as she turned to look at the golden haired man.

“There’s a clinic, up in Queens, they specialize in Omega care,” Natasha states in a light tone that belied the firmness of her eyes, “We want you to go.”

“A clinic,” Lela repeats the word, the liquid and pills sitting in her stomach turn to lead. She can feel her heart begin to race in her chest. She can feel the way her body has locked tight and tension filled. Lela can almost taste her own anxiety bleeding out into the air around them. Fear soaks through her borrowed clothes. Lela can smell it, can smell it wafting around her. She’s not on anything to kill it. Hasn’t had a smoke since she woke up this morning. She barely smells like cigarette smoke to hide it.

Lela growls, rough and ugly as the world whirls around in her brain. A clinic for Omegas. It was a nice way of saying a training facility. A place where unruly omega’s went almost immediately after presenting. A place for them to learn all the bullshit that they’d need to know to appease their mates. To screw their heads on straight, a place to make them learn their fixed place on the rank of dynamics. A place that took them in, changed them, made them docile so an Alpha could come and mount them.

Lela’s heard of them. Knows their purpose. Knows it because every time she got picked up by the police, anyone who smelled like an omega got carted off to the place. Kicking and screaming they’d go. Their minds about to slip through the holes of their ears like slush. Places like that were renowned for their ability to make unruly Omega’s fade into nonexistence. Locking up anyone that was considered defective.

If there’s one thing Lela’s damn sure over herself, it’s that she’s defective. She’s wired wrong. Put together with spare parts. Broken enough times that she can’t make sense of the shards in her head. She’s a damaged Omega. They’ll take one look at her, lock her up and throw away the damn key.

She’d rather fucking die then head to a place like that.

“Go fuck yourself,” Lela snarls out. Her canines have grown long now. Her growls coming from the black chasm in her chest. And while her previous growls had been somewhat placating, these weren’t. These were fighting growls. Growls that promised bloodshed and violence of the darkest kind.

Lela’s growls are answered by threatening ones seeping out of Natasha. They sound like the rumbles of death itself. Like the ground was splitting open and letting through actual fucking demons. Lela would be impressed; scared too, if she wasn’t so fucking lost in her anxiety fueled fear.

“I’m not going to no fucking Omega Facility,” Lela hisses, her eyes meeting green fire.

Everything in her head is begging for Lela to step away from the fight she’s kicking up. Her instincts want whimpers to spill forth. But Lela roars, hate filled and vicious. And like she’s incapable of backing away from a fight, Natasha meets her head on. Her ruby red lips part to reveal DomBeta fangs that could shred Lela to ribbons. Her pale face is contorted in her lethal warning.

Lela was wrong. Natasha wasn’t a bitch. She was the goddamn devil. And Lela would marvel, would absolutely worship the sight of her fury filled face, if it wasn’t aimed right at her.

“Nat!” Clint barks out a Gamma warning. His own growls filling the air as Natasha’s abruptly died
away. And when it’s only Lela’s growls ringing in the air, he says, “It’s not an O-Fac. It’s a clinic. One that specializes in prescribing proper Suppressors and Blockers.”

The volatile part of Lela barely even hears Clint. She can barely make sense of his words. It takes a while for them to sink in through the red hazy of her panic and fury. When they do, Lela tears her gaze from the Beta silently glaring. Her fangs delicately put away.

Slowly, Lela takes in Clint’s open and golden face. Her eyes flash from his honey colored eyes, watches the green glitter and shine. Her eyes rove over the strong line of his nose and chase up the gold dusting of his freckles. She chases them until they disappear into his temples and hairline. The soft bow of his blush colored lips is gorgeous.

Lela looks at him, at his open expression—completely honest expression—and feels her growls rumble low in her chest until they die away. When she takes a deep breath through her nose she can smell the tang of his concern, of his own anxiety but nothing that spells of his lies. It settles her. Far more than it should to a near stranger.

But she’s been living with them for over five days now. Five days where she’s awake and speaking to them. Interacting, arguing, figuring out the small things like how Clint hated mushrooms but he’d eat anything smothered in cheese. Of figuring out Clint, Gamma Clint, could go to toe with his Beta if he needed to. Of understanding that Clint, was built entirely of happiness and sunshine.

They’re hardly strangers. Still, Lela shouldn’t feel so fucking connected to a man she doesn’t even know the last name of. It trips her up, that she can admit—even if it is to herself—that she feels connected to him at all. It was like the thinnest of ribbons was tied between them two. A strange silk like band that caressed her skin and that kept her tethered and grounded.

Pulling her gaze from him she glances up to Natasha. The red head hasn’t moved. Looks just as comfortable as she had when she’d first slipped up onto that chair. She looks as unconcerned as a person could with the whole of the situation. But Lela can see it, in her emerald eyes, the way they’ve darkened with her regret at her own outburst. Lela can smell it, from across her room the way the red head is remorseful even if she won’t admit it or acknowledge it to Lela or Clint.

And as much as Natasha wanted to display herself as a stone cold bitch, she wasn’t. Five days was all it took for Lela to figure the red head out. Five days for Lela to see through the carefully constructed façade Natasha put up. While she was brash, rude and entirely too demanding, everything she shoved Lela’s way was made specifically for Lela. Everything specifically chosen to help Lela.

And Lela couldn’t help but feel like there was something there between them. A connection that was almost just as firm and bright as Clint’s. It was different though. Firmer, harsher, far more rigid than Clint’s. Made of steel and like no matter how hard Lela pushed at it, Natasha would refuse to let it break.

It blew Lela back. It made her heart race in her chest. Made anxiety swirl up the pit of her stomach till she was choking on her stomach acid. In a panicked rush, she jumps up and out of her seat. Puts as much distance between the wonder-dicks and her self as she can manage without actually leaving the room.

Distantly, Lela realizes she’s growling. Savage, wild things that make the rough of her mouth tremble and her throat ache. They make her sound desperate like a cat with who’s been cornered by two street dogs. Lela struggles to pull in a breath. She can feel her lungs aching, but she can’t pull in a breath. Every ragged breath she manages to drag in comes tumbling out in those manic sounding growls.
Running a ragged hand through her hair, she violently shoves those fucking insidious thoughts about connections away from herself. She blames it on the fact that she’s locked in here with them that she feels any type of way.

They had a name for it, Stockholm syndrome, Lela comforts herself with that instead of accepting it as anything else.

Lela desperately tries to think about Clint’s soft plea of ‘trust us’.

Because they haven’t done anything to her. They’ve done nothing else but try to keep her health and fed. They keep their distance when Lela draws a line. They haven’t tried to pull rank and make her bare her neck for them. They haven’t so much as pushed her into a corner. And Lela knows she hasn’t been trying all that hard to not be confrontational or aggressive.

Lela tries desperately to focus on Clint’s words. She tries to focus on them instead of her fear and anxiety.

Digging her fingers into her right temple, Lela forces out of her mouth, “Suppressors and blockers?”

“Yeah, we were hoping you’d let us take you,” Clint softly states. His eyes, golden and green, are riddled with his worry.

Gritting her teeth, Lela nods and then turns on her heel to the lone bedroom. She comes back in with her boots in hand and her leather jacket pulled over her long sleeved purple borrowed shirt. Wordlessly and without making eyes contact with either of the wonder dicks, she heads straight for the duffle bag containing her clothes. She half dumps out the contents onto the couch as she pulls out a pair of black skinny jeans. Uncaring, Lela slips out of her borrowed sweats and changes. When her torn at the knee—entirely too distressed—jeans are on her, button and zipper still open. She pulls on a pair of socks and jams her feet into her boots. Lela doesn’t bother with tying up the laces.

Looping the button into place and zipping up, she looks up and roughly demands, “Let’s go.”

“Right now?” Clint asks, shock and apprehension coloring his tone. He rises to his feet almost instantly. Tall and built like a fitness trainer, Clint almost makes Lela take a full step back.

She hides the sharp stab of unwarranted fear by heading out to the balcony to retrieve her smokes. It’s a new pack, one she had to call through the Hotel phone to get because the wonder-dicks had refused to get her any. When she steps back into the suit, smokes and zippo sitting in her jackets inner pocket, Natasha has changed into jeans. She’s also sporting a dark leather jacket on her body that was almost the same as Lela’s.

The only difference being that Natasha’s was newer and infinitely more expensive looking. On Natasha’s feet she’s got on black-heeled boots leaving her almost as tall as Clint.

“That whenever you’re ready,” Natasha drawsl slow and careful. Her eyes pin Lela in place with a silent dare.

And Lela’s not dumb. She knows damn well that this isn’t a good idea. She’s been off her blockers and suppressors for the better part of two weeks now. She knows at this point, she’s gotta be smelling of exactly what she is. Anyone who bothered to take a shallow breath around her would fucking know.

They’d know.

All of Lela’s hard work going up in smoke.
That knowledge, dark and evil as it is, makes cold fear seep into her veins. The feeling makes every bloody and black self-preservation tick she’s got want to curl their poisoned spikes inward at her. It makes Lela want to snarl and snap. To roar and fucking fight.

But she bites it back. Swallows it down like the burning sting of cheap vodka. Tightening her jaw, Lela raises her head in challenge and glares at Natasha. She was going to get those fucking suppressors and blockers and not a single fucking body was going to stop her. She’d break any ones jaw who stood too close to her. She’d sink her fangs to anyone that tried to bark an order at her.

Lela’s hands ball into fist in preparation of a fight. Her body going tense as if an Alpha, a Beta or even a forceful Gamma was standing in front of her ready to try some shit.

For all that Natasha looked as if she was both bored and amused in a condescending manner, her eyes shone with something that was almost pride as she looked Lela over. A small smile tugged at her ruby red lips as she tipped her head in a fraction of nod.

Lela kills the need to fucking preen under that approving look, cold, hard and vicious beneath her heel.

Huffing out a breath, Clint rubs at the back of his neck and says, “Okay, I guess let me call the clinic. See if they can take us in on such a short notice.”

“I’ll get the car,” Natasha announces to the room at large before turning and leaving the suite. And before Lela knows what the fuck she’s doing, she’s moving and saying, “I’ll go with you.”

If any of the three are shocked, they don’t show it. Lela sure as shit doesn’t. She keeps her shoulders set and her back straight as she followed the red head out of the suite room. Clint follows close at her heels. And on any given day, that would’ve set Lela off—enough to spin around and swing—but it sets a wild thing in her at ease. Lela viciously ignores it.

As they walk down the long hallway, Lela swallows down the growing lump in her throat. Her mouth going bone dry as she forced her heart to beat slow and careful. Stuffing her hands into her pockets, balled up tight and painful, she wills her scent to become small. She doesn’t want to smell like fear, like panic and whatever the fuck else she did that could spell out Omega.

Lela thinks back to her mother. To the way she’d learned, through trials made of blood and broken glass, how to keep her scent smelling like nothing. Lela scrounges up every little black-handed trick she’s employed to keep herself in one piece like second nature. She cloaks herself in them, fitting them over her flesh like armor. They go on seamlessly. They fit like maybe they’ve never fallen away. Lela pulls as much comfort from that thought as she can.

That she hasn’t changed. That she’s still that rabid little street dog even without her suppressors and blockers. That she can still posture without effort.

Lela tries to pull comfort from it and ignores how her hindbrain kicks in agitation and fear.

When they enter the elevator, blessedly empty, Lela briefly closes her eyes and puts every ounce of energy into wrapping up her fear soaked thoughts in sinking them into the sea of her dark mind. The only sound in the elevator is Clint’s voice while he spoke on the phone. Lela keeps her eyes closed until she hears Natasha’s voice:

“Here”

Slowly blinking open her eyes, Lela turns to the red head on her right and eyes the small round
cylinder being given to her. Carefully, Lela reaches for it. Her eyes must hold her question because Natasha goes on to say.

“It’s a scent neutralizer. It keeps your scent muted. Spray it onto your pulse points.”

The black tube hardly weighs a thing in Lela’s hands. It’s barely big enough to span Lela’s palm. Which was saying something because Lela knew just about everything on her was considered small. From her ass to her tits to her damn feet and hands, Lela’s perfectly proportionate to her small frame. Still, the little black spray bottle is entirely too tiny to do the job Natasha claims.

But as the red little numbers over the elevator door start ticking down, she decides now’s a good a time as any to trust Natasha on her word alone. Gripping the bottle, she sprays it on each wrist and both sides of her neck. And then, just to be on the safe side she keeps spraying till the front of her shirt is damp with it and her hair gets heavy with the liquid.

“I think you’re good,” Clint coughs out, his free hand waving away the light misty cloud that had formed away from his face.

And yeah, maybe that was true. But Lela’s always erred on the side of caution. So she pockets the black little spray in the left pocket of her jacket.

When the elevator doors slide open, she follows Natasha out. Her long toned legs eat up the ground as she sets a brisk and steady walk. They aren’t running, but they sure as hell have a fast pace set.

Lela’s heart ratchets up at least twenty notches higher as she takes in the golden gilded lobby of the hotel she’s been staying in. She takes in the clientele milling around. All of which are dressed in expensive suits or dresses. Lela feels wildly out of place here. And by the wide-eyed looks she receives from a gaggle of pretty little Beta’s at the counter, she fucking looks it.

Off her suppressors and blockers as she is, Lela can smell almost everything in the room. She can smell every Gamma, every Beta and every goddamn Alpha that’s so much as stood in there long enough. She feels her skin crawl with it. Her hindbrain, already so on edge, fucking writhes. Lela does her level best to keep her head straight and her growls locked in her chest.

When they pass through the front door, everything in Lela goes shock still. She can smell the deep wild mess that belonged to an unmated Alpha. A scent so space heavy she wrinkles her nose and instantaneously drops fang. When she spots the doorman, tall thickly built and the shade of melted chocolate she releases the deepest growls she’s got in her.

The friendly smile the Alpha man wears immediately drops. The step he’d taken forward to hold open their door disappears as he stumbles back. Surprise and a small dash of fear colors his face as his eyes zeroed in on her face.

“Wha—” the Alpha exclaims as he held out his hands to show he was no threat.

Slipping a hand onto her shoulder, Clint squeezes tight and rumbles deep and soothing those wind chime sounds. That strange mixture of barely there growls and half purrs settling Lela down inch by inch.

“Don’t mind her, she’s got a shit mood most days,” Natasha drawled with a bright smile as she snatched her keys out of the mans hands and headed for the parked car.

The hand on Lela’s shoulder never eases up as Clint steered her towards their vehicle. Opening the passenger seat, Clint ushers her in before securely closing the door. He himself slides into the back seat. The car is running, Natasha seated behind the wheel with flashing black aviators perched on the
elegant line of her nose. By they don’t move as Natasha pushes down her glasses and stares at Lela over the rim of them. Her right brow raised expectantly.

“What?” Lela snaps out, irritated and on edge.

“Seat belt,” Natasha says simply in a tone that brook no argument.

Pursing her lips to keep from baring her teeth, Lela demands, “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

Turning away from her, Natasha pushes her glasses up and drums her fingers lazily over the steering wheel. The action alone telling Lela she wasn’t about to move unless her request was fulfilled. Blithely, the red head merely mutters, “Safety first.”

Tersely, Lela pulls her lips over her canines and roughly yanks the belt over herself and into place. The growls that tumble past her tightly clenched teeth speak to her annoyance. Only when the buckle clicks into place does Natasha shift the car into motion and pull out into the street.

Unfucking believable, Lela couldn’t help but grouse to herself.

Because of course Natasha would be worried about Lela wearing a seat belt in a car. Never mind the fact that the red head’s been holding her hostage for over two weeks.

Ignoring the anger that usually comes from acknowledging that fact, Lela instead focuses on the drive. She’s not very familiar with New York and what surrounds it. In all honesty, she hasn’t moved around much since she first got here. Hadn’t felt the need to. So while Clint had told her where the Clinic was located she didn’t know how long it’d take to get there.

“How far away is Queens?” she asks the car at large when they hit their first red light.

“It’s about a thirty to thirty five minute drive, depending on traffic,” Clint tells her as he leaned in from the back seat.

Briefly, Lela wonders why the fuck she has to be buckled but Clint didn’t.

Thirty five minutes. That’s how much more time she needed to endure not being loaded with suppressors and blockers. Thirty-five minutes. She could do that. Gritting her teeth, Lela stiffly nods and keeps her eyes locked on the bumper of a ’99 honda accord with a dent in it’s bumper. She keeps glaring at it in silence until Natasha reaches for the radio and fiddles with the dial until she lands on something like a news channel.

‘No, think about it Joel! They’re vigilantes! They take the law into their own hands! They’re no better than thugs on the street! I mean, if they want to make the world a better place, they should just enlist in the army! Or join the police force! Instead what do they do? They dress up in masks and run around beating up people in the name of justice! It’s wrong, it’s against the law and they should be held accountable! I mean, look at what happened in Sokovia! Or better yet, look at what happened here! Alien Monsters descended from the sky! And they just ran around knocking buildings in their effort to help people! And what did the good sheepole do? They clapped for them. I saw someone on my way to work hawking Iron Man mugs—’

And Lela, she doesn’t care one-way or the other about super heroes. She’s never been for them or against them. She’s never cared. Always busy with the small bubble that was her shitty life. So it’s less what the man’s saying and more of the fact that his voice sounds like nails on a chalkboard in her ears. It sounds like someone’s trying to fuck her inner ear drums till they bled. It makes the anger Lela’s fighting so hard to keep contained finally lash out. It spills over like a pot boiling water.
Messily and noisily, Lela roars and slams a closed fist at the radio. The voice immediately cuts off as the radio turned off.

“Was that really necessary?” Natasha dryly asks, her face tilt so that she both was looking at Lela and the road.

Setting her jaw tight, Lela bites out, “Yes.”

“You know,” Natasha starts as she reached for the dial again and put on something low and with a beat rather than a hate speech, “You throw far too many tantrums.”

“That tends to happen when one is being held hostage,” Lela snapped back, her teeth flashing as she glared at the woman.

Pursing her lips into a small frown, Natasha corrects her in a completely neutral tone, “I’m pretty sure we’ve been over this, you aren’t a hostage.”

At that, Lela snarls ugly and mean as she dug her hand into the door handle. She waits for her growl to die down before asking the red head, “Anyone ever call you a bitch, cuz I gotta say, I wouldn’t be surprised if they did.”

Smiling, a coy and dangerous grin, Natasha turns her attention back to the road and eases off her brakes, “No one breathing.”

And if Lela was any kind of smart, she’d have recoiled at the words. Because they’re said with such surety, Lela knows the red head isn’t lying. Natasha isn’t being sarcastic or dark humored. She’s being truthful. And that should flash like a bright red neon sign to get the fuck away. But Lela’s wired wrong. Must be because the words make her hindbrain stir.

They make her want to go belly up and pant after Natasha. Her instincts smell the DomBeta and fucking ache for her. To stick close despite how much Lela wants to stick close.

Rumbling low in his throat, something like a warning, Clint smoothers the tension in the air. He says nothing but Lela hears his words anyway. ‘Calm down’. For a moment, Lela wonders if they’re meant for her or the red head. Maybe both. But Lela doesn’t ask. She turns her head and watches the world slip past her. Counting down the minutes until she could get her hands on suppressors and blockers. She ignores the Beta at her left and the Gamma at her back.

She ignores the strangeness in her chest and hopes it’ll all go away the moment she’s doped up again. Hopes that once her hindbrain is properly dosed everything she’s been pointedly ignoring will fade away.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I know. This went nowhere.
But I've written it out and I didn't feel like hacking into pieces. Next update should be up soon. Hopefully it'll move us somewhere. As always, drop me a line and let me know what y'all thought. -Ani
"Something nameless settles at that thought. Of knowing she’s put that part of her life—a crucial piece of herself—down and at her feet. She’s carried it for too long, Lela thinks, the memories of a past life, on her shoulders. It’s bent her spine into a shape she can’t quite name. Lela’s tired of carrying the memory of her mother, of who she used to be, of who she was under the unwilling bond she once had too. Something nameless settles, lets her breath a little bit clearer with Clint at her side."

The drive was exactly thirty minutes. Natasha had driven smooth; smooth enough that Lela had completely she was the type of person to get motion sickness in the past. When they pull up to the clinic Lela’s almost damn sure both Natasha and Clint had been lying to her. That this really was an O-Fac because the building is hardly like any clinic Lela’s ever seen.

It’s a manor. The kind that came from old money. The kind one usually saw in movies. With the nice brick fence and the large drive way lined with trees. The building, red bricked and large bay windows, glitters in the way only something slightly sinister can. It’s the kind that lends Lela to believe it’s funded by private money. The moment Natasha pulls the car into park onto the side of the street, Lela fly’s out of her seat and out into the open air. She’s got a lit cig pinched between her lips by the time Clint slides out after her.

“You don’t have to go in. There’s no rush. No one’s forcing you to do anything you don’t want,” Clint tells her, voice soft and soothing.

Swiping her tongue over her lips, Lela tells him through a mouthful a smoke, “I know.”

With that said, she pinches the smoke to her lips and makes the long trek up the driveway. Clint follows at her left and Natasha at her right. When she reaches the front door, she lets Clint open the door. Flicking the dying butt of her cig away, Lela follows in barely keeping the smoke out of the building.

Once inside, Lela is hit by an overwhelming need to get the fuck outta dodge. For the inside of the manor does little to settle her ease. It reeks of a rehabilitation center. It’s all soft comfort with the tall tale signs of a medical facility. Everything is colored in the way that implies more than just simple checkups happen here. While the outside of the building was oddly reminiscent of a place that once had been a very fancy home, the inside held none of that.

Everything about it scram DANGER.
Lela’s heart hammers ugly and loud in her chest. Every shred of self-preservation she’s got is screaming at her to turn tail and run.

But Clint walks before her, striding over to the front desk without any hesitation or qualms. Natasha stays at her side until Lela closes the distance. The red head is both a pillar of strength and a silent fucking challenge to Lela that keeps her in place.

“Good Afternoon,” Clint starts off with. He flashes a brilliant smile at the Gamma brunette behind the front desk.

“Ah,” the brunette, dressed in work casual clothes, looks surprised they’ve entered for all of three seconds before plastering on a perfected polite grin, “How can I help you?”

“We have an appointment with Dr. Kelly Keaton,” Clint informs the girl.

Surprise flutters fast over the girls face at Clint’s words. Her soft brown eyes flash away from Clint’s face and over to the Lela and Natasha. They immediately zero in on Lela though. The moment they do, understanding settles in her gaze.

Clint had said this was a Clinic that treated Omegas. What Lela thinks Clint must have meant was that there was a specialist here that catered specifically to Omega care. This doctor, Kelly Keaton, was probably that person. And her chosen field of expertise was clearly well known, if the look given to Lela by the receptionist was anything to go by.

The knowledge that yet another stranger knows, knows what Lela has been desperately trying to hide makes putrid hatred race through her veins. All her hard work washed away by a simple glance. It makes something wild twist up in her gut. It makes the absolute beast in her punch down at her hindbrain and straighten herself up for a fight.

Instinctively, Lela bares her canines in a ruthless snarl as she growled from deep in her belly.

The act, so savage and surprising, forces the receptionist back and away. Her pretty brown eyes flash wide and open as a scared little Gamma whimper slipped past her strawberry pink lips.

Knocking hard into Lela’s shoulder with her own, Natasha issues a barely audible growl. It’s both a warning and a goddamn reprimand. One that tells Lela wordlessly, to quit her shit. And Lela hates it, fucking abhors it, the sound of Natasha’s growl. The way it rumbles down Lela’s tension stacked spine. The way it makes every one of her fighting instincts want to go butter soft. Lela hates it.

But her growl fades away as she reluctantly pulls her lips over her fangs. With a tight purse to her lips she glares heatedly at the receptionist as Clint attempted to smooth things over.

“Sorry about that, my friend here isn’t exactly social,” Clint offered with a light laugh and a brilliant smile. His scent bleeding out of him in a wave of strawberry sweet bubble gum. Everything about it is meant to calm, to sooth, to comfort and reassure.

That itchy prick of her hindbrain simmers down. Goes still and docile, like Lela has no reason in the world to be so upset.

Gritting her teeth, Lela grinds her back molars to keep her head set and straight. Every inch of her wants to let her head loll to the side. Both for Natasha’s irritated firm growl and Clint’s bubblegum scent.
“Y-Yeah, um, uh,” the receptionist starts, her wide eyes flashing from Lela to Natasha and then back over to Clint. She fusses for a minute, reseating herself back into her black swivel chair before telling him, “Dr. Keaton isn’t here. She stepped out for the day.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I made an appointment to see her today. I called earlier, spoke to someone named Mandy, was that you?” Clint asks, and though his voice is carefree, there’s tension slowly filling out the lines of his dark gray shirt.

“Ah, no, you must have called around my lunch time. My calls get rerouted over to Dr. Steinman’s assistant, Mandy. She must have penciled you in and forgot to let me know,” the girl informs them with a small sheepish smile.

Clint glances back over his shoulder, his honey gold eyes meet Lela’s cautiously as if he’s weighing his options. Whatever he decides, he turns back around and asks, “And Dr. Steinman, does he usually fill in for Dr. Keaton’s cases?”

“Oh, not often,” the receptionist offers, her nose and brows wrinkling up with her confusion. But then as if a light goes on in her head, her glossy pink lips pop open into an ‘o’. Her eyes widen as she quickly glances over at Lela and then away, “Do you mean…are you asking if he’s, um, a certified Omega physician?”

Lela’s lips curl up in a twitch as her glare intensified ten fold. The growl she’d manage to cut down picks up again. This time when Natasha growls, Lela pointedly ignores it.

“I guess I am,” Clint huffs out a short breath, in it Lela can smell the bitter tang of Clint’s growing frustration, before he added on, “Is he available?”

“Let me check,” the girl scrambles to pick up her phone. She taps in about four digits and then speaks quickly over the line with Mandy. When the phone is back in its rest, she turns, bright eyed and smiling at Clint, “You’re in luck, he’s got two slots open today.”

“That’s great, where might we be able to see him?” Clint asks as he pulled away from the desk.

Fiddling with her phone, the receptionist pops up out of her seat and takes them over to a set of stairs. She wears a pleasant smile on her pretty little face as she moves. But her shoulders are hunched up around her neck. She keeps a careful eye on Lela, as if expecting her to suddenly lash out. Which, if Lela’s being honest, wasn’t too off the mark.

A dark vicious kind of pride makes Lela grin. Her pink tongue peeks out of the right side of her open mouth as she flashed the girl a long toothed leer. Lela doesn’t even hide how much it pleases her when the Gamma girl gulps down her fear and half sprints back to the safety of her desk.

Climbing the white steps of the staircase, Lela almost misses it when Natasha says, “That was unnecessary.”

Barking out a cold laugh, Lela doesn’t bother to turn around as she made her way up, “Probably, but it sure as shit felt good.”

They say nothing else until they stand before another assistant. This one is a bottled blonde with bright blue eyes and a lazy smile. The scent around her is sharp, like lemon peels and peppermint. She’s dressed similarly as the girl previous. The moment she spots them, she grabs hold of a clip board and hands it over to Clint.

“Hi, Brenda let me know you guys were headed up,” the blonde says—presumably Mandy. When she’s done handing over a pen she glances over a tight smile over to Lela and straightens her
shoulders, “If you could fill out the forms for me please, I’ll go ahead and let Dr. Steinman know he’s got a walk-in.”

Half ripping the damn white clipboard from Clint’s outstretched hands, Lela tersely nods and then heads for somewhere to sit. She finds a set of maroon chairs in what appeared to be some kind of lobby. She picks one that sits up against the wall and drops into it. She sends a snarl at the Mandy when she notices the blondes avid attention still pinned to her chest.

Natasha takes one across from her, facing her, and Clint takes the first chair to Lela’s left. Only when there’s not much left to do except glare uselessly at Natasha, Lela looks over the forums clipped to the board in her hands.

At first glance, they appear to be the standard forums used in any given clinic. Lela’s filled out enough that she’s pretty much got the format down pat. Only, whenever Lela’s filled them out in the past it was with the use of fake names and lies. This time around, when she stares at the first few blank lines she feels a panicky sweat begin to build at the nape of her neck.

Gripping the pen tight, Lela keeps her eyes on the pages before her while she asks, “How honesty do I gotta be on these?”

“I mean, for the sake of your treatment, I’d say completely. They need to know what form or method to treat you,” Clint offers in that feather light way of his. His scent, going soft and sugar sweet. All calming and soothing like she’s learned it can get.

Lela’s never heard of Gamma’s being able to produce scents that thick, that pungent. But there it was, hitting her across the face. Lela refuses to let it make her go gooey like her hindbrain wants to. Instead she focuses on the damn white sheets in front of her. With more force than necessary, she writes out her real first name and last name. She fills out the middle initial even. She writes down her date of birth she goes on down the line. She skips over the shit she can’t. Like her address or her social, because one she didn’t have an address and two, though she did have a social security number, she didn’t know it.

It was one of those things she never bothered to learn when her mother died. Too busy breaking into houses for cash and jewelry. Too busy stealing rides to take to chop shops. Too busy getting entangled with an Alpha fuck who absolutely ruined her.

When she gets to the parts about pre-existing conditions like diseases, Lela feels a pang of frustration begin to build in her chest. She checks off the no’s where she can. When she gets to the part where it asks if she might have something like STD’s Lela finds that frustration blooming into white-hot anger. The paper even asks how many sexual partners she’s had so far. Asking if she’s ever giving or received oral. What the fuck kind of question was that? Practically running the ballpoint pen through the paper, she angrily scribbles onto the empty space ‘a fuck ton’ and leaves it at that.

When the paper starts asking her about past drug use Lela contemplates jamming the pen into her neck. She’s only three checkmarks into the impressive box full of fifty or so listings when she gives up and runs a whole line through the thing. A vertical dark line running through all the ‘yes’s.

Lela flips the page over and starts trying to answer the bullshit on the back. There arequistions, stupid fucking questions, that ask the dynamics of her mother and of her father. They ask how many Omegas are in Lela’s family, the exact number. They ask her if she’s unmated, if she’s ever been mated, if she plans to be in the future. They ask her if she’s ever received a bonding Mark and if so when, how long ago and on what side of her neck. They ask her a series of question to help determine her stability of an omega.
One question asks, ‘If in a room with unmated Alpha’s how likely is she to submit without an active command?’ Lela stabs the paper clear through when she circles ‘Very Unlikely’.

Another question asks, ‘When going through a heat, how often is it one based on the need to procreate?’ Lela stabs another circle through ‘Almost never’.

Another question asks, ‘How adverse is she/he to finding a Heat Partner for the duration of her heat?’ The circle Lela draws around ‘Very Unlikely’ is black and angry.

Without reading much of the disclosure forms that line the back of the first paper, she signs her name and half tosses the clipboard over to Natasha. She doesn’t even bother to say anything as she white knuckle grips the pen in her hand. Natasha for her part, hardly flinches as she effortlessly caught the flying board. She merely sends Lela a rueful smirk and a simple brow raise.

That in and of itself seemed to speak wonders. A wordless, ‘Was that really necessary’ being said without the red head uttering a fucking word. Lela snarls, flashes her sharp teeth and snaps them for good measure, before sinking back into her seat.

“You left a lot of these blank,” Natasha remarks after running a quick look over the forms.

Tilting her head back so that it thumped hallow against the wall behind her, Lela bites out, “Don’t know how to answer them.”

Natasha says nothing on the matter. She remains quiet as she rises to her feet and turns the clipboard in. Only when Natasha is gone does Clint speak:

“Lela, you don’t have to go in. We’re not pressuring you, if you’re not ready was can leave and come back another day. Maybe we should set an appointment with Dr. Keaton? She comes very highly recommended, this Dr. Steinman, I don’t know how—”

“It’s—I’m fine,” Lela growls as she continued to eye the strange hanging lights overhead.

She’s not. She’s so very far from being fine it’s goddamn comical. There’s a jittery feeling just under her skin. One that feels electric. Like her mind can’t decide if she wants to lean into Clint’s presence or run out the fucking door. Her heart hasn’t stopped its rabbit foot tempo. It keeps crashing harshly against her chest. There’s a fine sheen of sweat building at her forehead and her temples. And if Lela were to take a deep enough breath through her nose, she’d make out her fear and panic currently sitting on her flesh.

Without a word, she rummages through her pockets and grips the black cylinder spray. She douses herself in it until she can’t smell shit.Whatever is in the black little bottle kills the tang of her scent almost instantly. Wherever Natasha got this shit from, Lela was willing to fucking beg for it.

“Lela, you’re fine. You don’t have to keep spraying yourself. Me and Nat, we won’t let anything—” Whatever else Clint is about to say is cut off by her last name being called.

At this point, it’s been so long since she’s heard her last name being called out. Long enough that for the first two or three seconds, Lela doesn’t even comprehend that it’s hers. And then it hits, like a rock being thrown at her face, she hears it. With it comes the fuzzy memories of the hand full of times she’d gone somewhere with her mother.

And isn’t that a trip. Her mother once or twice took her to the doctors office. She had to, didn’t she. For vaccines and check ups, right? Lela gets a flash of that like someone’s popped a roadside flare right in front of her eyes. She gets blinded by the flash of it, by the flimsy memories of a lifetime ago. She gets disoriented a little too. Feels wrong footed as she turns to stare at the nurse dressed in peach
colored scrubs.

Some small part of her looks around her, half expecting her mother to just appear from the far right of the room.

But then the flash fades away and with it the memory of a time where she’d looked to her mother in situations like this. Sinking her teeth into the sides of her cheeks, Lela forces herself to rise from the seat. She walks forward ignoring the little white light still burning in her vision.

A small strange part in her aches in a way Lela has never known. Some part of her wants to turn around, snatch up Clint’s hand and keep him close. Another wants to dig her feet into the ground and wait for Natasha to come back. Her hindbrain—the thing that makes her the lowest of the fucking low—writhes around within her. Fear making it want to kick up a fucking whimper—a fucking cry building in her throat—as she started to walk.

Forcing it away, Lela refuses to look back. She keeps her back straight as the smiling nurse ushers her in and closes the door behind her.

*~*

In total, Dr. Steinman is the very literal incarnation of a human douche.

He’s old, round and what little remained of his hair had turned yellow-white. He smells stale and faintly like a Beta. His eyes, the shade of toffee, are hard-edged and unpleasant. When he’d first greeted her, conducted her physical examination, he’d been…rude.

Every question she’d answered was met with a disproval and a scathing note in the back of his throat. He’d looked down his nose through his too thick round glasses. Pursed his lips at Lela when she admitted she wouldn’t know the exact number of bed partners she’d taken on account of her profession.

When he asks about Pack and bonds, Lela scoffs. She shakes her head and tells him she hasn’t had a pack since…well ever. And as for bonds, well, she wouldn’t know what one felt like if she ever did. Her answers only earn her more disapproving looks and noises.

It’s only when her blood has been drawn, her pussy swabbed for later testing, that they get down to business.

“What have you been using up until now, to help you transition to your mateless heats?” Dr. Steinman asks, as he gripped his clipboard and scribbled something onto the surface.

The way he’d said that, ‘Mateless Heats’, rubbed Lela the wrong way. Since the get, the man had been implying she was way past getting suppressors and blockers. As if to say, she was old enough now to hitch herself to the closest viable Alpha hanging around and dealing with it the way nature intended.

As much as she hated it, she grit her teeth and kept her growls as far down as she could manage. She was so fucking close to getting her hands on straight drugs. The good kind. The kind that didn’t leave her feeling like she’d been scooped out and dropped at her body’s feet. The kind that didn’t need to be cut by narcotics.

Shrugging her jacket back into place, Lela shrugs and tells him, “Honestly, whatever came my way. I’m pretty sure I’ve been taking Demara since I got here. Masinex too.”

“What do you mean, you’re pretty sure? Who prescribed you these drugs?” Dr. Steinman asks, his
eyes growing wide as if he couldn’t believe the words falling from her lips.

“No one,” Lela says in a way that should pretty much imply how she got them.

Pursing his lips, the doctor scribbles something else down on her folder before asking, “And how long do you think you’ve been taking them?”

“A little over a year. Before that, I’m pretty sure I was taking Grimidex-O. That one was way better than Demara or Masinex, kept me from feeling too fucked up. But I haven’t been able to find anyone around here with any of it. Ramodiefen was nice too, cut my heats by half,” Lela grouses as she runs a lazy hand through her hair.

Choking on air, the doctor levels her with a harsh look before demanding, “How much Grimidex-O and Ramodiefen were you using?!”

“I mean, shit, I was usually pumping two vials of each a day,” Lela informs him with a shrug and a slight frown, “Why?”

“Ma’am, there’s a reason most of those drugs have come off the market. They’re dangerous. They cause irreparable damage to an Omega’s reproductive health. They also caused severe imbalances in an Omega’s natural heat cycles,” Dr. Steinman exclaimed, his hands shooting out to wave around in his agitation.

Drumming her fingers anxiously on the bed of the examination table, craving a smoke like nobodies business, Lela hums out, “Oh, so what’re you gunna give me then?”

Heaving a tired sigh, Dr. Steinman sets his clipboard down and removes his circular glasses and tells her, “Honestly miss, I don’t think prescribing you medication would at all be wise.”

The words ring in Lela’s head. They make a cold prickly feeling spread out of her chest and down her limbs. She can feel how stiff she’s gone. Her drumming fingers freeze mid tempo.

“Why?” Lela bites out.

“Because,” Dr. Steinman starts, his voice hard and tense, “From what it sounds like, is that you’ve already caused untold damage to your body. I couldn’t, in good conscious, prescribe you Suppressors and Blockers that could cause more damage. You need to understand that Omega physiology is quite delicate. One more push and you could very well become sterilized and never go through a productive heat in your future. If you ask me, that sounds like a risk you shouldn’t take.”

“I’m not fucking asking you, am I?” Lela growled, her fangs flashing as she dug her fingers into the plush cushion of the table, “I want to take them. I don’t give a fuck about having productive heats.”

“Have you thought of maybe enrolling into Omega partnership programs,” Dr. Steinman pushes, ignoring the way Lela has growled at him and her rigid posture, “If you were able to successfully find yourself a Mate, you wouldn’t have to endure fluxuating Heats. If you were able to bond with a fertile Alpha you would cease to have fluxing Heat cycles. Your hormones would settle and your scent would naturally become subtle.”

Lela stares at the man. Really just stares at him. She takes in his wrinkle-lined face and feels the urge to take a swing at him boil up in her.

Through a mouthful of fangs, Lela tersely asks, “So you aren’t giving me shit?”

“Ma’am, I really do believe you’d benefit from an O-Program. I have all the necessary forums you
would need to fill out if—” Whatever else the doctor says dies the moment Lela jumps to her feet.

She’s out the door before the doctor can even scramble to his feet. She hears him chasing after her, calling out for her to come back. To see reason but Lela fly’s. She pushes past the nurses that happen to get in her way. When she gets to the door that leads to the lobby, she kicks it open with her booted feet. It swings wide and loud as it slammed back into the wall. The doorknob punches a hole into the wall behind it with the force she uses.

“Ma’am! If you could just listen, you’d understand I only wish to help you!” Dr. Steinman shouts when he comes through the open doorway.

Swinging around, Lela spots Clint and Natasha—on their feet, bodies coiled tight for a fight. In the corner of her eye, she can spot Mandy clutching the receiver to her chest, her eyes wide like Lela’s brandishing a weapon.

“Fuck you,” Lela spits at the doctor when she turns to face him. Her eyes are hard, her growls threatening to pull flesh and blood from him if he so much as took a step closer to her, “I don’t fucking need a goddamn Alpha. I need the fucking meds!”

“What’s going on here?” Natasha asks as she strode up to Lela’s right hand side. Her face is perfectly devoid of emotion as her green eyes flashed from Lela’s murderous face to the doctors.

“He won’t give me the meds. He wants me to enroll in some fucking program to get myself Mated,” Lela hissed through tightly clenched teeth.

“Miss, as I’ve explained. I couldn’t in good conscious prescribe you anything. If you were somehow rendered barren by them then how would you ever find yourself a Mate in the future?” Dr. Steinman shouts, his face turning red in his anger, “It’s unnatural for an omega as old as yourself to continue to use Suppressors and Blockers when there is a more natural viable option.”

“Excuse me?” Clint shouts, his voice colored in his shock and fury, “What kind of half-cocked bullshit is this?”

“Clint,” Natasha doesn’t bark, she doesn’t even growl. But it pulls both Lela and Clint’s attention like she’s split the sky with a roar. Natasha’s voice goes low, cold and empty.

And Lela, wrath filled and raging to fucking take a hit at something, anything, goes utterly fucking still at that. Because her hindbrain screams danger. Every instinct in her is telling her there’s a threat here, standing right beside her, ready to spill blood. Everything in Lela wants her to desperately take a step back and behind Natasha.

Clint goes quiet; his face goes stony as he burns holes into Dr. Steinman’s face. His body held tight in tension as he curled his hands into white knuckled fists. Every line on the Gamma’s body says he’s ready to jump into a fight. Much like the night they’d first met, Clint reeks of strength and lethal energy.

“Are you refusing her care?” Natasha prompts in the silence that has swallowed up the tension filled room, “Are you denying her medical care over your own biased opinion?”

“I’m sorry? Who are you?” Dr. Steinman demands of Natasha, his eyes running over the long length of her body, “I don’t have to explain myself to you, whoever you are.”

“Yes you do,” Natasha states with all the gravity of a woman wielding a loaded gun.

“She is an unmated, packless Omega, legally speaking, she should’ve enrolled the moment she
presented! She needs to be enrolled into a program, it is the only way she can—” Dr. Steinman’s words die in his throat by the utterly savage growl that rips out of Natasha’s throat.

And if Lela thought her growls were up to snuff with Alpha’s then she had shit on Natasha’s. Because that was a growl that could make a grown man shit himself.

Lela half jumps away from the red head. Her hindbrain desperate for her to drop her head and fall into submission at the sound of it. The sound is so intense Lela feels it in her very bones. But she forces herself still, keeps herself locked in place with her shoulders set, her jaw tense and her teeth bared. She forces herself to remember every little thing that’s kept her alive up until now and digs her finger nails into the palms of her hands.

“Clint, Lela, I won’t be long,” Natasha announces in a tone that was harder than steel. As the red head took one step towards the doctor, the doctor took one step back. Like that, Natasha crowds him back into the hall that lead to the back rooms.

Without another word, Lela turns on her heel and heads for the stairs. Clint stands at her back, a step behind her, as she rushes towards the exit. When they exit the clinic, Lela rips a cig out of her pack and lights it. The wind kicks up just as she strikes her zippo to flame. The flame burns her thumb but Lela ignores it as she breathes in the toxic fumes.

“Fucking asshole,” Clint spits out, his voice going low and deep with his rolling growls, “What kind of bullshit was that?!?”

Lela says nothing as she starts walking back to where the car was parked. Rage courses bright and volatile through her body. There’s an ache—a fucking need—to scream, to roar, to fucking snarl into the open sky. To hit something, to be hit, to fucking spill blood building in her chest. Lela feels like she’s swallowed up a burning fire and it’s on the verge of being spit back out.

She knows that rage. Has been raised by it and all it’s viciousness. Lela knows how to kill it, how to sate it’s blistering heat. Lela knows all it takes is some halfway decent suppressors and blockers. She knows all it’ll take is some drugs—thick and ugly—to settle her back down.

When she gets to Natasha’s expensive sleek looking black car, she pushes her back into it. She leans up against it, the line of her back pressed against the sun warm surface. Lela keeps puffing on her smoke until it hit filter. When the bright little cherry on the end starts to burn her lips, she flicks it down and lights another.

“Are you okay?” Clint asks suddenly. When Lela glances up to look at him, his light brown brows are pinched and his lips are frowning. His eyes, more green now than golden, are drenched in his worry.

Pulling the lit cigarette from her lips, Lela smiles wide and vicious, her face stretching into something that was entirely too ugly to put into her words. Baring her fangs, Lela lets the smoke tumble past her lips as she told him, “I’m fine, just fucking peachy.”

And it’s a lie. Lela’s not okay. She doesn’t know if she’s ever felt anything like fine. She’s scared, drowning in her fear and her anxiety. She’s so fucking desperate she’s got half a mind to walk away from everything here and now. To disappear into one of these strange streets and fall into well-known bad habits. To sink into the pit she’s been calling home for the better part of her life.

It’s tempting, so very fucking tempting. To just push away from the car, the Gamma before her and just leave. It’d be easy, Lela knows, to just walk away from everything. To avoid trying to do this shit the right way.
At least then she didn’t have to sit through a fucking doctor spewing bullshit like that. Trying to trap her, enroll her, legally label her an UnMated Omega ripe for the pickings.

Lela doesn’t realize she’s shaking until Clint pulls his heavy gaze from her face and down to the hand that grips her smoke. Lela doesn’t realize she’s trembling until she looks down and sees it with her own eyes. It’s only then that Lela realizes she’s growling too. Loud, desperate ugly things that burn her throat and make the roof of her mouth shake.

Leaning up against the car, pressing his shoulder to one of her own, Clint heaves a tired heavy sigh through his parted lips. In that simple touch—barely there, really—Lela finds herself pulling in strength and peace. For a long while, one whole cigarettes worth, they remain quiet. Both of them lost to their thoughts as Lela attempted to swallow down her whirling rage and her desperation.

“We’ll find someone else to get you what you need,” Clint eventually announces. Lela doesn’t turn her head despite how much the words startle her. She keeps looking forward, at the sight of the clinic, and keeps smoking. Clint is undeterred by her icy silence, he keeps speaking, “He’s not the only Doctor in this state.”

Over the butt of her current smoke, Lela can’t help but state with vehemence, “I’m not going into an O-Program. I’d rather fucking die than get myself bonded to a fucking Alpha.”

And she means it, Lela. She means the fucking words more than anyone might fucking understand. She’s been down that road. She used to have a fucking Alpha once. One who she thought had loved her when she thought she was a Gamma with a mean streak. One who she had trusted with her deepest of secrets. One who had twisted her—hurt her—when he had found out what she was.

Lela wasn’t going to do that again. She’d rather fucking die on the side of the streets.

“I know,” Clint tells her easily. If it were anyone else, Lela thinks, she’d have snapped her teeth and snarled that no they fucking didn’t. But, Lela thinks, Clint’s different. Clint…

Clint looked at her and saw her. Saw all the bad she did—could still do—and saw something still worth looking at. He saw something in her face or in her eyes that made him smile. Clint looked at her and didn’t see a dirty fucked up little Omega. He saw Lela and whatever made her up.

Lela should hate it, should hate him for it, but she doesn’t. Her hindbrain goes warm. That skittish feeling in her chest ebbs away. That small silky soft ribbon she feels stretching out between them twirls, as if caught in the wind, before settling carefully.

Everything in her wishes to push it away. To lock herself tight within the confines of her mind. To keep herself safe and as hard edged as a blood soaked knife. She knows it’s the only way to stay safe, to keep herself alive.

She goes soft regardless. The tension that lines her shoulders bleeds away. It seeps out of her body like a valve has been knocked loose and the burning hot steam filling her is being released. The rage, the desperation, the sheer amount of mind fucking fear—seeping from her body and leaving her feeling sapped.

Inch by careful inch, Lela lets herself slump back into the car. She ignores how the action puts her flush against Clint. Her body inadvertently resting its full weight against Clint. If Clint were to move away, Lela doesn’t know if she’d be able to remain up right. But there’s a wriggling in the back of her mind, somewhere that was all Omega instincts and bullshit, that knows Clint would never move away.
He’d stay there, taking her infinitesimal weighted for as long as she needed. Warmth unfurls in her chest, it seeps past her flesh and into her bones. For a second, with the sun on her face, her body wrapped up in her leather jacket and stealing warmth from Clint’s form, Lela feels young again. If she were to close her eyes, think back hard enough, she thinks she could make out the sharp tangy of her hometown. She’s so warm she thinks she could close her eyes and convince herself the bitter dark years of her life so far have not come to pass.

But Lela doesn’t close her eyes. She keeps them focused on the clinic before her. She keeps her gaze poised and ready for the moment she spots Natasha’s crimson colored head. She doesn’t think she’ll ever smell home for the way black licorice and strawberry bubblegum fill her nose now.

Something nameless settles at that thought. Of knowing she’s put that part of her life—a crucial piece of herself—down and at her feet. She’s carried it for too long, Lela thinks, the memories of a past life, on her shoulders. It’s bent her spine into a shape she can’t quite name. Lela’s tired of carrying the memory of her mother, of who she used to be, of who she was under the unwilling bond she once had too. Something nameless settles, lets her breath a little bit clearer with Clint at her side.

Lela tries not to over think it. Tries to keep her black whirling thoughts away. Allows herself to leech off the warmth of a man with golden eyes and golden smiles. Allows herself to simply be, if only for a moment.

It takes a while, at least half of Lela’s current pack, for Natasha to step out the front door. And though she had entered empty handed she leaves with a large white bag. Her steps are confident and unhurried as she made her way towards them. Her head held high and her jaw set. When Natasha stands before Lela she says nothing as she shoves the large bag at Lela’s chest.

The white paper bag crinkles as Lela reaches out for it. Cigarette pinched between her lips, she looks down at the bag and then up at the red head, “Wha’s this?”

“Your meds,” Natasha drawls slow and lazy.

Confusion draws Lela’s black brows into a pinch as she said, “Thought he wasn’t gunna give me any.”

“He wasn’t,” Natasha says as she ran a careful hand through her now loose curls, “But he was convinced otherwise.”

It’s such a simple sentence uttered with such a light air, it shouldn’t mean anything. But the words, the tone, the very way in which Natasha says them—it sends a cold chill down Lela’s spine. Lela doesn’t need to be an Omega, sensitive to all ranks above her—to know Natasha was as dangerous as a great white shark. Lela could practically smell the blood—the sharp bite of it—barely muted on her hands. Natasha was a beast, built out of darkness not unlike Lela’s own.

It reminds Lela of that steel band stretched out between them two. A band that wrapped tight between Lela’s wrist and over to the redhead’s own. Lela is reminded, then and there, of the type of darkness that sometimes sat in Natasha’s gazes. Lela wonders where it might come from, of what Natasha has lost along the way, because a look like that never came from someone who was whole and hale. It came from people like Lela, who’s had bits and pieces of herself hacked off and tossed aside. People like Natasha too.

“So how’d you get this?” Lela shakes the bag, listens to the jostle of whatever was inside clink against itself.

“I made him rethink his decision,” Natasha informs her blithely, her eyes cutting away from Lela’s.
face and over to the mouth of the street. Her ruby red lips pulled into a smooth line neither too up nor too down.

Just like Lela knew she shouldn’t feel any type of way towards Clint, she knows she shouldn’t feel anything towards the red head. Lela knows Natasha was a literal wolf in pretty pale skin. Lela could feel it like the ocean tides felt the tug of the moon over head.

But much like the ocean, Lela doesn’t feel like she has much of a choice. She feels drawn towards Natasha’s quiet fire. She feels herself drawn to the strength that radiates off her very being. To the smell of ginger, nutmeg and blackberry. Lela feels that steel band settle deeper in her chest. A snap and then a firm pull.

Lela doesn’t know what it is, but it’s there and Lela allows it to remain, side by side the silk ribbon. Because she’s trying desperately not to pick up the memories she’s just laid down.

Gripping the paper bag in hand, tight and unforgiving, Lela flicks her dying cigarette away before pulling in the last drag, “I’m hungry.”

Clint startles beside her. His body going forward just an inch as he turned to face her in full, “Yeah?”

Shrugging, Lela pulls away slowly, forces herself away from the man’s warmth as she settled her weight back onto her two feet, “Yeah.”

“Okay.” Clint starts, his voice tinged in his growing happiness, “There’s a place close by, we can swing by and pick something up.”

Lela nods before she looks over at Natasha, who herself as brought her emerald gaze back onto Lela’s face. Lela doesn’t say thank you, not at all. But she hopes Natasha can see it in her eyes. Her gratitude for the things that’ll keep Lela safe. The things Natasha pulled out of a reluctant Omegarepressors uncooperative hands. Lela hopes Natasha see’s it. Because Lela’s trying, she’s fucking trying, but she isn’t there yet.

“What’re you in the mood for?” Natasha asks as she dug through her jacket pockets for the car keys.

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela waits till the lock on the door unclicks before popping it open. She’s halfway in the car before she says, “I don’t fucking care.”

Natasha drives them to a little pizzeria, a mom and pop type of place. A place where they sit in the booth’s together, Natasha across from Lela and Clint at Lela’s side. They eat from a large beef and mushroom—Clint arguing about the absence of pineapple and Natasha flat out hissing when Clint suggests they order one to go for the suite. It isn’t awkward, because they’ve had enough meals together at the suite for it not to be new and stilted, but it feels like a novelty all the same.

As they she eats, Lela finds herself feeling a strange mixture of warmth, safety and comfort.

*~*

Pav-O.

That’s what the orange can says. Hormone Blockers. A can filled with almost a hundred little pills. The directions say to take them once every morning and once before heading to sleep. They aren’t like anything Lela’s seen or taken. They aren’t exactly look like they can do the job they boast.

They’re too small, the white little pills. But the moment she pops the lid open she’s swallowing one down.
That’s what the other can says. Suppressors. The circular tab they sit in looks oddly reminiscent of birth control pills. Except there’s far too many. She has to take at least three a day. One in the morning, one midday and the last at night.

Both come with far too many side effects. But Lela doesn’t read them. She crumples up the pamphlets and leaves them at the bottom of the suite’s bathroom trash bin. If she has any questions she’s pretty sure Natasha will know what they said.

It’s been a total of six days since she left the clinic. Six days spent back in the suite locked up with the wonder dicks again. Six days spent hugging the toilet and puking like maybe she’s gotten herself knocked up or hit with food poisoning.

She’s reassured, every day—by Natasha or Clint—that it’s perfectly normal. That the sudden introduction to the new medication would take time to get used to. Her body, already so out of whack, was slowly trying to work the shit out inside of her.

“How’re you feeling?” Clint asks the moment she steps out of the bedroom.

Growling in annoyance, Lela ignores him entirely as she made her way to the kitchen. When she’s downed at least a full bottle of water she says, “I feel like maybe, if you ask me that again, I’m going to break your fucking nose.”

“Whoa!” Clint half shouts as he rolled off the couch he’d been laying out on. The move is entirely too fluid, too practiced and filled with ease. Like a cat, that was Clint. Every one of his movements was purposeful and almost graceful. His feet barely make a noise as he wandered over to the counter and hopped onto one of the bar stools, “You’re in a shitty mood today.”

Lela’s lips go tight, as she glared at the sunny smile on Clint’s face, “I’m always in a shitty mood. I’m a shitty person.”

“We can see about lowering your dose,” Clint tells her, completely unperturbed by Lela’s statement and her hostile posture.

Pursing her lips, Lela scrubs at the side of her face before she says, “I’m fine,” and when it looks like the blonde is about to argue with her, Lela bites out, “I’ll be fine. It...this shit takes some getting used to.”

It’s their words—Natasha’s and Clint’s—that Lela tosses back into his face. It’s their words she’s been telling herself every night when she feels like she’s vibrating out of her skin and soaking the bed sheets with her hot flashes. It’s their words she uses to comfort herself when she wakes up puking her goddamn guts out.

“I’ll be fine. It...this shit takes some getting used to.”

It’s their words Lela keeps close to her chest to keep from falling into a black hole. Because these meds are good, they’re straight from the fucking source; they’ll do the job just fine. They’ll keep her scent hidden and keep her fucking dynamic buried.

“Seriously, Lela, how are you feeling?” Clint asks again, his face losing it’s sunny bright shine. It grows sterner, far more serious as he leaned his elbows onto the countertop.

Lela knows what Clint is asking. Not how she’s feeling nauseas or achy. But if she feels like the meds are working. If they’re doing for her what they should be doing. If they’re keeping her hindbrain nice and tame.
Pulling in a deep breath through her nose and out through her mouth, Lela both smells and tastes Clint’s worry. And while that makes something strange clench in her chest, it doesn’t make Lela want to do something fucking stupid like reach out and offer comfort out of sheer compulsion. Not like the way Lela had felt practically obligated to do when she was sans meds.

The overwhelming need to comfort Clint, to take up his hand and push that worried expression off his pretty face, might be entirely on Lela. She thinks it might have nothing at all to do with her dynamic and everything to do with the man himself.

Ignoring that thought with a vengeance, Lela grips her bottled water tight before asking, “Where’s Natasha?”

“Out on the balcony, she’s on a call,” Clint answers her, his face still riddled with his concern.

And that trips Lela up; hard enough that the thought of comforting Clint and everything else just slips out of her head. Furrowing her brows, Lela turns to stare at the balcony door. For all the time that they’ve spent around each other, neither Clint nor Natasha has ever left longer than to run down and pick up food or some other mundane item. Neither of them have ever so much as mentioned anything like a job.

For the first time since she’s come to know them, Lela finds herself wondering what exactly it is they do for a living. Obviously, they’re flush enough to continue renting out a five star suite for weeks on end. It feels almost a little too late in the game to ask, but now Lela’s gotten to wondering, who the hell they were.

“What do you guys do for a living?” Lela asks, turning her attention back to the blonde in the room.

“Ah,” Clint issues a small laugh and flashes her a wry smile, “If I told you, I don’t think you’d believe me.”

And seriously, what the fuck was that supposed to mean? She glares in the blondes direction, keeps her shoulders straight and her jaw set. As much as she was coming around to liking both Clint and Natasha, she’s got that gnawing thought stuck in her mind.

She doesn’t know them. They’re all still halfway strangers. It didn’t matter that Lela knew Clint liked binge watching Real Housewives of Orange County. It didn’t matter that Lela knew Natasha read trashy romance novels in paperback form. They were still strangers.

“You secretly an Axe-Murderer, or something?” Lela can’t help but say with a sarcastic smile, something like fear curling up in her chest. She kind of feels like the other shoes about to drop, “You been holding out on me this whole time?”

Grinning, the blonde picks a blood red apple from the fruit basket on the counter and says before biting into the crispy fruit, “I’m a highly trained assassin.”

And maybe it’s meant as a joke, it’s certainly said as one, but Lela can see the way apprehension shines in Clint’s honey green eyes. She can see the tension on his shoulders and the way he holds his body. Like he’s ready to duck and roll out of the goddamn conversation if need be.

Lela knows, just as much as she knows Clint can’t stand the smell of honey mustard, that Clint is telling her the truth. But then, Clint’s never lied to her. Not since the start of all this. Never once has he issued anything that bordered on a lie. He laid it out, always, at Lela’s feet and let her decide.

“Yeah?” Lela says around a suddenly dry mouth.
Shrugging his shoulders, Clint offers a simple, “I mean, it’s totally legit if that’s what you’re wondering. All in the white.”

And yeah, that’s exactly what Lela’s wondering. If Clint is running around knocking the right type of people over. That’s exactly what she’s wondering.

Only, she’s fucking not. Not at all.

Lela’s desperately trying to put the soft warmness of Clint together with the type of man he’s claiming to be. A man who wasn’t as all softly curved as she’d thought him to be. A man who killed people.

The knowledge—whether it be true or not—doesn’t exactly fill Lela with the type of fear that it ought to. Lela’s lived a long and hard life in her 22 years. She’s come across a whole manner of people. The dark ugly kind. The kind that had made her skin crawl. The kind that killed for a few extra dollars to line their pockets. Lela herself hasn’t ever been pushed to that extent. She’s gotten a hair trigger close, but she’s never been pushed that far.

Darkly, she thinks, about a couple months back, she wouldn’t have even blinked if she had to sink her old knife into someone’s belly. Lela thinks, back then, she wouldn’t have felt much of anything, least of all guilt.

Rolling the half empty bottle of water between both hands, Lela leans her hip against the counter and ask as nonchalant as she can manage, “Natasha too?”

“Pretty much,” Clint informs her between crisp bites of apple.

Rolling her teeth between her teeth, Lela nods slowly before pushing away from the counter.

The knowledge, while unexpected, puts a hell of a lot into prospective. It explained a shit ton about the wonder-dicks. It explained Natasha’s terrifying might and Clint’s complete ease when confronted with Lela’s wrathful growl.

It explained a lot.

And yet, it didn’t. The knowledge of what they were, of what they did, made the few things Lela knew about them feel like nothing. It felt less like Lela was rooming with a couple of strangers and more like she was rooming with a bunch of Martians.

Slowly, Lela walks around the counter top till she stands by Clint rather than across from him and slides up onto an empty barstool. She says nothing as she sips from her water bottle. Despite the raging—swirling and anxious thoughts running rampant in her—Lela keeps her mouth shut. There’s a hell of lot she wants to ask, a shit ton more that needs to be asked, but she bites that down.

She tries to remember that this—this whole great grand reveal that left her feeling like someone had yanked the rug out from under her feet—is kind of on her. After all, both and Natasha had left the door wide opened since the day they’d met. What with Clint revealing that Dr. Banner had sent them both after Lela. What with Natasha and the way she’d made it absolutely clear that she was willing to keep Lela in the suite by force if necessary. It was all there and Lela hadn’t looked.

If they wind up fishing her body out of the river, Lela only has herself to blame.

But it’s just as she’s accepting her possible—inevitable death—that something snags in her mind. Face screwed up in confusion, Lela turns to the blonde man and asks, “How the hell do two assassins friends with Pepper?”
Barking out a small laugh Clint tosses the core of his apple into the trash bin. The piece goes in effortlessly and with little noise, “We go way back, us and Pep.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah,” Clint says, a smile stretching out on his pink lips, “We got loads of history between us all.”

There’s something in the way Clint says that, the way his smile turns a little bitter, his eyes just a smidge darker with green than before, that makes Lela wonder. It makes her wonder what kind of back alley shit Pepper was into to have loads of history between two self-declared assassins. Pepper, with her brilliant little smiles, golden skin and sky blue kind eyes, didn’t look like she had a drop of insidious blood in her.

But then, Lela remembers the building she went into. The nameless one. The one that was guarded with a fleet of alpha guards. The one that held a private medical wing. The one that had treated her with hospital like care on absolutely no notice. The building that scram, with every inch of itself, money.

At this point, Lela’s willing to bet she doesn’t know shit about Pepper, or Clint or Natasha for that matter. And that makes an uncomfortable lump form at the base of her throat. Something like nausea and anxiety creep up her belly.

Lela swallows that down like a bitter pill.

Despite herself, now that she’s got thoughts of a different kind of blonde running through her mind, she asks as carefully as she can, “How is she? Pepper?”

What she doesn’t ask is, ‘Is she mad?’ Because Lela doesn’t want to care, shouldn’t care, they’re fucking strangers too. But sometimes, when the utter fucking shitty side effects of her new meds keeps her up at night, she wonders. Lela can’t help but wonder—can’t help but think about the absolutely wretched look on Dr. Banner’s face and the way he’d said Pepper had been worried. Worried enough that Pepper had sat with her while she’d been laid up, wires running out of every inch of her body.

Guilt sits uncomfortably—like a cement brick—on the center of her chest any time she thinks on it.

Quietly, Clint tells her, “Last I checked she was good. I mean, she’s worried. But that’s Pep; she’s a bit of mother hen.

They’re strangers, so Lela doesn’t know. But she thinks back on that lone dinner. The brief two to three hour exchange they’d had was enough to let Lela know that, yeah, Pepper was definitely the type. The mother hen type.

Clint’s words startle her though, makes her whip around to face him in full as she demanded of him, “She knows where I’m at?”

“Nah, Nat’s pretty hard up on not letting anything slip, not until you’re ready,” Clint brushes her concerns aside as easily as if waving away mosquitos in the air.

Not until you’re ready.

The words ring in her head. They both settle her suddenly speeding heart and make Lela feel as if cornered.
Lela doesn’t think she’ll ever be ready to face the blonde. She feels like that’s asking her to face mount Everest and climb it with only her leather jacket on her shoulders. Lela doesn’t know what she’ll say if she’s ever put in front of the woman with her fresh linen scent. She doesn’t think it’ll go the way she’ll want it to.

As if sensing her turmoil—or better yet being able to scent it—Clint lays a warm hand on her shoulder and squeezes lightly, “Whenever you get there, we’ll take you. But don’t worry, no one’s rushing you.”

And Lela should growl, she should spit out a snarl to push Clint’s reassurance firmly from herself. But she’s stuck on the familiarity of his actions. The way his hand falls on her shoulder like he’s done it a million times before and the way she doesn’t flinch away from it. She’s stuck on the way her heart slows, her panic dying down and her heart steadying. So she lets it happen the way she shouldn’t.

Not with everything that’s just been revealed.

The slide of the balcony door opening heralds Natasha’s return into the suite. A small smile tilts the ends of her ruby red lips, as she looks over at them. Her sleek black phone gripped in one hand she heads for the kitchen. When a pear sits in her hands she asks, “How’re you feeling?”

The question makes a more welcomed emotion blossom across her chest. It lets her breathe far easier than the comfort she’d been feeling not seconds ago from Clint. So she frowns, screws up her face with her clear irritation and bites out:

“I swear to god, you wonder-dicks are asking to get your faces chewed off.”

Laughing, Clint slides his hand off her shoulder and Lela refuses to acknowledge the way she desperately wants it back, before he jabs, “Did you hear that Nat? Wonder-dicks.”

Pursing her lips, Natasha sends a stern glare over in Lela’s direction before saying, “Well, someone is obviously in a mood.”

“Yeah,” Lela agrees, as she jumped down off the stool and pushed away from the counter top, “Kinda the same one you seem permanently stuck on too: Mega Bitch.”

“Oh sweet heart,” Natasha cooed, her eyes glimmering bright with her amusement as she flashed a wide toothy grin, “Never sell yourself short, you far exceed me in the Bitch department. I mean, you’re clearly far more experienced.”

“UltraBitch,” Clint helpfully chimes in with a shit eating grin as he plucked yet another apple.

And this is what Lela was thinking about earlier. They’re not strangers, not really, not after so long rubbing elbows. There’s familiarity between them. A steady and familiar flow of insults, banter, ongoing arguments that have formed over the course of the day. It runs over the things Lela doesn’t know about them—like where the fuck they might be employed as actual killers—and erases her unease altogether.

Refusing to grin, Lela cocks a hip out, lays her right hand on it and tosses her loose black hair over her shoulder before rolling her eyes hard enough to hurt, “Bitch, I’m fucking leagues ahead of you.”

As she turns to leave the kitchen, headed for the couch and the remote, Clint’s laughter—warm and bright—follows her wake. She can hear Natasha begin to list ingredients for a new shake that she intends to force on both Lela and Clint. Clint’s suddenly choking laughter and inevitable squawk forces a reluctant smile out of her as she dropped into the couch.
Lela knows they’re strangers, she knows that like she knows that fire can burn and the ocean will drown the strongest of swimmers when it wanted to, but she can’t help but feel like maybe they really weren’t. The thought makes heat explode in her chest. It makes the ribbon of silk and the steel band grow uncomfortably hot. It makes her feel bold enough to entertain the thought that, yeah, maybe someday soon she’ll be able to face Pepper.

Chapter End Notes

This was a doozy to write.
Now I know, still not in the tower, but I'm pretty sure by the next update we'll be there. At least I hope. I have an outline guys, the story goes where it goes. But Lela's getting easier to push around, getting softer with our assassin babes around.
As always, thanks for reading, leave me a comment to let me know what you think!
Love hearing from you guys!
-Ani
Realizations, a little late

Chapter Summary

"Change, Lela thinks, the hardest part about it, is the fact that sometimes there’s parts of her that just don’t want to. It’d be so easy to blow this man off. As seemingly well intended as he sounded and looked, Lela wanted to tear into him. Let her teeth sink past his dark skin and spill blood. To pull up a fist and smash it across his high and well defined fucking demi-god like cheeks. There’s a bubbling want to sour his scent with something acidic like anger or frustration. To make the lilac less palpable. To wash away the honey with his ire. To make the oak wood burn."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The problem, Lela thinks, about wanting to change, is how much bullshit it actually is in practice.

These new meds are nothing like the old ones she used to use. The ones back home, the ones she hadn’t cut with drugs, they always sucked the life out of her. They always had her feeling like maybe some great big giant hand had reached into her chest and ripped out her heart. They did what they were supposed to, she guesses, suppressed everything. Most days she felt like an empty black hole, life slipping in and withering away.

Always had her feeling like half a person, missing the most essential parts of herself.

The ones she could get her hands on up here in the north were the ones she’d cut with whatever drugs she could get her hands on. So, obviously, Lela always felt fucked up. Constantly being high kind of fucked with anyone’s state of mind. It kind of came with the territory.

But, these drugs, these new one’s with their fancy little containers, were different on almost every level. Lela is painfully aware of how sober she is. Her mind doesn’t feel so bogged down, so heavy. That sepia hue she’d grown so used to seeing through is gone now. The colors around her look brighter. The air around her holds tastes and smells she can actually differentiate between. Everything comes sharper than she remembers it being in over years.

It’s uncomfortable.

It makes Lela painfully aware of all the shit she’s done in the far past and in the most recent past. It forces Lela to see it through the bright lens of a barely recovered addict and, so, it makes her hunger for something to dull it down a bit. It makes her itch for something, anything, to hide away behind even though there’s nothing she can really do for it.

Half of the shit she’s done, the ugliest shit, she’d done because it had been her only way to survive. It
had been *survival*, she keeps telling herself that. Lela tries to take comfort in that there’s nothing she can do about it. That there’s nothing she can do to change it now. Because it’s done.

It’s fucking set in stone already. Living only inside her suddenly coherent mind. Her painfully *sober* mind.

It’d been early in the morning when Lela had slipped out from under the watchful eyes of the wonder-dicks. Clint had stepped out, to deal with whatever it was he was dealing with that morning, that she’d made her move. Natasha hadn’t batted an eye at her as she exited the bedroom dressed in a simple pair of torn at the knee skinnies and a battered gray muscle shirt. Lela had pulled on her jacket only after Natasha had raised a crimson brow at her.

A question had hung on the arch of that brow, but Natasha never voiced it herself. She’d merely watched, amusement glittering in her green eyes, in utter silence. Lela had merely offered her a simple ‘*Goin’ out*’ before half sprinting out the door.

No fuss or muss being kicked up from the crimson haired demoness. Lela does not doubt, had Clint been there, he would’ve attempted to tag along. As he often tried to do when Lela went to the local bodega around the corner for a pack of smokes. Clint was a *worrier*. He put to shame any and all soccer moms with his helicopter hovering ways.

Natasha, as much as she was an immovable bitch, didn’t fight her on things like being left alone on her small walks. It must be the harshness that sits in Lela’s eyes that Natasha see’s and understands. There was a sense of begrudging acceptance in Natasha’s down turned lips that said she understood that whatever Lela was trying to work out needed to be done on her own.

Whatever it is, Lela’s just glad to be out on her own. Living with the wonder-dicks is uncomfortably pleasant. Being around them, as she has, Lela almost forgets what she is—or who she was—and sinks into the warm air around Clint. The harshness of her chipped off edges smooths out with the coolness of Natasha’s silence. It’s nice, Lela can’t help admit, but when the ugly beasts that are her self-destructive thoughts come rearing up, she can’t help but feel fucking trapped.

Because as much as Clint claimed they understood, and Natasha looked like she might, Lela doesn’t feel like maybe they do. It was Natasha—strong and powerful—what would she really understand what it was like to be dirty and ugly like her. It was Clint—warm and kind—what would he understand what it was like to live at the end of hurtful hands all his life?

Maybe they did, who knows, but the field feels uneven. They stand at a higher ground while Lela sits in the hole she’s been digging for herself since the day she presented. It makes her feel small and utterly puny. Worthless and painfully aware that she’s fucking *lesser*.

There’s a part of her that knows—just *fucking knows*—that she could talk about it with the wonder-dicks. Clint always has this overeager puppy dog eyes on his face that half begs Lela to just confide in him. Natasha always holds this air around her that whatever bullshit is coming up her throat—like a bad case of acid reflux—would be welcomed no matter how ugly it might be.

But, no matter how many times a bubbling want to uncurl her tongue builds, it dies at the knowledge that she’ll just ruin the one good thing she’s got at the moment. That somehow, after they two learn what an utter fucking piece of shit Lela actually was, they’d pack her bags for her and wash their hands. The fear of being left alone, of having no-one again, makes her clamp down on everything. It makes her swallow it all down until she’s choking with it in the middle of the night. Sinking her teeth into the inside of her cheeks and curling her fists up tight.

Lela likes them, likes them more than she ought to—considering they might be straight up
That’s how she ended up out by the waters edge in the farthest part of downtown Manhattan. It’s windier out here than she’d anticipated. Her hair whips around at her face like stray bits of leather lashing at her cheeks. She’s got a smoke pinched to her lips, leaning against the rail, when her eyes catch on a stranger. He’s dressed in a casual white tee and brown sweater paired together with worn down washed out jeans. He’s leaning up against the same railing she is, just further down the way. Far enough away, that when he gets on his phone, Lela can’t hear him against the wind coming off the water. Far enough away that Lela, for all that she’s got a good enough nose for picking up scents, can’t smell his rank on the wind. Lela doesn’t know what keeps her looking at the man, only that she does.

It’s only when a different kid walks up to the brown sweater boy, that Lela knows why she’d kept looking. He’s a dealer. Her hungry eyes watch as drugs and money pass hand in that swift and hard to follow manner. Once the transaction is completed, the faceless kid wanders away and leaves the brown sweater boy alone.

Temptation swirls at the pit of Lela’s belly. It makes her mouth run dry. Hunger makes her palms itch. The worst parts of her sing, wouldn’t it be easier just to fall down that rabbit hole. To avoid the ugliness that she turned out to be?

It’d be so fucking easy to push away from the railing she leans on and head the man’s way. To ask him what he’s slinging out and buy whatever he’s got on him. She doesn’t have much on her, but then, she knows how to score by selling parts of herself.

All the bullshit she’s trying to stuff down, suddenly in technicolor, explode across her eyes. Lela can almost feel the stray pebbles of a dirty alleyway digging into her knees. She can almost feel the stretch and burn of her jaw. She can almost feel the ghost of some nameless fucker’s dick in her, pushing into her hard and relentless.

She’s tempted up until she remembers what it felt like afterward, having to clean herself up or off. She’s tempted until she remembers how sour her stomach usually got when it was filled with some fuckers cum. She’s tempted until she realizes she doesn’t want to be like that anymore. That she hates whoring herself out more than she hated what she was. She’s tempted until the ghost of her mothers sneering voice comes tumbling out from the pit of her mind.

Laughing at what she’s become.

So Lela tosses her brand new cig into the water and pushes off the railing. She keeps walking past the bus stop she’d used to get here and decides to get back to the hotel the long way around. Call it bad luck, or the universe trying to keep her from falling into bad habits, but it’s like that that she comes upon a rundown little rec center. There’s some type of board outside, with those black little interchangeable letters on it, spelling out ‘Support Group’.

In theory, Lela knows what goes down at AA meetings but she’s never personally attended any. She doesn’t think she’s the type. The thought of going in there, baring her heart and soul to a bunch of strangers is...terrifying. To admit the shit she’s done, say it with her own tongue, makes lead drop into her stomach.

But, for whatever reason, she stops dead in her tracks by the stone steps that lead up to the entrance. For a wild second, Lela wonders if it helps any, going in and talking her shit out. She wonders what it’d do for her. To talk about the abuse she’s lived through, the pain she’s been given and the horrifying shit she did to herself. But, then Lela reasons, she doesn’t even know what kind of support group this is. For all she knew it was grief counseling. So she should just leave. Continue on her
walk back to the suit to internalize her shit till she was foaming at the mouth with it.

She must stand there for longer than she thinks, because Lela completely misses it when a man suddenly appears at the steps.

“You coming in?” the man asks, his voice smooth and careful.

Half jerking in place, Lela rips her eyes from the black and white board and over to the speaker. Her eyes make quick work of the man. She takes in his soft smile stretched across his handsome face. The brilliant white of his smile and the small gap between his front teeth. She drinks in the sight of his smooth mocha skin and the muscle hidden underneath a simple navy blue shirt and form fitting blue jeans. He’s handsome, stocky and well defined in the ways, Lela thinks, only models or gym devoted folk often were.

And yet, for as hard lined as he was—a fighter if nothing else—the man held a certain softness in his brown eyes. A softness that bleed into his entire being. It flowed outward and got itself tangled in the wind that blew past them. It is a softness Lela can fucking smell and taste—thanks to her new meds—on her goddamn tongue. The stranger smells of Lilac flowers on a dewy morning. He tastes like warm honey over a steaming cup of tea. Underneath all of that, he smells distinctly like oak wood and something musky enough to show he’s a Beta with a dominate nature.

It should set her on edge, but Lela cannot help but find the scent pleasing. It’s probably her meds doing, because she can scent a hell of a lot of people these days and find that her hindbrain remains pleasantly dead at the back of her mind. A determined little shit that it was, it was easier to manage. Easier to beat down when she needed to. Still, she feels her hindbrain kickback at her, twirling in the way it did for Natasha and Clint when Lela was drowsy.

Ungluing her tongue from the roof of her mouth, Lela tells him, “Not really,” her eyes run back to the board as she tries to kill the notion of walking in dead before it sparks up again, “No.”

Pulling his dark sneaker clad foot off the front step, the man casually slips his hands into his front pockets and says, “Prolly not, I mean, it isn’t but, hell you look like you might need some help kid.”

Growling low in her throat, Lela slips an unlit smoke to her lips and strikes up. With lungs full of smoke, she bites out after waving her hand at the board, “And what, you saying this shit helps?”

“I mean, it always helps to talk about the dogs biting at our heels. But nothing ever works unless we want it to,” the man confesses, his voice smooth and unbothered by her clear hostility.

Everything in Lela wants to push past the stranger, to rush back on her way to wherever the hell she was headed, but she doesn’t. She finds her boots glued to the pavement. She finds herself pinned in
place by the softness in the man's eyes and the strangeness of his scent filling up her nose. The willful
shit that was her hindbrain slithers up the back of her head until it wraps it's greedy little hands
around her neck and squeezes. It keeps her in place, keeps her caught in the scent that wafts around
her like a well worn blanket from a distant memory.

“M'not much of a talker,” Lela admits as she ashed her cig.

“You don’t gotta share if you don’t wanna. I mean, it’d be good if ya did. But no one’s gunna force
you, that’s not how it works,” the man offers with a bit of a frown. Like he can’t understand that
what Lela means is that she doesn’t want to delve into the shit she’s done. She wants to stuff it down
into a box and let it rot.

Pursing her lips, Lela pulls her gaze away and watches as a different stranger walks up the steps and
crosses the threshold with ease. She remains quiet for a moment until she breathes out in a plume of
smoke, “You go?”

“Every chance I get, it’s a weekly meet,” the man admits without preamble. Like it’s no big deal to
admit he needed help on like a weekly basis.

A strange type of nervousness grips her chest and twists up her stomach. Lela isn’t actually going in,
but the thought of maybe doing it, is making anxiety claw it’s way up her veins. It makes her heart
hammer just loud enough that she can barely make out the sounds of the cars zooming past.

“What’s it for?” Lela asks as she fiddled with the butt of her smoke and chewed on her bottom lip.

“What? The group?” The man asks, his head shooting back around his shoulder to stare at the closed
door. Only when he’s looking at her does he shrug and say, “Mostly, I come in for the Vets, have a
friend who asked me for a favor.”

“Oh,” Lela huffs out. Can’t help but suddenly feel like all her dumb shit is utterly fucking childish in
the face of problems like that.

Those were soldiers, or Ex-Soldiers, her shit was juvenile in the face of all that. That feeling she gets
when Clint gives her that warm look and Natasha flashes her an understanding glance, Lela thinks,
might be inadequacy. She feels it now flare up in her and turn her head to mush.

“M’not a vet,” the words slip out of her mouth before she can register what they are. It’s an excuse, it
feels like one, to not go in. To solidify that she’s never going to make it up the steps.

“I kinda guessed that,” the man admits with a crooked smile, but then he adds on, “Still doesn’t mean
you can’t come in and have a look around. I mean, it can’t hurt. They got pamphlets and shit.
There’s a roster by the main lobby that has all the dates for different types of meetings.”

To that, Lela merely frowns, and stubs out her smoke with the heel of her left foot. She flashes the
man a dubious look before she can register what they are. It’s an excuse, it feels like one, to not go in. To solidify that she’s never going to make it up the steps.

“Still doesn’t mean you can’t come in and have a look around. I mean, it can’t hurt. They got pamphlets and shit. There’s a roster by the main lobby that has all the dates for different types of meetings.”

To that, Lela merely frowns, and stubs out her smoke with the heel of her left foot. She flashes the
man a dubious look before glancing back at the door. Lela knows she’s got fear in her heart. The
kind of fear one had when confronted with the thought of having to walk into a den of lions.
Logically, she understands it’s just a fucking rec center. It’s probably got all the bullshit that came
with a community building: all hand-me down shit worn around the edges enough to get thrown out.

But the fear keeps her out. She doesn’t want to go in, catch a glimpse of someone who knows pain
and suffering far more than she’ll ever understand and get told she’s a goddamn fucking disgrace.
She doesn’t want to walk in and feel like her shit’s infantile. Because it is, Lela knows. She’s making
a big fucking deal out of fucking nothing. But she doesn’t want someone else to admit it too.

Her life has admittedly been ugly, but it could always get worse. She knows that first hand. Lela
knows she should be counting her fucking stars and getting down on her knees for whatever god gave her this break. She should be thankful she’s not dead in a ditch somewhere, dry spunk on her dress skirt and enough heroine in her veins to kill a horse.

What she shouldn’t be doing, is standing around feeling fucking sorry for herself. She’d done this shit to herself. No one had forced her to get herself locked up in a bond, she’d allowed that shit to happen. No one had forced her to walk the fucking streets sucking dick for cash, she’d allowed that shit to happen. No one had forced her to get herself hooked on drugs that killed people from the inside out, she’d allowed that shit to happen. No one had forced her to present as a filthy goddamn Omega, and yet, she’d allowed that shit to happen too.

Lela’s got no one else to blame for her shit. If she walked in there, looked into the eyes of men and women who were just a little bit broken in ways she’ll never know or understand, they’ll know it too. They’ll call her out on her bullshit and run her out the fucking door with her tail tucked between her legs.

And Lela thinks, well fuck, she’d rather not do anything like that.

So, she takes a calculated step to the side—not back, never back, you didn’t do that kind of shit in front of anybody—and makes to leave.

“Wait!” the man says, his dark arm shooting out to still her. Only it hovers at a perfectly respectable distance. Never crowding her in place or barring her pass. It’s the type of move one gave to a wolf who got caught in a backyard and was making to leave through a bear trap path. It’s meant to still her but never by force.

It still makes Lela want to bare her teeth for a fight. Falling back into the ugly habits that have kept her alive this long is second nature. To want to drop her teeth and display herself as nothing more than a stray rabid dog, it’s all she knows. It’s all she thinks she’ll ever know.

Sober or not.

Lela doesn’t know why—only that she does—she goes still. Lilac and Oak Wood fill her nose and honey lines her nicotine stained mouth. She feels like somewhere, deep and nameless, she’s tasted all that before. In another life maybe, one where she wasn’t such a fucking mess, Lela knew that scent and had called it one of hers. But, like much else in her mind, it’s a bunch of bullshit.

Either way, Lela stops and lets her eyes settle on the man’s face, waiting. She’s got her chin jutted out, her shoulders tense and her feet squared and planted. The aggressive fighting stance comes to her as second nature as breathing. Hardly a thought goes into presenting herself as a Dom-Something. In the back of her mind, she really doubts the Beta man is going to do anything, but she’s conditioned at this point. Lela doesn’t know how else to react to the dominate bark of a Beta, despite how soft the sound is or how supple the scent might be.

“Wanna get a cup of coffee?” the man asks, his dark brows pinched in worry. As if understanding that Lela was never about to head in, whatever he would have said would’ve fallen on willfully deaf ears.

Arching a brow, Lela refuses to believe it’s something she’s picked up from a certain green eyed menace, she purses her lips and drawls out between half sharp teeth, “Why?”

“I mean, it’s a nice day out, we can take a walk through the park, have a drink or something,” he says in a tentative manner, “You don’t have to talk, or anything really. But, I do know what it’s like to have your back against the wall. It’s up to you though, no pressure.”
Change, Lela thinks, the hardest part about it, is the fact that sometimes there’s parts of her that just don’t want to. It’d be so easy to blow this man off. As seemingly well intended as he sounded and looked, Lela wanted to tear into him. Let her teeth sink past his dark skin and spill blood. To pull up a fist and smash it across his high and well defined fucking demi-god like cheeks. There’s a bubbling want to sour his scent with something acidic like anger or frustration. To make the lilac less palpable. To wash away the honey with his ire. To make the oak wood burn."

It’s then that her hindbrain stirs to life. It pulses mad and wicked. A sentient thing forever fixated on Lela’s goddamn demise. All the things that maker her a fucking Omega come to life. With that smell in her nose, that scent on her tongue, Lela feels herself begin to settle. Lela thinks it has something to do with living with the wonder-dicks too, that’s made her a tad bit less abrasive.

They’ve softened her up, with Clint’s gamma purrs/growls. They’ve worn her down, with Natasha’s firm glowers. Lela blames them both. Greedy desperate hands wrap themselves around the strange silk ribbon and steel band. She pulls from them what strength she can as she nodded her head in a quick little jerk and muttered between down turned lips, “‘kay.”

Her response is lackluster at best, begrudging at most. But the strangers dark face practically glows with the grin that spreads across his face. There’s a slight bounce to his step as he goes to stand at her side and they both begin walking. He doesn’t say anything, is content to keep the silence that Lela refuses to break. But he walks with a confidence that says he is undisturbed by her standoff nature. Though, considering, he’d admitted to attending a meeting for veterans which implied he was a veteran too, a little dom-something would hardly faze him. Lela does her best to ignore the instinctual fear that crops up.

Not being able to intimidate people with her faux Alpha growls makes her feel defenseless. Vulnerable in a way she wasn’t used to feeling, not in a long time. Though, the wonder-dicks were hardly fazed by her growls too. Lela willfully ignored that knowledge on a daily basis.

They stop at some little hipster looking coffee shop to pick up their drinks. The man orders something hazel nut infused and Lela grabs a plain coffee that she mixes herself with creamer and sugar. By the time she’s done with it, the dark liquid is a pale brown and sugary enough to make Natasha’s left eye twitch if she knew. Personally, Lela’s never been much of a coffee drinker. Not really. She likes the smell well enough, but she’s never actively sought out the drink. Much more of a soda drinker more than anything.

But caffeine in any form was still caffeine. Living with the wonder-dicks was akin to being holed up in some kind of boujee rehab of sorts. They didn’t really take kindly to Lela’s caffeine addiction. Much like they didn’t approve of her smoking. Always Natasha is trying to shove some type of herbal tea while Clint lists off adverse medical effects like a bad nutritionist. But, fuck, if she was supposed to be getting clean—off the drugs and shit—she needed something to keep her fucking level headed. Whether it be nicotine or insane amounts of sugar.

They don’t really speak until they come upon a bench just inside central park. It’s hidden away enough that there’s not a shit load of people crowding around but still has every other person milling about. The stranger slides down into the hard metal while Lela herself lets herself drop with little grace. Her drink jostles but doesn’t spill on account of the lid she’d secured in the coffee shop.

It’s windy out, so the long strands of her hair whip around her like live black tentacles. Lela pushes at them until they sit half tamed behind the curve of her ears. She’s beginning to regret ever growing it out in the first place. A part of her is afraid of cutting it. A small bit of her is afraid she’ll somehow get recognized for who she used to be without her hair to cover her up.

“I’m Sam,” the Beta—Sam—announces after taking a long draw from his cup. His voice breaking
her from her thoughts.

Chasing the sugar on her lips, Lela offers, “Lela.”

“You new around here Lela,” Sam asks, his body is slanted towards her, open and inviting while simultaneously displaying himself as least threatening as possible.

In that moment, Lela is hit with a strange sense of deja vu. Both over the fact that he’s asking that and the simple fact that she’s chased after yet another stranger into a strange place. All over a fucking scent. Lela thinks, it must be her fucking dynamics doing. Acting on scents alone, her fucking omega instincts—whether they be drugged with medical drugs or narcotics—were ugly little fucks. She was a slave to them, in the end.

“Yeah,” Lela decides to be honest. No sense in lying, not after following the stranger on the sole purpose of talking—but-not-talking.

“Where you from, originally?” Sam probes lightly, from the corner of her eye she can make out the careful expression in his soft brown eyes. The way he seems to be walking carefully over a bed of eggshells lest he spook her away with one wrong word.

“Texas?” Lela says as casually as she can, moving her cup from one hand to the other, “You?”

“Harlem, born and raised,” Sam announces, no small amount of pride lining his words. He says it like someone who’s proud of his hometown and everything that came with it.

Lela wouldn’t know what that felt like. Her own homelands was nothing to be proud of, not really. At least, not in the eye of the public media. It was a border town. Over crowded in the ways no one in the great nation approved of. Yet too empty where it mattered. Cities that were considered towns in the face of other places. Her home was filled with harvest fields and labor workers. Filled to the brim with poverty, with drug related crimes, with all the bad shit they liked to blame the people of her heritage.

They didn’t have hometown pride like the people of New York. At least, not in anyway Lela’s ever seen. Not in any way she grew up feeling.

“How long you been here?” Sam asks, chasing away her thoughts.

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela downs at least half of her drink before her stomach starts to sour over it all together. She places the cup between her feet and pulls her pack out of the confines of her jacket pockets. Only when one is lit and smoking does she answer, “Fuck if I know. A while now.”

Taking her answer for what it was, Sam nods and delicately questions, “So what brought you to the rec center?”

“Nothing, I was passing by. Saw the sign,” Lela admits.

“What made you stop?”

Pursing her lips, Lela pulls a heavy drag in and tells him, “The dogs at my heels.”

“They got names?” Sams asks, and when she glances over at him, he clarifies, “Your dogs, they got names?”

And fuck, yes. They have names. One is named Sara, after her mother. The other Leo, after her ex. The biggest one, the ugliest one, the one covered in mange and foaming at the mouth with rabies
bears her name. On it’s head is the branded Omega sign, the skin raw and forever bleeding. But Lela doubts that’s what Sam means. She doubts that’s what he’s asking.

“Cocaine, Heroine, Oxy, and whatever else I happened to score,” Lela gives him instead of the truth.

If Sam is surprised, he doesn’t show it. He merely nods before looking down at his drink and taking a sip of it. For a moment he is quiet. He glances up to watch a group of middle aged woman jog past them in designer looking yoga pants. After a while, he asks, “How long you been sober?”

“I don’t know, about three weeks?” Lela tells him. That’s the count she’d come up with after the clinic. That’s about the time she started taking the time to mark down the days she’s spent sober around the wonder-dicks.

“That why you stopped at the center? You were looking for NA?”

“Told you, I didn’t stop. I was passing by.”

“You stopped,” Sam tells her with certainty. As if he knew—as much as Lela did—she was bullshitting him. She’d stopped dead in her tracks when confronted with that white board, “What made you stop?”

Tension begins to build on Lela’s shoulders. Anxiety fueled aggravation begins to line her veins. Grinding her teeth, she runs her left hand through her hair. Pulling a heavy drag she heaves out a bitter sigh:

“Saw a dealer, out by the docks. Got to thinking, this whole straight edged bullshit wasn’t worth it, ya know?”

And like some levy in her just snaps, Lela finds herself unable to stop the words that follow.

“I don’t have enough on me to buy a decent hit of anything, but I started thinking that I didn’t need it. Fuck, I’ve never needed money for it before, right? Like, I started thinking, I could just fall back into it, easy as fucking breathing. Get on my knees and suck his dick for fucking pills. Or let him fuck me just to burn some tar on a crooked spoon. I wanted to do it. I wanted to so fucking bad and…I just…fuck. I don’t know.”

By the time she finishes, her chest is heaving. Her heart is hammering in her chest. She feels her body half vibrating like she might just jump up and start running. It’s probably the coffee and the insane amount of sugar working its way through her. But it also might be the intense need boiling up in her to fucking jet the hell out of here. Because this whole talking her shit out, it feels a little like she’s touched a live-wire within herself.

Lela doesn’t know what the fuck people get out of talking their shit out. She feels far shittier now than she had when she was on the waters edge. There’s a throbbing rawness in her now. Pulsing and burning with how she’s grabbed the knife in her chest and twisted it harshly in place. Her bad habits make her want to run. To ditch this fucking mess of a situation she’s made for herself as fast as she can. But she doesn’t move. She finds herself frozen to the spot with words just spilling out of her mouth like she can’t stop them.

“I want to stop. I never meant to become a fuckin’ junkie. Like, shit, I saw what it did to my mom. I saw her waste away in front of me, till one day, I came home from some side job I had and she was lying in a pool of her own vomit. I saw what she was and swore I wasn’t gunna be anything like her. But then, shit, I don’t know. Life fuckin’ happened, ya know?

And like, I don’t, I guess I’m my mothers daughter, right? It’s so much easier to fucking drown in it
than to claw my way back out. I just kept digging myself further into that hole. I kinda hoped I’d get buried alive in it. Just go out that way and the, and then I got sober and now—Now I gotta deal with all the shit I never wanted to. And it’s hard, so fucking hard to want to stay sober when I know how much easier it is to just…not.”

Dropping the dead butt of her smoke into her coffee cup, Lela lights another to hide the way her hands shake. She hasn’t spoken about her mother—or her mother’s death—since…well, since ever. Apart from stating she was dead, Lela didn’t touch the why’s or the how’s for the life of her. She never liked her mother—hated her on most days—but that was still her mom. And finding her like that, broken and cold, lifeless and dead eyed, had hurt her in a way Lela thinks she’ll never get over no matter how much she bullshits herself.

“I want to stop, I don’t wanna be the type of person who lives off the shit, but…I—I don’t think I know how else to be? Like, I know I’m not a good person, the shit I’ve done, all of it, I know I’m not. How do I fucking do this?! I don’t know how the fuck I’m supposed to do this,” Admitting that, saying it out loud, makes the worst parts of her slither beneath her skin.

Lela feels vulnerable in every sense of the word. Worse than what she had felt when Natasha and Clint had known what she was and she was forced to face them anyway. She feels like she’s gutted herself at this stranger’s feet. Pulled her guts out inch by inch and just let them pile up at her goddamn feet.

Sam hasn’t said anything, but Lela can feel his gaze on the side of her face, boring into her like he’s willing her to stay in place.

Change, Lela wants so desperately to change herself, to make herself better. But she doesn’t think she’s that fucking strong. Not at all. Maybe it’s got nothing to do with her fucking dynamic and everything to do with the scared piece of shit she is deep down. She aches so badly to dive back into her former life because she’s scared shitless of finding out she’s just weaker on a more primal basis. That her dynamic is the least of her problems, she doesn’t want to find out.

Issuing a disparaging note at the back of her tongue, Lela pinches her cig in between her lips and says, “It’s fucking bullshit, right?”

“It’s not bullshit,” Sam says, and that causes Lela to look at him. If only to send him an incredulous look that must spell out how much she didn’t believe that. Shaking his head, Sam issues a heavy sigh of his own, “It’s not. I mean, I’m not going to sit here and tell you exactly what you’re going through, because I don’t. No one will ever know exactly what someone has suffered and understand. Everyone hurts in their own way. And you dealt with your hurt the only way you could.

I mean, obviously, drugs are bad, and you shouldn’t do them no matter what, but hell—everyone’s entitled to their falls every now and again. And that’s what you did. You stumbled, you fell down, but now you’re pulling yourself up. You’re taking that first step and that’s not bullshit. It’s fucking brave, it takes courage to want to turn your situation around. To want to get better. It takes a hell of a lot of willpower to acknowledge that we’ve wandered onto the wrong path and wanting to get back on the straight and narrow.

That’s brave, you’re brave Lela.”

Laughter bubbles up in Lela’s chest, dark and cruel. There’s an aching want in her chest to sneer, to bite out something to push the man and his soft words away from herself. But Lela doesn’t. she finds herself unable to do anything because there’s a lump growing in her throat.

A cry that’s half sad and half miserable.
Pursing her lips, Lela pulls her gaze from the Beta man and pins them on the tree line across from them. She keeps her lips sealed over the end of her smoke to keep them from quivering. Lela’s never been the type of girl to cry, not in a long while now, but she’s feeling like she might. There’s a burn in the back of her eyes that makes her want to curl into herself and just…bawl.

Because, she’s been called a great many things in her life, but never fucking brave. Never has she dared to use that fucking word to describe any part of her life or herself. Lela doubts, if the man knew all of what Lela did, he wouldn’t use it too.

But the part of her that’s raw and bleeding, it pushes away her self deprecating thoughts and pulls the Beta’s words closer to herself. A part of her clings to them like she might make them stem the bleeding for a little while. Like they’ll keep her from bleeding out here and now.

Lela hides the tears on the brim of her eyes with cigarette smoke as she roughly swiped at her cheeks. Her leather jacket creaks and groans as she bites out, “I don’t feel fucking brave. I feel useless. I did this to myself, right? Got myself hooked on the shit and now when it comes to paying the piper, I just don’t got it in me.”

“Well, now, that’s bullshit. You’ve made some mistake in life kid. But that’s just what they are: mistakes. Mistakes you made in your past. And you can’t let them define who you are now.” Sam tells her firmly, he makes an aborted motion—as if he’s going to place his hand on her shoulder before he thins better of it. Instead he simply turns more in her direction while still seated.

Pulling in a ragged breath, Lela speaks past the lump in her throat and tries to keep her voice steady, “What if—what if I don’t know who that is? Like, what if I don’t like who I am now. What if I don’t like who I am when I look into the mirror?”

Dark brows pinched, lips tight and frowning, Sam looks like maybe he wants to scoop her up and smoother her in affection he isn’t sure would be well received—but willing to try regardless. But he holds himself in place as he tells her with all the conviction of a man who will not be swayed, “Then don’t let them define who you want to be. We’re all human, all of us are fallible, but we all deserve redemption Lela. And even if you don’t think so, that does mean you too.”

It feels like a sucker punch straight to the goddamn chest. Her air rushes out of her lungs. Her lips pop open as her cigarette dangles—barely clinging to her cry lips. She feels wide eyed and lost as she stares at the man. Her heart twisting itself into different shapes in her chest. That feeling of bawling intensifies till tears brim and spill over like a broken fucking leak.

Sam’s brown eyes go wide as he stares in growing horror at her.

“Oh shit! Oh Fuck! I’m sorry, fuck, I don’t mean to make you cry!” Sam practically screams as he goes to touch her only to pull away. His hands hover over her—dangerously close—but Lela can do nothing else except cry.

“Fuck you” Lela growls between broken sobs, furiously wiping away at the tears that refuse to cease. Her cigarette has tumbled to her feet and sputter out, “I’m not crying.”

But she is, she’s fucking bawling like a goddamn crazy person. Tears run down her heated cheeks like ugly torrents to a broken dam. A part of her fucking hates that she’s doing it. It bites at her savagely to man the fuck up. To get her shit together. It sounds like her mother, that part of her, all savage growls and hurtful hands. Another part of her, softened up by Clint’s warmth and Natasha’s cool accepting silence, ignores it. Tells her it’s okay to feel what she’s feeling. To allow the tears to fall because it’s been so long since she’s let herself feel human.
Twisting up his lips in a wry smile, Sam tells her, “Really? You kinda look like you are.”

Biting down as many of the sobs—dangerously close to sounding like whimpers and cries of her damned dynamic—Lela snaps out in a far less heated manner than she’d like, “Fuck you.”

Laughing, Sam finally settles his hovering hand onto her shoulder. The clasp is gentle, hardly there at all. Instead of finding herself feeling trapped, or frightened by it, Lela practically melts into the warmth of his palm. A warmth—that matched the beta man perfectly—she can feel through the material of her jacket.

Lela can feel his silent strength radiating through his hand until it seeped into her flesh. His touch, just like his scent, feels bone achingly familiar. It brings to life her hindbrain. Burns it awake till she feels something practically unfurl in her chest and force her to lean into the touch.

Slowly, the tears come to an end. They petter out in a lazy manner until Lela is sitting there in silence with Sam. Both of them quietly taking in their surroundings with an ease that belied the fact that they were strangers.

“You got a support system? Friends you can rely on when you’re starting to slip?” Sam finally asks, his hand slipping away from her shoulder—half reluctant and unsure.

Lela is sad to see it go. A whine—pitiful and entirely omega-ish—is captured behind Lela’s teeth. Beaten down until it burns away in her chest. Medicated or not, Lela wasn’t so stupid as to start doing shit like that.

No, sits on her tongue easy as anything. Because Lela doesn’t. Never has. But it sits crooked in her throat. Sharp spined, it digs into her throat and refuses to spill out. Because that was before.

The strange silk and iron band warm in her chest, pulse loud and clear against her overwhelming emotions. They remind her of Clint and Natasha. Of the wonder-dicks constantly trying to smoother the life out of her every single day she woke up.

Shrugging, Lela mumbles, “Kinda.”

“They know you hit a bump?” Sam questions lightly, no judgment whatsoever in his words. As if he didn’t just have a stranger melting down next to him on a bright sunny day.

“Not really, I haven’t really told them I’ve been jonesing,” Lela admits. What she doesn’t say is that Natasha and Clint hardly seemed like the type one could just pillow talk all night with. What she doesn’t say is that she most definitely isn’t ready to see if they were or not.

Too scared to fuck with the way things were at the moment. Too scared to drive them away.

Sam grows quiet then, as if understanding what Lela won’t say. Wordlessly, he moves around, so he’s digging through his front pocket until he produces a white piece of paper. Lela watches as he unearths a pen too and then Sam proceeds to scribble onto it.

“If you ever feel like you need someone to talk to, call me,” Sam tells her as he hands over the white little scrap of paper.

When Lela takes it, she notes that it’s the coffee shop receipt. It holds the info of their order but on the back sits Sam’s phone number and his name. Sam’s writing was most definitely chicken scratch, but, Lela can make out the numbers well enough.

There was a time when this—this small token of goodwill—would’ve been looked like a double
edged sword in Lela’s eyes. Not too long ago, Lela would’ve snapped her teeth at whatever asshole thought it was a good idea to try to offer his help to her. The tentative hands of this offered grapevine would’ve been savagely torn up by her hands. But, apparently not today.

Change, she keeps thinking about that word. Keeps trying to force herself to do the opposite of what she normally would’ve done. She wants to be brave, like Sam thinks. She doesn’t want to be who she is now. She wants to be…better.

So she stuffs the paper into her jacket and tells him, honestly, “Thanks.”

“No problem kid,” Sam says as they both begin to rise to their feet. When they’re standing, Sam seems reluctant to draw their talk to an end. Every inch of his body language suggests he wants to reach for her again. Like he wants to draw her in to a tight hold but is holding himself back.

Lela’s thankful for it, even if it both twists at her chest and warms her, she’s not ready for something like that. Doesn’t know if she ever will be. A part of her hopes maybe one day she won’t feel so adverse to casual touch like that.

“You can call me night or day, I don’t mind, for real,” Sam informs her in a tone that is both firm and optimistic.

“Got it,” Lela nods as she stuffed her hands into her jacket pockets and awkwardly shuffled her feet. She feels as awkward as she’s ever felt in her life. She had, after all, dived head first into the worst parts of herself with a total stranger. A stranger who had offered her kind words and no judgment whatsoever.

“I’ll see you around then?” Sam asks, sounds painfully hopeful as he ran a hand over his perfect faded head.

Snorting, Lela nods again before turning on her heel and throwing back, “See you around Sam.”

Feeling infinitely lighter, like she can take a deep enough breath to not want to pass out, Lela makes her way back to the suite.

*~*

The moment she makes it past the front door Lela is…attacked. A body comes barreling at her and whether she liked to or not, Lela is put on edge. She feels her teeth slip down and grow sharp. A roar rips itself from her lips as her eyes snapped up to whatever fuck had decided to crowd her against the front door.

It takes her a moment—longer than she’d like to admit—to recognize the face belonging to her would-be assailant. It’s the scent that she recognizes more than anything. Strawberry bubblegum and black licorice, fucking Clint.

Growling low in her throat she pushes at his chest as hard as she can and watches him stumble back. Her face is twisted up in anger as she bites out, “What the fuck was that?”

“Where were you?! You’ve been gone for like…hours!” Clint says instead. His golden face pinched with his worry. His voice painted in his pent up frustration. His eyes—more green than honey gold—are half wild as they rake over her face. As if searching her for injuries.

“Out,” Lela snaps, her nose screwing up as Clint’s worry attempted to burn her nostrils.

Stepping around the blonde she heads for the couch. She’d walked here, decided against the bus and
taxis on account of how utterly empty her pockets were. Her feet were throbbing in the only way too much walking could prompt. The thought of kicking off her boots and pulling up her feet was all Lela could think about for the moment.

“Are you hurt?” Clint questions as he nipped at her heels.

“What?” Lela can’t help but ask, her brows pinching tight as she pulled off her jacket and tossed it at an empty lounger. Only when she’s sinking into the softness of the couch does she look up at Clint and prompt, “Why the hell would I be hurt?”

“I don’t know! You were gone for a long time, I thought… I thought—” Whatever else Clint was going to say dies when a whine slips past his lips. A gamma whine was all throaty and broken notes.

The sound of Clint’s clear distress makes Lela’s hindbrain twist sharp and painful. The sound of it grates on Lela’s ears sending cold creeping down her spine. Her useless fucking instincts wind up tight and ache to pounce. To release a whine, a whimper, a fucking cry for peace and comfort. But Lela clamps down on it. She grits her teeth and gnashes them together until they grind. Lela Glares up at Clint, wordlessly trying to get him to stop that bullshit here and now.

“Clint,” Natasha calls out, voice stern and leveled. The redheaded Beta appears—like goddamn ghost—from behind Clint and seats herself across the couch. Her face is perfectly impassive but her eyes are hard edged and fixed on Lela’s face. It’s probably worse than listening to Clint’s distressed cries. The sight of Natasha’s aggravation makes Lela want to bare her throat. To go belly up and submit to avoid whatever Natasha was about to dole out.

Pursing her lips, Lela keeps her head straight and forces out of her mouth, “What?”

“Nothing,” Natasha breezily answers, her hands brushing at some stray imaginative dust on her lap, “We were simply worried is all. You had been gone for far longer than we anticipated.”

Despite herself, Lela feels warmth uncoil in her belly. Because what Natasha doesn’t say is that they had been worried. Worried for her, over her. These strangers, who’d gone out of their way to help her for seemingly nothing in return, had probably paced the floor waiting for her to return. These strangers, who had seen to getting Lela sober and healthy again—who had gone out of their way to pay for top dollar suppressors and blockers—had probably thought she’d gone back to her old lifestyle. They had probably worried that she’d slipped out their hands and gone back under.

And Lela doesn’t know why she’s so surprised that they’d show this level of intense worry. When their entire time together has been one marked with Clint’s hovering ways and Natasha’s half tyrant force feedings. They cared because… well, because they did. And Lela cared for them because… well, because she did.

The silk ribbon and steel band—which had grown cold and tight enough to strain—go warm again, gentle too. Lela wraps her imaginary hands around them and pulls just enough to get them bundled up against one another. They twist and twine effortlessly around her heart, settling only when Lela lets them go. She pulls from them what strength she can and lets her boiling anger fall away.

Rolling her eyes, Lela drops back into the couch and mumbles, “Just went for a walk through the park.”

She thinks back on Sam’s quiet words. The way he’d accepted her, a stranger on the street, and all the baggage she was dragging on her back. The way it had felt effortless with him—Sam. She wonders if maybe she should tell Clint and Natasha what she’s been thinking, what she’s been struggling with. She thinks about letting her guard down, fully, with them. To allow herself to treat
them less like strangers and more like the kind people she’s getting to know them as.

Silence sits heavy for a half beat before Clint dropped gracelessly next to her. The rough movement jostles Lela, but she doesn’t snap her teeth because it’s familiar enough already that Lela half expects it. With a heavy sigh, He drops his head back onto the couch and grumbles. they remain like that, silent and unmoving, for a bit longer until Clint asks up to the ceiling:

“You hungry?”

A groan works it’s way up her throat as Lela sinks into the safety and warmth of Clint’s body. She does her damnedest to ignore Natasha’s knowing gaze across the way. As casually as she can muster, Lela knocks her knee right knee into Clint’s left saying as she did so:

“I swear to god, you assholes are trying to get me to hate food.”

Laughing, Clint rolls his head over so he’s facing her entirely. His eyes have lightened back to honey as he smiled wide and happy, “Burgers or Pizza?”

Clicking her tongue, Natasha interrupts, “Clint, she needs vitamins and nutrients. I can always broil that salmon we have. Paired together with some Brussel sprouts and a quinoa salad—”

Half hissing, Lela whips her head in Natasha’s direction and bites out, “Fuck no.”

Natasha herself wasn’t a half bad cook. Sure she always managed to make it incredibly healthy, but it wasn’t half bad. But Lela would rather go dumpster diving again than put quinoa into her fucking mouth again.

“Pizza?” Clint calls out as he rose from his seat and headed for the door. He’s walking backwards, elegantly missing every piece of furniture on his way out, so he could continue to keep his gaze on her face.

Nodding, Lela tells him, “Beef and mushroom.”

“Gross,” Clint shoots at her with a smile playing at his lips.

By the time Clint makes it back to the suit—ten whole minutes later—Natasha has force fed Lela her usual handful of vitamins and a whole shake of gooey pink shit shake. He comes in carrying at least four whole boxes and places them on the coffee table. They dig in just as Ghost Hunters comes on.

Lela’s at least five slices in when she feels brave enough to broach the subject. the comfort of eating, of watching tv, of their companionship making her go soft again. Lela tries to channel that bravery Sam had claimed she had.

Dipping the corner of her slice into the pool of hot sauce on her plate, Lela says down to her food, “Met a dude today.”

“Yeah?” Clint drawls, mouth full of pineapple and ham pizza. His eyes are glued to the tv but Lela isn’t so stupid to think he isn’t entirely fixated on her.

“Yeah, some kind of vet,” Lela elaborates as she swallowed down her food, “He was going into some support group at a little rec center.”

When Lela chances a glance upward, she notes that Natasha is no longer eating. Her thin spinach and mushroom sauceless monstrosity left unattended on her plate. Her emerald green eyes pinned on Lela’s face. Natasha makes no effort to at least pretend that she isn’t fixated on the topic Lela has
“Got to talking to him,” Lela adds on and then lamely drifts off, can’t find the words to explain all that had been talked about with the male Beta.

“What about?” Clint questions lightly, he’s looking at her now. His brown golden brows pinched in confusion as he licked food from the corner of his mouth.

Shrugging, Lela licks the grease off her thumb and says, “You know, the usual junky shit. Told him about how I was jonesing. We talked shit out. He even gave me his number.”

Silence grows after she’s spoken. Lela tries to hide her growing nerves behind the glass of ice cold coke in front of her.

“Was he—did it help?” Clint asks, his eyes flashing from Lela and then down to his plate of food.

“Kinda, I mean, well yeah.”

And it had. Lela had fucking cried. She’d felt lighter since she’d spoken to him. Felt less like a scab of a person after they’d talked. So yeah, it had helped.

“That’s good,” Natasha muses, her eyes flashing all across Lela’s face, “Do you, maybe, want to talk to us?”

“Yes, we’re here for you, whatever you need,” Clint rushes out, half tossing his plate away, he turns from where he sits on the floor—beside Lela’s feet—and sits his heavy imploring gaze on her.

It’s then that Lela feels the silk ribbon and the steel band fluxuate. She feels them expand and then firmly squeeze her heart. Tight enough to force the air from her lungs. They burn hot and bright as Lela sits there staring at her support system in their faces.

Choking back the incessant need to start up the water works—again—Lela licks her lips and fiddles with her plate. Speaking past the lump in her throat, Lela nods and forces herself to change.

“I know, I know you are,” she says quietly, her voice sounds—even to her own ears—especially delicate. Far more vulnerable sounding than when she’d been on that park bench with Sam. She forces herself to ignore the need to hide it all away and continue speaking, “But this is something I gotta do on my own.”

“Oh, okay,” Clint mutters and he looks like he wants to fight her on this but is forcing himself to keep his peace. Clint, like always, is ever ready to give her what she wanted. Lela blinks past the tears that begin to build in her eyes, “But, I’m serious, you ever need anything we’ll be there. No matter what.”

Scrubbing a hand under her eyes, Lela offers a watery smile as she picked up yet another slice, “Anything? Like, what? Can I put out a hit on someone and you’d do it, no questions asked?”

“Lela,” Natasha asks her tongue, as she too picked up her abandoned slice, “All you have to do is point and we’ll take care of the rest.”

And Lela’s trying to be a better person, she really is, but the thought of two supposed assassins offering to kill on her whims alone makes her go warm all the way down to her toes. Natasha utters the sentence with an air of a joke but the harsh seriousness of it sits in her glittering eyes.
wasn’t joking, not really. And that should be terrifying. It should make Lela blanch and turn the other direction. Because Natasha was made of hellfire and something dangerous. And Clint, warm as he was, held just as much dangerous darkness as his beta.

It should frighten her, make her feel unsafe or whatever. But it makes Lela’s chest flutter and the silk and iron bands go white hot. the knowledge that they would run out and help her—even if it was to possibly murder someone for her—makes her go gooey.

It’s then that Lela figures out—entirely too late—that she doesn’t have a support system. Not at all. She’s got friends. Two of possibly the worst and most dangerous friends a person could have.

And the realization of it makes her laugh. It makes her laugh hard enough that she’s clutching tightly at her sides and bowling over. Lela laughs and laughs till she’s crying again. Ugly wounded sounds that don’t abate until Clint is wrapping his arms around her. She’s crying and crying, soaking up the material of Clint’s lavender colored shirt, until Natasha is cradling her head in her lap and running long careful fingers through the tangles. Lela cries, clutching at both her gamma and her beta, until finally she feels something in her snap clear in half.

Something dark and nameless--utterly alien--stirs to life within her. Like the dangerous winds of an oncoming hurricane, that something stirs in her chest and swipes away the last of her barriers until Lela is left bare.

Quiet, Lela lays there, in Natasha’s lap, curled into herself in Clint's arms and lets herself breathe. Aside from the air around her stinking of bubblegum/black licorice and ginger root/nutmeg/blackberry, it also tasted of change. And Lela wills herself to be brave, she curls her fingers deeper into the material of Clint's shirt and Natasha's jeans. She wants to believe Sam's words so very very much.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the wait. I've had a lot on my plate. Work is taking me out of state, maybe, still not sure yet. So I've had to be running around getting things in order for the long drive up with my son.

Anyway,

Hope you guys enjoyed. I wrote this on notepad, word hasn't been working out for me lately, and I wasn’t able to run a fine tooth comb through it. So I’m sorry if there’s any errors in it.
Let me know what you think, sorry we're still not in the tower. The new update should get us there though. I want Lela to walk in as healthy as possible so as to not run away from what Pepper has planned. Plus, I need her to bond--at least somewhat--with the super spies.
Hope it didn't come off too wonky. I liked it.
Sam, OH MY GOD, I love him. I wanted it to go so much darker but Sam just nipped that in the butt. He was like 'no, I'm here to love and be accepting of your faults, nothing else!'

Hope to have the next update up soon.

As always, thanks for reading.
Please leave a comment down below
suggestions and/or opinions are always welcomed!!!
-Ani
Amends, or something like it

Chapter Summary

"Lela feels nerves and anxiety claw up her throat. She feels her heart thump a little harder in her chest. Going to see Pepper has been something she’s been entertaining for a while now. Dogging at her heels every time she came back from meeting Sam at whatever little coffee shop he picked. When Sam talked about making amends he usually meant Lela forgiving herself. One of the things she can’t seem to forgive herself over is the ten minutes he’d promised to Dr. Banner and in turn Pepper."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Like, seriously?” Lela feels a bit dumb even asking, but the casual drop of such vital information has left her floundering, a bit.

Grinning, Clint nods his head as he bent over and picked up a stray empty cup of trash and tossed it into a trash bin. Clint makes the shot over his shoulder without so much as glancing at the cans direction. Shrugging his shoulders, which causes the softness of his graphic tee to move with him, Clint just says, “Yeah, I mean, I thought you noticed.”

“Not really,” Lela states, running a nervous hand through her hair and chewing at her bottom lip. She feels like maybe she should have. But maybe she’s just a little self absorbed, can’t bother to look into other peoples problems because she’s wallowing in her own shit. “Like, were you born like that or did it just…happen?”

“A little of both, honestly. I mean, I was always a bit hard of hearing but I didn’t completely lose my hearing until later on,” Clint tells her.

“Shit,” Lela mutters as they lazily made their way to their preferred diner. For a good while, they remain silent, at least one whole block. But it’s as Lela’s lighting up a smoke that she mumbles over the butt, “So you’re like deaf, deaf?”

Motioning to his left ear, Clint flashes her the small black circular buds inside his ear. They aren’t hard to miss if one was staring right at them, so Lela wonders how the hell she missed it in the first place.

“Deaf deaf.” Clint nods his head, doesn’t seem to bothered to admit it as he wiggled his fingers at a gaggle of children passing them by.

Lela feels the word sorry bubble up in her throat. But she doesn’t say it. She doesn’t think its appropriate. The way Clint had broached the subject, casually, effortlessly, implied he was well past
feeling like it was something to hold him down. The simple way he’d shrugged his shoulders told Lela he didn’t feel like it was something others should apologize about. It was just something about him, not something that made him lesser or broken. So Lela swallows it down.

Flicking off the growing ash on her smoke, Lela mumbles, “So a deaf assassin huh?”

Barking out a laugh, Clint tells her, “I’m all about breaking the glass ceiling babe.”

Lela snickers at that because she may not know him very well, but that was entirely Clint. He carried with him this kind of golden optimism that out did the sun. He was the type of person that picked up trash, attempted to recycle in a hotel suite, and took all things in stride. He was the type of man that saw a broken down Omega-hooker on the street and decided she was worth saving. That was Clint and Lela liked that about him.

The diner that they come to is a little mom and pop shop. A little hole in the wall with a devoted clientele. With Clint in front of her, they manage to squeeze in through the crowded front door. Clint manages to snag them a booth in the far end, enough away from the gaggle of teeny boppers that it’s relatively in silence. Sliding into the booth opposite of her, Clint sends her a mega watt smile.

They order their drinks and dive into the menu before them.

“Nat’s on her way,” Clint informs her, his eyes set on his menu.

Heaving a put upon sigh, Lela flips to the back of the menu and stares at the steaks, “We better order fast.”

Laughing, Clint doesn’t bother to tell her that it’s useless. That whether they put in their order, Natasha was most definitely going to try and stop them from consuming whatever unhealthy shit they’d managed to order. He just laughs and sends her a warm grin. Lela ignores how much her own smirk matches his.

It’s easier now, Lela thinks. To let her guard down and simply just be around them. Since her talk with Sam—who she’d only met twice since the first time around—she finds it easier to speak to them. To allow herself to be friends with them. Her hindbrain is easier to deal with now that she’s allowing herself to connect to them.

There’s still a lot that Lela doesn’t know about them—like where the fuck they’re employed as actually killers—and something hungry in her aches to know.

Only when their orders have been put in—a triple meat burger covered in extra cheese and chili cheese fries for Clint and a 12oz steak with mashed potatoes and broccoli for herself—does Lela go about asking.

“So where you from Clint?” Lela asks, sipping lazily from her straw.

“You ever hear of Waverly, Iowa?” Clint asks, twirling his straw through his thick strawberry milkshake. When Lela shrugs, Clint grins wide, “Yeah, not a lot of people have.”

“Small town?” Lela prompts, can’t help but want to dig her claws into the tender side of Clint and pull from him that mesmerizing warmth.

“You could say that, not much going for it.”

“That why you left?”
Frowning for a fraction of a second, Clint shrugs, “Not really, I mean, there’s lots of reasons I left. I was ten when I lost my folks, got tossed into an orphanage with enough kids that when I slipped out no one noticed till I was in a different state.”

“No shit?” Lela’s brows rise up on her forehead, “Where’d you go? I mean, very little places for a fucking kid to disappear into.”

And shit, Lela knew that from experience. How many times had Lela run out of group homes when her mother had lost her to CPS? Only for a passing cruiser to pick her up and take her back.

“Joined the circus,” Clint grins wide and proud.

“You’re shitting me?” Lela asks around a gaping mouth. Because that was just…too much?

“I can attest, he most definitely is not shitting you,” Natasha’s clear voice rang out to Lela’s right.

Jerking forward in her surprise, Lela slides an ugly glare over to the red devil and growls, “Could you fucking wear a goddamn bell?”

“And miss the way you jump out of your seat every time I show up?” Natasha smiled brilliant and regally, as she slid into the seat next to her, “Not on your life.”

“No seriously, I was like their star attraction!” Clint declared with his chest puffed out and a brilliant smile.

“What would you do?” Lela half demanded as she pushed her drink aside and allowed Natasha enough space to comfortably place her elbows onto the table top. They sit flush against one another, and in another life, Lela would’ve had an insane issue over it. But Lela’s growing soft. She doesn’t mind it as much as maybe she would’ve, or should’ve.

“I mean, what didn’t I do? I walked the tight rope, worked the booths, twirled cotton candy, juggled knives and played with fire.” Clint easily says as he slid his milkshake over to Natasha with ease.

Gripping the dewy cup in her right hand, Natasha noisily slurped down some shake before adding on, “I’m pretty sure you also wore white paint too, if memory serves me right.”

Choking on a failed drink, Lela sputtered out, “Fucking tell me you were a clown!”

Sending Natasha a glower, Clint tilted his head and proudly announced, “I’m a jack of all trades, I did what I had to do.”

Barking a laugh at the mental image, Lela runs a ragged hand down her face and shook her head. Because of fucking course, Clint—fucking Clint—fucked off to live in a traveling circus. And of course, he fucking ran around painted up like a goddamn clown! Lela laughs till she’s leaning against Natasha and finds herself breathless.

“I’ll have you know, I was the best damn clown they ever had,” Clint sniffed, turning up his nose at her laughter and glancing over to the waitress that came their way.

“Oh my god,” Lela squeaked out, sinking into Natasha’s firm shoulder, “shut the fuck up Clint.”

Smiling, the waitress deposits their food and takes down Natasha’s simple order of salad and disappears. The grin Lela wears as she cuts into her meal refuses to die as quiet giggles continued to slip past her lips.
“Jesus christ Lela,” Clint muttered, his face screwing up as he glanced down at her working hands.

“What?”

Flash ing her an incredulous look, Clint tells her, “Your food’s bleeding.”

“I think I heard it moo,” Natasha remarks as she stole Lela’s drink and took a delicate sip from it.

Rolling her eyes, Lela cuts off a large chunk and popped it into her mouth. Chewing messily she says, “I like it bloody.”

“Hmm,” Natasha hummed, her eyes flashing away from Lela’s mouth and over to Clint’s face, “Words to live by.”

Swiping her fork through her potatoes Lela pops it into her mouth and carefully glances over at the red head. Natasha and her weren’t exactly close, not the way Lela was close to Clint. Sure they were friendly, most days, but there was a firm line in the sand drawn between them that Lela can see from ten miles back. Lela liked Natasha, probably as much as Lela liked Clint. But it was different. Some times, it was harder to talk to Natasha than it maybe should be.

“So, what’s your story?” Lela asks, washing down a mouthful of potatoes and broccoli with sugary soda.

Arching a perfect brow, Natasha drawls out, “My story?”

Licking her lips clean, Lela stabs her fork into a sloppily cut square of bleeding meat and swirled it into her mash, “Yeah, I mean, Clint’s a goddamn carnie, what’s your story?”

From the corner of her eye, Lela can spot the way Clint has gone tense. The way he swipes his chili slathered fries through ketchup looks idle but isn’t as smooth as it should be. Clearly, Lela’s walked her graceless ass through a mine field. And where any other rational and sane individual should walk away or back off, Lela finds she won’t—or can’t.

Trying to be a better person or not, Lela finds she still can’t back away from a fight for the goddamn life of her. So she squares her chin and meets Natasha’s hard stare with an ease that came from years of living like a damn animal.

“My story isn’t a particularly nice one. I don’t think it’s one you’ll care to hear,” Natasha tells her, a challenge in her light tone.

There’s a part of her—an especially bitter part of herself—that thinks it’s fucking bullshit that Natasha knows the intimate details of Lela’s darkest secret but won’t let a single detail of herself slip out. Lela doesn’t like the fact that Natasha, for as much as she leant her strength through quiet reprieves, was tighter than a goddamn safe. Lela feels like banging her fist against the lid of that safe if only to hear the hollow thud inside ring.

Quirking a brow of her own, Lela bites out, “Try me.”

“Clint’s told you then, what it is we do?” Natasha questions in a tone that suggests she already knows the answer to her question. But Lela nods her head regardless and it allows Natasha to continue, “I was born in a little town in Russia, Volgograd. Before I could even learn the names of my parents, I was taking by the government to participate in a recruitment program.”

“Recruitment program?” Lela repeats the words, feels the way the fall from Natasha’s lips in a cold and clinical fashion. Detached.
Nodding her head, Natasha sips from her glass of lemon water and continues on, “Of the fifty girls involved, only I succeeded in graduation. I became the only survivor of the Red Room. I worked for the KGB and became their number one assassin. Made a hell of a name for myself to accomplish it.”

“So what happened?” Lela asks, popping yet another piece of meat into her mouth.

“What happened indeed,” Natasha half purred out, her eyes flashing from Lela’s face and over to Clint.

“She took one good look at my dashing face and saw the light,” Clint chipped in with a wide smile. His eyes holding far more levity than his smile or tone.

“I mean, who could say no to such a well rounded man? The moment he told me his clown name, I was hooked.” Natasha drawled with a smile of her own, only hers was a little sharper edged. And it’s a joke, Lela gets that, she smiles at it, but it does very little to cut away at the tension that has built. Natasha seems to know and understand this too, for she goes on to say, “Clint was sent after me, to neutralize me, but he made a judgment call and I defected.”

**Defected**, Lela feels the word bounce around in her head as she loosely gripped her knife and fork.

“And as they say, the rest is history,” Natasha lamely finished off, her eyes fixed on the green leaves spearred onto her fork.

“No shit?” the words slip from Lela’s lips before she can think better of them. They don’t feel very appropriate but she’s not entirely sure what the appropriate response to any of this actually is. Like, Lela would love to meet with whatever prick out there managed to not sound like a douche when confronted with news this heavy. Lela’s not entirely surprised the truth of Natasha’s story is far darker than she had imagined.

It was in almost every line of Natasha’s being. The red head was a devil, sure, but she wore the harshness of a dark life on her smile and in her eyes. It’s in the darkness that shone whenever the crimson haired woman grew agitated as she had back in the clinic.

Lela isn’t so stupid to think Natasha’s—or Clint’s for that matter—story is that simple, to be summed up in so little words and so neat and tidy. But they’re pieces to a bigger puzzle. A puzzle Lela has found herself desperately trying to make out the whole image since she got kicked into sobriety.

Carefully, Lela looks over at Natasha and takes in the rigidness of Natasha’s eyes. The way her emerald green eyes no longer. The way the Beta holds herself like she’s waiting for a blow and is willing to let it come to her. Like Natasha was waiting for Lela to push her away for the whatever sins Natasha thought she was damned for.

Licking her lips, Lela shrugs and mutters, “That’s some heavy shit.”

“Is it?” Natasha asks, her eyes lighten with something like relief.

“I mean, yeah,” Lela affirms, “Like, that makes way more sense to me than this fucker over here.”

“Excuse me?” Clint sputters out, confusion lining his brow.

“Dude, seriously, how am I supposed to take you serious now? Like what the fuck was your clown name? Bubbles?” Lela jabs, as she reached over and swiped some of his fries.

“I’ll have you know, Bubbles wasn’t half the clown I was!” Clint bit out as he pulled his fries closer to himself. A dark glower firmly pressed into his pink lips.
Snorting, Natasha blithely stated, “Bubbles was a far better entertainer. His shticks landed.”

Wide eyed, Clint stares—abject horror painted on his face—as he declared, “Blaspheme!”

Laughing, Lela snagged the plate of fries and pushed them over to a smiling red devil. Lela’s never been all that great with her words, but she hopes Natasha has enough assassin training in her to read between the lines. So that she may understand that Lela’s not about to push her away for a past that she couldn’t help. Lela understood what it was like to be caked in the mud of a past life after all.

Only after Natasha takes from the fries does Lela asks as casually as she can, “Now level with me Red, what was his stage name?”

“Oh Lela,” Natasha grinned, wide and toothy—entirely terrifying as it was heart stopping.

“Nat!” Clint squeaked out, his hands flying out as if to slam themselves over Natasha’s ruby red lips, his eyes pleading, “You promised!”

Lela laughs as she finishes off her meal and begins to dig into Clint’s stolen fries. If she presses further into Natasha’s thigh with her own, there’s no one around that can see it. If Natasha notices it, she says nothing. The red head merely presses firmly right back and points her fork at Clint’s face. The action causes the man to pull away as if being confronted by a high powered rifle.

Lela has no doubt Natasha knows how to kill a man using the blunt side of a fork in probably a hundred different ways. Lela kinda wants Natasha to show her how to do just that.

*~*

“So, I was thinking,” Lela starts as they make their way down the surprisingly uncrowded streets of upper Manhattan.

“Yeah?” Clint prompts, tilting his head in her direction.

“I was thinking about, maybe, I don’t know, passing by Pepper’s building?” Lela means for it to come out far more casual than it actually does. Lela can taste her own hesitation and unease over the idle thought on her tongue.

“Oh?” Natasha asks from where she walks at Lela’s right elbow, “Why’s that?”

“I don’t know,” Lela shrugs keeps her eyes firmly in front of her as she walked, “I mean, kinda wanted to set shit right. I kinda owe her.”

“What do you mean?” Clint probes as lightly as only he ever could.

Huffing out a tired sigh, Lela pushes away a stray strand of her hair that’s fluttered into her face. Now more than ever does Lela want to take a goddamn razor to her hair. It was far too long. It fell somewhere past the mid of her back. Lela didn’t have the patience for it anymore.

“I met Pepper a while back. These two Gammas wanted to mug her or rough her up or…I don’t fucking know. I got them to run before they did anything. Pepper kinda made us even by buying me food. But then I showed up, fucked up and shit, and Pepper patched me back up and I kinda just bailed on her. I kinda owe her now, ya know?”

“I highly doubt Pepper offered you medical attention with the intention of having you repay a favor,” Natasha drawled out dry and disapproving.
Biting back the need to snap her teeth, Lela shrugs, and bites out, “Still doesn’t feel right, leaving shit as it is.”

They three stay quiet for a moment until they reach a crosswalk on red. Scrubbing at the back of his neck, Clint tells her, “We could go now, if you want?”

Lela feels nerves and anxiety claw up her throat. She feels her heart thump a little harder in her chest. Going to see Pepper has been something she’s been entertaining for a while now. Dogging at her heels every time she came back from meeting Sam at whatever little coffee shop he picked. When Sam talked about making amends he usually meant Lela forgiving herself. One of the things she can’t seem to forgive herself over is the ten minutes he’d promised to Dr. Banner and in turn Pepper.

“Cool,” Lela offers them just as the light blinks green.

“We should probably grab a cab,” Clint mused aloud.

And as much as Lela would like to get there as fast as possible, while she still had the courage to go, she kinda needs the long walk to keep from vomiting up perfectly good steak. She’ll probably need to smoke a bit before she gets there too, and most cabbies frowned at that. So she shakes her head and tells the man, “C’mon Chuckles, walks good for you.”

Groaning, Clint hisses out, “You fucking promised Nat.”

“No honor among thieves,” Natasha happily chirped as Lela snickered.

“We aren’t thieves, we’re highly trained assassins, there’s a fucking code Nat!” Clint growled out as they crossed the street.

Lela lets her nerves bleed out as she listened to the wonder-dicks snipe at one another. She tries to gather her strength from the silk ribbon and steel band thrumming happily in her chest. She tries to ignore the knot tying itself raggedly in her guts.

*~*

They make it past the lobby with little trouble, this time around. With both Clint and Natasha flanking her sides, Lela knows she’s got little to actually fear. But the memory of Alpha’s in uniforms crowding around her is hard to shake. The pain she’d felt at the end of a stun gun is still something she thinks about on an off day. The way it had felt like pure unadulterated fire had raced beneath her skin half haunted her.

Lela sticks close to Natasha as the red head is the one that leads the way. Clint follows tight at her heels. And again, it really shows how much Lela’s trying to let shit like that go, because on any other day, she would’ve sent her fist flying at whoever walked that tight at her heels. But because it’s Clint, Lela doesn’t find her old instincts flaring up.

At least, not the way they used to, not the way they should.

When they reach the elevator, they step inside and Lela watches as the gathered masses of suits and sharply dressed others do not bother to head for he spacious empty spots inside. Instead they stand waiting for the next box. Lela wonders briefly at that, but ignores it under the wave of anxiety currently eating her up.

It’s only when the doors slide closed and Natasha has pressed an insanely long chain of numbers into a side panel does the elevator move. Lela isn’t moving, she’s standing stubbornly still, but she can feel a fine jittery electricity thrumming through her body. She feels like she might just vibrate out of
her skin.

When the doors slide open Lela is hit square in the face with an intense wave of anxiety it nearly bowls her back. It stinks, like vinegar hitting baking soda, acidic. Natasha leads the way out, as she had lead the way in, and Lela follows.

Standing behind a haphazardly stacked pile of papers, a doe eyed stranger stares at them wide eyed. He looks, for a lack of better descriptor, like a deer caught in the head lights. His hands, clutched into tight fists in his toffee colored floppy hair, a pale mole dotted man stares at them with all the fear of a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Oh! Ms. Romanoff, Mr. Barton!” someone calls out, their voice tangled and frayed by something like both surprise and dread. His hands fly from his hair leaving the ends sticking out at odd angles.

“Hello Joseph,” Natasha greeted the man with a small pleasant smile, “Is she in?”

“Oh, who? Ms. Potts?” the man—a Gamma by the smell of him—flounders, the pale white of his cheeks flushing bright red as he raced out, “Yeah, Mr. Stark cam up, so she’s a little busy. Did you —Do you want me to buzz her?”

“No, that’s quite alright.” Natasha tells him as she headed to the neat little line of five or six chairs.

Lela follows, her eyes still trained on the man. Joseph—who was apparently Peppers secretary of sorts—was a good looking enough guy. He was young, probably in his mid twenties. He was all long limbs and sleek lines of lithe muscles. The kind that maybe you’d find on runners. He was cute, in a generic white boy way. His nose was a bit pronounced but it lent to a European heritage, maybe? His eyes, the softest shade of brown, glittered despite how frazzled they looked.

Underneath the man’s stench of anxiety and frustration, he smelled of something like french vanilla and taffy. He moved awkwardly as he restated himself in his desk chair. He looked like the type of man who woke up to find his life in constant disarray and just couldn’t cope. He looked as soft as silk, nothing about him looked hard edged or sharp. There was something about him that exuded care and delicacy Lela could not even begin to understand.

For a wild minute, Lela wonders how a person like that could even exist.

Pulling her bottom lip between her teeth, Lela bit down and jiggled her left leg. She’s quiet as she balled her fist into the pockets of her jacket. She knows, she’s got to be at least smelling like her anxiety a little bit. That black cylinder spray Natasha had handed her had run out a ways back. Suppressors and Blockers only went so far after all.

“It’ll be fine,” Natasha says to her barely above a whisper.

From where he sits on the other side of her, Clint makes an agreeing noise before saying, “Yeah, I mean, if something goes down, we’ll get you out.”

Lela tries to take that for the comfort it’s meant to be. But a small part of her—the one riddled in her fear and anxiety—has her wound up. What if something did go wrong. So many things could go wrong. But before Lela can jump out of her seat and fly back down and away, the dark gray door of Pepper’s office opens.

“I mean seriously Pepper, I’m feeling a bit attacked.” a voice starts to say, confident and joking, “All I did was try to set him up on a date. I’m not seeing where I’m in the wrong.”

“What you did, Tony,” Pepper’s familiar voice is tight and riddled in her exasperation, “is send four
separate male strippers to his room while he was in town for the UN meeting.”

“Still not seeing where I’m in the wrong for this,” the man who walks past the threshold is grinning bright and unrepentant. His tanned face radiating pure and utter smugness it psychically hurt to look at.

The man—Tony, whoever he was—was an Alpha if ever Lela had laid eyes on one. He wasn’t tall, probably stood toe to toe with Pepper in her heels. He was built far leaner than any Alpha Lela had ever seen. Dressed in a simple long sleeve underneath a ratty looking ACDC shirt, he wasn’t exactly rolling in dominate nature. But it was in the way he held his head high and the way he seemed to swallow up the space he occupied without effort.

“He wants to press charges!” Pepper hissed out, her clear bell like voice going deep with the growl infused in her voice. Her golden face flushing with her ire as she whipped her head about and in turn her golden blonde hair.

And obviously, Pepper doesn’t sound like she’s in the best moods. But the moment her voice hits Lela, Lela feels like all her anxious fears just melt away and pool at her boot ed feet. she can make out now the scent that had lured her in so very long ago. Cotton, lavender and chamomile. Lela feels the way her hindbrain stirs awake. The way it slithers like it’s got a mind of its own and begs Lela to reach out. To close the distance and that have that scent sit heavy on her tongue.

“How? I didn’t break any laws—“ Whatever else the man is going to say dies the moment he turns his head and catches sight of them three. His dark eyes fall onto Natasha first then flash over to Clint and then finally fall onto Lela.

“Natasha? Clint?” the alpha calls out, sounding surprised before it morphed into something like frustration, "Oh so now you two super spies show up! I’ve been calling you over two weeks now! Do you know how many missions had to be out sourced? Have you guys been screening my calls?”

“We’ve been busy,” Natasha stated simply, her voice just a hair above being hostile.

Pursing his lips, the Alpha nodded once before demanding, “Who’s the kid?”

If Lela wasn’t already on edge she is now. She can feel the way goosebumps raise themselves up on her arms and race up her neck and into her scalp. She can feel the way her body goes tense with her apprehension as a growl began to rumble in her chest. Her gums ache to elongate her teeth and bare her teeth in a threat and a challenge. She squares her shoulders and hides her neck as she glares up at the man.

“We’re here to see Pep,” Clint says to the room at large as if sensing the way Lela’s about to drop fang and put herself in another shitty situation.

“What, why?” the Alpha demanded as he crossed his arms over his chest. And it’s probably deliberate, but it’s a hostile stance. One that reeked of defiance in the face of three strangers probably encroaching on territory he has somehow claimed.

“Seriously Tony?” Pepper bites out, her hands flash out to push the Alpha out of her way. she steps out with a tired smile stretched tight across her face as she said, “Hey Nat, what can I—”

And Lela watches the moment Pepper catches sight of her. Lela watches as weariness morphs into surprise and surprise barrels into white hot relief. Slowly, Lela rises to her feet, feeling entirely awkward while doing it and offers the blonde a weak smile.

“Hey Pepper,” Lela calls out, feels the way the name stretches and pulls at her tongue. Lela is left to
stand awkwardly for a whole of two and a half seconds before she’s being crashed into by a flying body.

An oomph leaves her body as Pepper barrels right into her. Lela is completely taken by surprise she doesn’t react like maybe she should. Lela blames that surprise for the way she goes still in Pepper’s arms. Lela blames that surprise for the way she lets the blonde grip her tight—too tight, like maybe if Pepper let’s go, Lela will disappear again—and she stays quiet.

Grip tight, Pepper digs her fingers into Lela’s arms and pushes her away so Pepper’s tear filled eyes can map out Lela’s face.

“What happened?” Pepper chokes out, sobs caught in her throat, “You just left! You woke up and you left! H-How are you?! Did—Are you okay?!”

“Oh, y-yeah, I’m good,” Lela tries to push the words out of her mouth in a way that might make Pepper not cry, “Sorry I bailed, I…”

“No, it’s fine. I mean, it’s not fine fine, but I understand! It must’ve been a shock!” Pepper frantically tries to get the words out as her trembling hands ran up and down Lela’s arms. The longer they stand in this half embrace the more her comforting scent begins to sour with her distress. It’s a familiar scent too, reminds Lela of the restaurant and the way Pepper had flown into a panic thinking she was sending Lela out to fucking die or something.

Pinching her brows and sending Pepper a harsh enough look, Lela tells the blonde, “Pepper, I’m not gunna tell you again. I’m not looking to get charged with sending a beta into distress. So set your shit on chill.”

“Right, yeah,” Pepper mumbled as she nodded her head frantically. Slipping her hands down the length of Lela’s arms, Pepper scoops up Lela’s hands and softly tugs, “C’mon, we can talk in my office.”

“Kinda feel like I’m deliberately being left out of the loop here guys,” The Alpha man called out as Pepper and Lela walked past him.

And as much as Lela is focused on not bailing yet again on Pepper she keeps her gaze on the Alpha as she passes him. Weary as she is to present any side of herself as an opening to any Alpha.

“Is she like a long lost sister I’m unaware of?” the Alpha asks to the room at large, “Kinda feel like there’s a story here I don’t know about. Natasha? Clint? Pepper?”

When Pepper goes to close the door of her office, the Alpha’s hand flashes out to stop it. He jams his converse clad foot into the doorway and attempts to strong arm his way in. All of Lela’s old instincts come rearing up just then. They tumble up and out of her in a savage roar that she’s only used in actual fist fights. The intensity of it widens the Alpha’s brown eyes and has him stumbling back with his mouth popped open in a little o. A familiar rush of dark pride runs down the entire length of Lela’s body at that.

With or without her meds, Lela was still able to fake an alpha roar to utter perfection it seemed. That pride makes her bare her teeth in a deadly threat as she ripped her hands out of Peppers hold. With more force than Pepper had used, Lela kicks the door shut and watches it rattle on it’s hinges.

Through the material of the door, she can hear Natasha’s growls and even Clint’s. A part of her that was all silk ribbon and steel band curls up tight. It somehow lets her know that they two have her back even out there. It settles Lela down a bit so her anger goes back down to a simmer.
“Sorry about that, Tony, he’s tenacious when his curiosity is piqued,” Pepper offers her with a sheepish tight smile.

“Is that your way of saying he’s an asshole?” Lela snaps out as she turned to the blonde.

Snorting in a way only Pepper could make look cute, the blonde beta runs a hand through her hair and nods, “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

Lela allows herself to smile at that. It’s a small way of letting Pepper know Lela’s not as aggravated as she actually is.

“Been a while Pepper,” Lela starts off, stuffing her hands back into her jacket pockets. After initiating what could’ve been a fight with an Alpha, Lela feels less awkward and far more comfortable in her own skin. She feels less like she’s wade in waters unknown and back to her old self destructive ways. Like slipping into a well worn shirt.

“Yeah,” Pepper agrees with a watery smile, “How have you been?”

Shrugging, Lela tells her, “Been pretty good.” and because she wants Pepper to know she’s not lying, she adds on, “Got sober.”

Looking far more relieved than maybe she should, Pepper releases a ragged breath as she clutched her chest, “Oh, thank god.”

Brows pinched, Lela feels herself go a little defensive, her lips pull up into a half snarl, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing!” Pepper holds out her hands in a show of compliance, “I was—I’ve just been worried.”

“Oh,” Lela offers the blonde lamely.

Guilt floods Lela, makes her feel like a dick for snapping at the blonde like that. After everything, Lela knows Pepper was only ever trying to help. Like the wonder-dicks. Carefully, Pepper motions to the comfy looking chairs that sit before a large sleek looking desk. Lela follows only after Pepper starts moving.

Only once they’re seated does Pepper do a piss poor job of asking, “So, how are you—are you still…do you still, um, are you still working?”

“No,” Lela forces out through tight lips.

“Oh, that’s good,” Pepper says as her face floods with more of her relief.

“Went straight on everything after Dr. Banner sent the wonder-dicks my way,” Lela tells the blonde, drumming her fingers on her knee anxiously. She wants a smoke, bad.

“Wonder-dicks?” Pepper asks with a frown.

“Natasha and Clint,” Lela clarifies.

“Oh,” Pepper appears shocked at that before a weary smile spread across her face, “Bruce was worried after you left like you did. I think he only sent them after you for me.”

Clicking her tongue, Lela tries not to feel too bitter over the whole situation—because she’s made her goddamn peace over it—and nods her head, “Yeah, they told me.”
“How long have they been, um, tailing you?” the words are awkward on Pepper’s tongue. Like the blonde doesn’t know exactly how to word the situation.

“We’ve been staying at some swanky Hotel suite for about two months now? I don’t know, I lost track of the days to be honest.”

Sky blue eyes grow wide at that as Pepper repeats, “You’ve been living with them?”

“I mean, after they helped me through withdrawal I kinda lost my motel room and I haven’t been turning tricks so I don’t have money to rent a room on my own. They don’t seem to mind letting me stay there,” Lela admits, feels the strangeness of the truth in her own ears.

Pepper remains quiet for a second before her eyes grow sharp and determined. They flash over the whole of Lela’s face as she asks, “When you left, you were injured, did everything—“

“I’m good, I’m tougher than I look,” Lela says, tries to reassure the blonde with a crooked grin.

“That’s good, but, when you left, the physician had some concerns.” Pepper says, dropping lead into Lela’s stomach. There’s a creeping fear in the back of Lela’s mind that knows—just fucking knows—what Pepper’s trying to get at, “About your, um, she was concerned about your physiology.”

Lela feels herself go still, her heart screeches to a halt. Her breath catches in her lungs as she waits for the blow.

“She was concerned that you might be an untreated Omega,” Pepper tells her in a tone that was light as air. But the words strike at Lela’s face like a goddamn bat.

Swiping her tongue over her dry lips, Lela feels the way her fangs peek out of her lips. Tilting her head, Lela pulls her gaze away from Pepper’s apprehensive face and out to the blonde’s wide windows. From this high up, Lela can make out the best view of New York skyline.

Aside from the wonder dicks and maybe that fuck in the clinic, no one knew what Lela was. Lela’s only ever been in the position to willingly admit what she was one other time. And that other time, it hadn’t ended all that well for her. So fear makes Lela want to curl into herself. Fear makes Lela want to fall back into well worn bad behaviors.

It’d be easy, Lela knows, to lie. To brush off Pepper’s concern with a harsh growl and a fierce enough glare that Pepper would have a hell of a reason to drop a distress bomb.

Lela doesn’t know Pepper. Lela doesn’t trust her with that type of information. Not like Lela trusted Natasha and Clint. Not like she knows she can trust the two wonder-dicks to not use the information against her.

For all Lela knew, Pepper was trying to get her to admit to the truth so that Pepper could have her permanently labeled on legal papers.

So, while all of Lela’s fears offer her every reason why she should tell the blonde to fuck right the fuck off, again Lela is forced to do the opposite by the scent that invades her nose. The same scent that had her following the blonde into a car and over to a restaurant so long ago. The same scent she’d come looking for when she was hurt and broken. The same scent that had inadvertently sent Lela on this shit show roller coaster.

Digging her nails into the meat of her palm, Lela bites out as coolly as she can manage, “It’s taken care of, don’t worry about it.”
It’s not an admission at all but it sure as fuck isn’t a fucking denial.

Pepper seems to take it for what it is, “Well, if you ever need any help with that, you can always come to me.”

“Why?” Lela feels the word fire off her tongue as she turns her hard glare to the blonde’s face, “I mean, yeah, I helped you out of a tight spot, but why the fuck do you care so much? When I came here all fucked up, you could’ve just sent me to a hospital. But you treated me? Why?”

Lela doesn’t know why she’s asking it in such a harsh manner. But she’s starving for the reason. Just as she had been starving for the wonder-dicks to come closer while simultaneously pushing them away with ever ounce of her strength. Lela wants to hear from Pepper’s own lips why the fuck the Beta has done all that she has. Lela wants to know why the blonde continues to hold out a warm hand towards her—a fucking stranger.

Like molten iron has been poured into her very spine, Pepper straightens up and meets Lela’s glare with a stern look of her own. She doesn’t look cowed or even slightly intimidating. And if Lela wasn’t so fucking surprised by it, she’d liken the strength that exudes out of the blonde to the red devil on the other side of the door.

“I just do. I don’t have to explain to you why I care about your safety. I don’t have to explain why I worry about your healthy after the life you told me you lead. I don’t have to explain it, you just need to know that I do. That I do worry about your safety. I do worry about your health. I worry because I care. I care about you because you deserve it.”

For a good long while, they remain quiet, trapped in a silent stand off where they both expect the other to step down or away. But Lela’s never been the type to back away from anything and Pepper, it seems, was used to going toe to toe with people on a regular basis. Because the woman hardly flinches.

In the end, it’s Lela who decides to let the stand off fade away. She tries to remember Sam’s words and all the promises she’s made to herself that she’s not going to be the mega-bitch she once was. She’s trying to change and she hadn’t come here to fight with the woman that might’ve saved her damn life. Lela had come here to try to make amends.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Lela says, with a rueful smile, “I’m the worst type of person to worry about.”

A grin slowly spreads across Pepper’s face as she rolled her baby blue eyes, “How ‘bout you let me worry about that Lela.”

“I guess, your funeral, I’m driving the two wonder-dicks out there half fucking insane with how much worrying I’m makin’em do,” Lela announces with ease as she sunk into the back of the chair.

“Tell me you don’t actually call them that to their face?” Pepper pleads, her eyes wide and a small smile on her lips.

Frowning, Lela tucks her hands back into her pockets and shrugs, “I mean, yeah, sometimes. Usually I just call Clint an asshole and Natasha a bitch.”

“Please tell me you’re joking,” Pepper demands of her, smile falling from her lips and something like fear slipping into her eyes.

It’s then that Lela remembers Pepper knows just as much as she does, that the wonder-dicks are in fact highly trained assassins.
“I mean, what’s the worst they’ll do to me? Kill me?” Lela asks with a crooked smirk as she shrugged her shoulders, “Nah, whenever I call Red a bitch she just makes me an extra green looking smoothie and gets all bitchy until I drink it. Killers are surprisingly softies when you get down to it.”

Pepper’s mouth is popped open into a small ‘o’ as she stared wide eyed at Lela. And Lela feels a little smug as she grinned and laughed. Lela knows there’s a shit tone more that has yet to be worked out, but, she’ll take this small break from the heavy that’s to come. She feels like her small act of courage should be reward at a least a little bit.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so first off, That whole Clint was a clown, not intended. I wrote out the first part of this chapter on like three hours of sleep. (My son caught a cold and it's just been hellish here.) But now that it’s in there, well, you can take Chuckles out of my cold dead hands.

Second, meeting Pepper, finally did it. Hope you guys liked it. I feel like I fucked it up well and good. But after Lela was able to talk her shit out with Sam, she's been so much easier to write. Like honestly, she's lost all that reluctance to act like a decent fucking person. It's so nice you guys. Seriously.

Hope you guys like it.
Let me know what you guys think!
Always love to hear from you guys!
As always, thanks for reading my dumpster fire fic! Hope to have a new update soon!
-Ani
Dining with an Alpha

Chapter Summary

It was a mistake to come here. It was a mistake to take Pepper up on this stupid fucking late lunch. It was a mistake for Lela to try to make decisions for herself. Because, clearly, she was shit at them. But she can’t do anything about it. She can’t just stand up and walk out. She’d be turning her back on an alpha. She’d be bailing on Pepper—again. Lela would be taking a step back when all she wanted to do was take a step forward.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So, who’s the kid?” Tony asks only after he’s managed to collect himself.

Squaring his shoulders, Clint gruffly demands, “What’s it to you?”

Not only does Clint sound defensive but he sure as hell looks it. He’s got all of his protective instincts firing off at once, all of it ringing in his scent. They’re all working on trusting each other after the whole accords incident. But it’s been a long and hard road to get back to where they used to be.

“I mean, nothing. But, is she the reason you guys fell off the grid?” Tony asks, his eyes are narrowed, his stance defensive. Every line of him speaks to his frustration of having been left in the dark. Of having them disappear like they had when the shit had hit the fan. The fear of them having been caught when he had handed over the exact manner in which they could be hunted had twisted up his mind. Though, Tony would never admit it out loud, he’s constantly in a state of guilt over it.

Flicking her hair over one shoulder and Natasha crosses her arms over her chest, “And if she was?”

“What is she?” Tony asks again, his dark brows pinched. “Is she a Meta? She’s gotta be something, did you hear the fucking growl that came outta of that kid? Jesus fuck, that isn’t normal. Is she a fucking alpha? Never met an Alpha so small though. Didn’t get the chance to scent her? What’s her deal with Pep? Haven’t seen her get that emotional since Wall-E.”

“Tony,” Natasha puts a stop to the rambling mans words with a simple wave of her right hand, “She’s a friend.”

“A friend?” Tony repeats the words, can’t help but feel like he’s repeating a lie. There was more to it, if the way Clint was standing and Natasha was careful wording everything so vaguely. “So she’s a civilian?”
“Yes,” Natasha simply says as she continued to stand her ground. Now more than ever is Natasha reluctant to share any kind of information with Tony. Not after everything. Tony can feel the divide between them like the jaggedness of the Mariana trench.

Bridges had been burned, after all. Doused in gasoline by all parties involved and set to flame by the match he himself had struck. They were simply standing on the wreckage now. Everyone trying to play ball when none of them knew the rules to the game.

“A friend to you two and Pepper?” Tony clarifies, when the two super spies say nothing else, he simply nods his head and decides to wait around for when the door opens again.

His curiosity has been piqued. He’d very much like to catch another glimpse of five feet of fury. To scent her and get a handle on her. Pepper might not be the pack member to him as she had once been, but Tony was trying to right his wrongs. He was trying to piece the puzzle he’d scattered into the wind. Tony doesn’t remember sending a five foot, hundred pound pip squeak out into the unknown though. He’d remember something vital like that. A burning needs keeps him in place because now he wants to see where she fit in all of this.

Alpha instincts he’s long since ignored since his presenting come flaring to life. The need to protect his pack—reluctant members or not—has him set on edge.

*~*

The front door to Pepper’s office opens just as Pepper says:

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do for housing?”

A laugh, ragged and husky, slips out of the open door. Tony feels the unfamiliar baritone of it spill down his spine like shocks of a faulty suit. It is both familiar and utterly alien he finds himself trained entirely upon it. If his ears could perk up, they would be.

Out from behind Pepper comes the strange little girl. Her dark head barely coming up Pepper’s shoulder. She’s tiny, in every sense of the word. Probably severely under weight and malnourished if her complexion was anything to go by. But there’s something about her, something in her eyes and the tilt of her little upturned nose, that makes Tony’s stomach clench. Because Tony’s always had an eye for strength, for power and potential.

When the girl smiles, dark browning red plump lips spreading crooked and strange, the girl’s face lights up and she practically shines from it all. Her dark black eyes glimmer like they’ve got in them collapsing stars. She looks infinitely younger when she smiled as opposed to the fear inducing snarl she could do. Young, a little chipped and run down, but still so young it boggled Tony’s mind that there was an alpha roar on her lips.

She’s still too far away to properly scent, but Tony takes a discreet lungful through his nose regardless. What he pulls in is the harsh bite of cigarette smoke and something like a wild fire raging. It’s a sharp enough smell. One that in no way implied the girl was anything but Dominate in her dynamic. Yet, Tony for all that he had Alpha senses, could not pin down her exact dynamic at all.

His Alpha instincts swirl. They want him to take a step forward, to gather as much of the girls scent so that he can to taste it on his tongue. To pull it apart and decipher it like an intricate and especially tricky algorithm. But Tony keeps himself still, keeps his eyes on the girl and watches.

Every movement the girl makes is hard and secure. She never leaves her neck exposed, never leaves an inch about her open to so much as belie open vulnerability. She moved like a DomBeta, kept her
eyes forward on others without issue. She disregarded his presence like she was an Alpha and he a lesser one. When her eyes flash over to her, she does not offer the token head tilt that came naturally to Gammas when confronted with an Alpha.

And it’s strange, how the girl seems to exhibit all the behavioral tells of all three dynamics with such ease and fluidity but claims not one as her own. Like she’s walking through water, they cling to her limbs but slide off when she needs it to. It’s strange. So very, very strange.

“Not really,” the girl admits as she made her way over to where Natasha and Clint stood. Shrugging her shoulders she motions with her head, “Kinda planned on mooching off these fuckers till they kicked me out.”

Huffing out a laugh, Clint shakes his head before digging his hands into his back pockets, “Never gunna happen babe. You’re stuck with us.”

Rolling her eyes, the dark haired girl clicks her tongue and turns to Pepper, “See? I’m set.”

“But,” Pepper starts as she came to stand at Tony’s right. the distance between their bodies is far larger than Tony likes, but he says nothing on the matter, can’t, “What do you plan to do, long term?”

Brows pinched, the girl shrugs her shoulders and says, “I don’t know. Haven’t really thought about it.”

The smell of Pepper’s worry reaches deep into Tony’s chest and pulls at the pack bonds that sit half starved in there. Tony doesn’t need to look at her to know that Peppers face is screwed up in that twisted worried mother hen expression she’s mastered.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do for a job?” Pepper asks, wringing her hands as she shifted from foot to foot.

Running a ragged hand through her inky mane, the girl shrugs and says, “Well, I mean yeah. I’ve been meaning to look around. Just not sure where to start.”

“Wait, what?” the words are half startled out of Clint’s mouth as he looked down at the girl, “You have?”

“Obviously. What kind of an asshole do you think I am? I was fucking joking about mooching off you fuckers,” the girl bites out, her nose wrinkling as she snapped her teeth.

And while the sight of her snarl is enough to make Joseph whimper behind his desk, Tony can see her ire doesn’t actually reach onto her eyes. Tony thinks it’s beyond strange that the girl can flash her fangs—even if it is for a half second or so—so casually at Clint and that neither the super archer nor the femme fatale at his side will do anything about it. They accept the half feral behavior with a casualness that spelled more than just casual friendship.

“You didn’t notice?” Natasha questions Clint, her right brow raised.

“You did?” Clint accuses with wide eyes.

Offering a fraction of a frown, Natasha pulls her gaze away from the blonde man and stares down at the dark haired girl. “I’m all seeing.”

Pursing her lips, the girl mutters, “Bet you are, you fucking demon.”
“So you haven’t found anything?” Pepper asks as lightly as she can.

Tony doesn’t have to be damn legally labeled genius to understand where Pepper’s trying to take this. But it helps. Tony doesn’t know why the strange girl is so important to Pepper and he’s dying to know. The worst parts of his obsessive self want to dig his hands into the girl’s past and just rifle through it to connect the dots.

So before the girl can answer, Tony slides in as effortlessly as he can:

“You can always apply here, we always have positions available.”

That’s a damned lie. Tony knows it. Pepper knows it. Even the super spies know it by the way their eyes grow sharp and dangerous. Everything about the way they hold their bodies speaks to the guarded suspicion. They don’t trust him and Tony doesn’t exactly blame them. But it’s more than just that. They don’t trust him around her—the strange little civilian girl.

What’s a little lie when Tony was after the bigger truth?

“I’m not exactly your office worker type of girl,” the girl admits, her eyes narrowing just the tiniest bit when they landed on his face.

Smiling his most charming smile—the one revered to woo hearts and magazine covers—Tony takes a calculated step forward. Like second nature, Tony pulls up all of his well worn tricks. The kind that never let him walk away empty handed. The kind that could drop Alphas, Beta’s and Gammas into his bed without effort.

Issuing a soft purr that rumbled up at the middle of his chest and out of his mouth, Tony smiles and says, “What type of girl are you?”

Tony’s half expecting Natasha and Clint to flash a hand out and stop him. Maybe even Pepper. But they don’t. Tony finds his steps halted by the angry stomp of the girl’s foot as she faked a charge forward. The girl’s shoulders are squared, her chin raised and her eyes as hard as diamonds. She looks like hell fire. Tony finds himself stilling all on his own, no help needed. His feet glued to the floor before he can actually reach her. Shock widening his eyes as he stared down at the minuscule danger.

“Not the kind you ever wanna fuck with,” the girl bit off, her long fangs—sharp, almost like an Alphas—are gleaming beneath the lights. Her dark full brows pinch tight as her face went from looking pixie like to homicidal.

At the heart of it, Tony thinks he’s always been a thrill seeker. It’s kind of wired into his DNA after all, being an Alpha born from a long line of thorough bred Alphas—it came with the territory. It somewhat explained his father’s obsession with all that he obsesses over and it kind of explained why Tony was so very eager to don the Iron Man suit.

And yes, maybe danger was flashing in bright neon red all across his mind as he stared down five feet of pure fury but Tony couldn’t find it in him to walk away. It was so very easy for everyone to fold under his gaze because of his name, because of his father’s name, and because of his dynamic. And then it became even easier for them to avert their gazes, to bare their necks without prompting simply because he happened to save people as a hobby.

Tony almost completely forgot what it was like to meet a stone wall. He can count on one hand the people that could do that and all of them had special training of some kind.

The sensation, of his Alpha instincts to surface and then be denied, is both exhilarating as it is
There’s a deep heavy pause that forms after the girl has issued her words and pushed him back without ever laying a hand on him. A pause that is as loaded as a damn gun and just as lethal. No one moves, Pepper’s holding her breath, Natasha and Clint are stock still behind the girl—coiled tight just waiting to spring into motion—but no one moves.

It takes all of his well bred will for Tony not to issue the displeased growl his throat is aching with. He jams it down and allows the exhilaration to run through him and widen his smile into something far less insidious and far more genuine. If Tony wasn’t interested before he definitely was now, less for Pepper, Natasha or Clint. Tony was invested for himself now.

Not a lot of people could do what she just did there. Tony wanted to know what kind of girl she was. What kind of strength she had that she just casually shrugged him off as the least interesting person in the room. Tony’s got a funny little stray thought jumbling around up there, that he kind of wants to be the first person her eyes fall onto when the girl enters any kind of room. There’s a wild primal part of him—all Alpha and completely uncivilized—that wants to close the gap between them and sink his teeth into any part of her.

To stake a claim for everyone to see and understand, that she was one of his.

And isn’t that a wild thought? One he isn’t about to touch at the moment. One he’ll try to figure out when he’s alone in his lab’s again.

“I’m Tony,” he finds himself saying, his hand reaching out as he waited for the girls.

Lips pursed, the girl forces her hand out so that they shake one anothers. Her hands are rough—rougher than Tony has grown accustomed to women’s hands feeling—and feel entirely too small in his larger palm. The bones in his grasp feel like bird bones, hollow and delicate. Which doesn’t at all compute with the strength of the girls grip. She wraps her thinner, shorter fingers around his and digs in. Pain flares up his forearm and the shock of it almost has him yanking his hand away.

But the scent of her, cigarette smoke, brush fire smoke, and something faint and utterly elusive keeps him in place and quiet. Tony doesn’t even bother to try to be inconspicuous about the way he’s trying to fill with his lungs with her subtle scent. Something desperate wants to taste what’s hidden in her scent. He can catch stray traces of it, but never enough to put anything together and it’s frustrating as much as it is interesting.

“Lela,” the girl declares as she pulled away and took a side step from him—not to be confused with a step back—the act is entirely Alpha. The girl is quiet as she eyed the man, her eyes roaming over his face as if trying to remember something she’s only ever heard from third person parties. Her nostrils flare as if she too is trying to scent him from where she stands.

A pleased rumble aches to spill out of him. But Tony clamps down on that as hard as he can manage and simply smiles wide. There’s a hot blaring need to puff out his chest and let his scent bleed out of every inch of his person. To flood the lobby of Pepper’s office with his scent for the girl to smell him better.

It’s a completely strange thing to think and even even stranger thing to want to do. But Tony has hardly ever denied himself a thing. He almost does it

“Nice to meet you Lela, you been here long?” Tony questions, he’d picked up on the strange accent a while back.
Shrugging her shoulders, Lela offers him a small nod, “You could say that.”

“You ever eat at a little place called Red Bell?” he asks, the gears in his head slowly turning.

It’d be easy, so damn easy, to just ask Jarvis to pull up every single bit of information on the girl by her face alone. Tony didn’t even need her last name. By the time the girl answered his question he’d already have all the answers to who she was and where she came from.

But Tony’s trying. He’s made his mistakes in his past. He understands where and what he did wrong. Those lines he’d happily crossed before—demolished in his wake—glare at him now. They remind him of all the people he’s lost on this great big path to the top. They stand like warnings to stay back or become the bad man he once let himself become.

It’d be easy, so damn easy, to peek into it and pretend he didn’t. Jarvis, after all, was loyal first to him and so his silence would be kept. Tony could look, could pull up every buried bone in the girls graveyard and let his hungry eyes devour them. No one would even know. They wouldn’t even be surprised if he did it. They’d expect it.

But… Tony can’t do that. Not after all the promises he’s made Pepper. To keep himself out of other peoples secrets. That everyone was entitled to their past and whatever it was that they tried to hide. That he wasn’t acting like a decent human being.

If Tony wanted to start rebuilding the bridge between his former Pack mate, Tony needed to at least keep some of the promises he’s made. Even if the curiosity ate at him from the inside out.

“Don’t think I have,” Lela says, her eyes flashing over from Tony’s eyes to Peppers face on account of how Pepper is now practically jumping up and down.

“Are you—Do you have plans? We should go, for lunch!” Pepper exclaims, jumbled and excitedly tripping over her words.

Lela is quiet as she glances back first to Clint and then to Natasha. There’s an answer on her lips already, that Tony can see. But by the hesitation that keeps her back, Lela doesn’t look so sure if she should answer. And it’s less like she’s looking for the super spies’ permission and more like she’s checking to see if they’re alright with her answering for them. It boggles Tony’s mind entirely the way he watches Natasha’s barely noticeable head tilt and Clint’s honey warm smile as he knocked his elbow into her arm.

“I could eat,” the girl announces in her gravelly tone.

“Oh! That’s perfect!” Pepper half shouts, as she spun on her heel and called out to her assistant, “Joseph! I’m going out to lunch!”

“M-Ms. Potts! You have that meeting at 1! and that video conference at 2:15!!” Jospeh sputters out, his voice cracking on his hysteria, “And you already went to lunch!”

“Well, today she’s taking a second one,” Tony stated easily as he pulled his phone from the back of his pocket.

One of the things Tony has always loved about Pepper is the way she could go from small smiles and quiet words to a living breathing hurricane. With a few steps, Pepper rushes over to the girl, hooks her arm through Lela’s arm and begins to lead them both over to the elevator. The action os so casual, Tony wonders if it isn’t something that’s been done over years and years. Quietly, he slips after his beta and the strange girl.
The two super spies lagging behind.

He’s in the process of dialing the restaurants number when Tony turns to Natasha and asks, “Did you drive here?”

“Nope, we walked,” Natasha states, her eyes cutting to the shortest among them.

Face twisting up with distaste, Tony hold his phone to his ear and demands, “Ew, gross, why?”

Huffing out a quiet sigh, Clint simply states, “Because it’s good for you.”

*~*

Let it never be said that Lela was not a fucking idiot when it came to making smart decisions. Going up to Pepper’s work place to make amends, to lay down the dirt she’d kicked up, had been all well and good. Both Lela and Pepper were even saying goodbye and ending things with an open ended type of thing. One where Pepper clearly wanted Lela never to close and Lela was half heartedly trying to shoot down.

And then she’d stepped out that office door. Got herself tangled up in the weirdest fucking Alpha scent she’s ever come across. Medicated or not, her hindbrain was out to fucking kill her. It slithered, stirred and kicked itself up like a raging fucking bull. All the things that came with being what she was, practically had her dropping to her knees. A whine or some pathetic shit like that desperate to spill from her lips.

Like orchids, jasmine—maybe, aged leather and some kind of motor grease. There was a Musk to him, harsh enough to tell Lela that despite the flowery smell of him, the man was an Alpha and a dominate one at that. It was a bite of something, like fried electrical wiring, hidden underneath flowers and leather. A strange coppery tang to him that made Lela almost squirm.

“I hope you guys don’t mind, I ordered a head of us,” the alpha announced as he pulled a chair out for Pepper and helped push her chair in.

Carefully, Lela watches the man from across the safety of the table. The man—Tony—moves in every way an Alpha could and did. Without effort he seemed to be able to demand a wide birth of space with a wave of his hand. When he entered the restaurant—wildly expensive—lower dynamics bowed at the waist for him. Necks lolled to the side like everyone just couldn’t help themselves.

The sight of it had made Lela inexplicably angry. It had made her want to bare her neck too. Or kick someones legs out from under them and sink her teeth into the Alpha prick stirring up a commotion in the first place. In the end though, Lela had done none of that. She’d simply followed after the group and put her self between Clint and Natasha.

“What did you order?” Clint asks, he wears something like apprehension on his face; suspicion sits in his eyes as he nudged his knee cap into Lela’s thigh.

“Obviously their very best,” the alpha simply states in that round about, entirely egotistical way of his. The man practically oozed self confidence.

The sight of it, the arrogant head tilt of his, the way he practically looked down the length of his nose at everyone else, makes something in Lela burn. Because there’s an Alpha, in his absolute prime and he’s everything she isn’t. the complete opposite of who and what she is. The White to her Black.

He was strength and she was weakness.
He was perfection and she was imperfection.

He was the epitome of the best of the dynamic and she was the worst of it.

He was the master of the universe and she was a thing to be owned.

Dressed in his worn down ACDC shirt with a fancy jacket thrown over, he gave the impression that he was somehow a king among the masses.

It was a mistake to come here. It was a mistake to take Pepper up on this stupid fucking *late lunch*. It was a mistake for Lela to try to make decisions for herself. Because, clearly, she was shit at them. But she can’t do anything about it. She can’t just stand up and walk out. She’d be turning her back on an alpha. She’d be bailing on Pepper—again. Lela would be taking a step back when all she wanted to do was take a step forward.

Gritting her teeth tight, grinding her fangs against one another, Lela tries to remember the warm words of Sam. Tries to focus on the praises he gave her even if she felt like maybe she doesn’t actually deserve them.

The food arrives without a single waiter coming to the table to so much as ask for what they’ll be drinking. Plates—all identical and holding the same amount of things—is put before each and every one of them. For a second, Lela feels completely alien. What she’s looking at, what sits on her plate, can’t legally be called food.

So with all the grace she possesses, Lela demands, “What the fuck is this shit?”

There’s a red and black speckled goop smeared into the white of her triangle shaped plate. Next to that sits some kind of lime green mush with two purple leaves sitting on the peak mound like a bad mud castle and flag re-creation. It’s weird, also very weird, Lela’s not about to put any of it into her mouth. But what takes the damn cake is the deep plum colored jiggly ball thing.

Whatever it is, it still trembles from the soft landing of plate meeting table.

“It’s a hipsters take on purple cauliflower and sweet potato soup and—“ The alpha says something, else, begins to list the items on their plates like it was all perfectly normal.

Whatever he says, Lela doesn’t even begin to half hear. She’s already made up her mind, she isn’t going to touch any bit of it. Sure, Lela’s never been too picky when she was living on the streets—going so far as to steal things out of garbage bins—but hey, this shit was a jiggling sphere. It in no way shape or form looked appealing. As discreetly as she can manage, Lela pushes the plate away from her and fiddles with a small sharp ridged spoon.

Carefully leaning towards her, Natasha mumbles just below her breath, “We’ll pick up something on the way back to the hotel.”

“Something edible,” Clint snipes from Lela’s left and Lela barely bothers to suppress the snort of laughter she issues at that.

It’s only when the others have dug into their food—Clint half heartedly pushing the blob around on his plate—does the Alpha/Tony, suddenly ask, “So, no one’s going to do it then? We’re all just gunna leave the elephant in the room alone?”

“Tony,” Pepper starts, voice firm as her pale pink lips thinned into a tight line, “*don’t.*”

“What you want me to pretend I’m not *dying* of curiosity here?” the alpha announces as he sipped
from his drink.

“I’m pretty sure you are, but I’d leave it alone bud,” Clint grumbled, not lifting his eyes from the mess he was making of the purple goop.

“Bud? Are you serious right now Barton?!” the Alpha cackled, fake and slightly aggravated, there’s a wildness in the alphas big brown eyes that strip away the softness of them, “You two went dark almost three months ago. You barely show up at any briefings, or meets and all non essential missions have been handed down to trainees. Last week I got paired up with some kid out of Florida that was literally green around the gills! Like, he had actual fucking gills and we were supposed to be stopping some mad scientist fuck underground! What the hell kind of help is a fish human hybrid under-fucking-ground?! Do you know how many sketchy Meta’s we’ve got on trial runs? 28!!! And you two just bailed?! You’ve—You ghosted me!”

“Tony,” Pepper starts, her baby blue eyes flashing over to Lela’s face and then around them in the dimly lit restaurant. None of the other patrons have bothered to turn but if the alpha continued to stink of his growing frustration, they’d all start turning heads, “This is hardly the time.”

“And then you two just waltz in like nothing, like you didn’t just fuck off to who knows where. Leaving the rest of us to pick up after you, carrying in a little civilian nobody. And I’m supposed to what, leave it well enough alone?” the Alpha growls out exasperated and angry. The grip he has on a dainty little fork tightening dangerously.

“Last I checked, we don’t answer to you,” Natasha starts off, delicately sipping from her iced water. Her emerald eyes are half lidded, half bored to anyone who looked, but it was in the minute tension of the corners of her lips. It was in the way she tucked a stray strand of crimson colored hair behind her left ear as opposed to her right. Lela could feel the murderous waves spilling from the Beta even if she couldn’t yet smell it.

“No you don’t, but I thought you’d at least give me the courtesy, I thought something had happened to you! I sent Carter after you. She kept coming up empty.”

“Tony, that’s enough,” Pepper interrupts, or at least attempts to.

“I deserved a little heads up that you guys were just going to some field in jersey or some bullshit!” the Alpha half roars, his eyes narrowed and face fulled down into a severe frown that pulled at his neatly styled goatee.

“What you deserved?!” Clint repeats the word, his eyes wide with surprise for a split second before his face grew ferocious, “Oh, there’s a great many things you deserve, Oh Great and Wonderful Mr. Stark, want me to list’em off for you?”

It’s then that Lela remembers, with stark clarity, the killer vibes that seemed to spill from Clint’s face the night they first met. Clint’s never had a reason to be angry around Lela, not really, not like this. And it’s scary, far scarier than Lela’s ever seen a Gamma capable of being.

Something like thrill and excitement race up her veins. It makes her hindbrain and instincts slither to a rhythm that’s far more primal than she’s ever felt. There’s a dull twist building in the pit of her stomach as she watches her two wonder-dicks face off with an Alpha that seemed to be the cream of the fucking crop.

“Tony!” Pepper sharply barks, her tone infused with a Beta bark that meant fucking business.

It stills the rising tension but does little to actually bank it. What it does, in all reality, is put the shit on
pause.

“This is not the time or place,” Pepper states the words in a sharp and clipped tone. Her eyes spelling murder and her ire reeking in the air.

A beta bark, most days, was a firm reprimand. A sound built to call order to the chaos. Lela can count on one hand the number of times she’s seen an Alpha heel to it. The only times it ever really worked was if the Beta was a cop or something.

But lo’ and behold, the Alpha stills. The growls that spill out of his mouth suddenly cease. The dark haired man—with soft wisps of gray at the temples of his head—rips his glower from them to stare angrily at his shitty food. Whatever fight had been building in the Alpha falls away under the stern bark and growl Pepper issues.

Brows arched, Lela can’t help the way a small laugh spills from her mouth. Surprise makes a crooked grin pull at her lips as she kicked back in her seat and regarded the alpha man. If she could, she’d prop her feet up onto the fancy looking table and lace her fingers behind her head but she figures that’ll be very well received by an already agitated red head.

Not knowing how else to break the tension, Lela peeks her tongue out of her lips, waggles it at Clint and asks, “You got a hell of temper there babe.”

Arching a brow—channeling a hell of a lot of Natasha vibes doing it—Clint sends her an unrepentant smirk, “Whaddya mean? I’m the sweetest bitch you’ll ever meet.”

Biting the tip of her tongue, Lela grins wide and shrugs, because for all she knew, maybe he was. Clint definitely was sweet, though Lela’s never known him to be a bitch. Either way, as casually as she can manage, Lela bumps her knee against his and kicks out her right foot so it jostled Natasha’s own. Her action manages to make for drop into Natasha’s lap in a mess of green and dark purple. Lela smirks at the intense glare Natasha sends for that.

Slowly, Lela watches as the tension in Natasha’s shoulders bleed out and Clint’s smile settles a little more natural on his face. Something like pride and relief swell and intertwine in her chest at the sight of her two wonder-dicks breathing out. Pride and relief because she’s helped them off whatever little ledge they both seemed happy to nose dive off of. Pride and relief because…well…shit, she’s not exactly sure.

Ignoring the strangeness of the feeling, Lela sits up in her seat and glances over to Pepper across the way. Lela doesn’t even bother to try to pick her words out, she just asks to the table all around, “Bad blood?”

With a strained smile, Pepper says, “Work stuff.”

“Work like, *work*?” Lela asks putting a mock gun to her head and pulling the trigger. Miming shooting herself in the head to illustrate her point.

Wide eyed and shocked, Pepper races to amend, “No! Not at all!”

“They’re in the business of *saving* lives these days, kid,” the Alpha mumbled as he waved down a waiter.

Brow perched, Natasha drawled out sarcastically, “*Are we*?”

“I mean, certainly doesn’t feel like we are anymore. Feels a little like we’re all part of the new secret police, to be honest.” Clint spat out as he roughly dropped his drink back onto the table.
“The world changed Clint. The threats weren’t the same. It needed to change—’’ The Alpha starts his eyes growing hard and angry.

“And who changed it Mr. Futurist? Looks to me like the people that stood at the top, dishing out the new rules and orders, were the only ones who made it out unscathed.’’ Clint states with a one shoulder shrug. ‘’The rest of us got told to play ball or fucking else we’d wake up to a bullet between the eyes.’’

Lela’s not even going to pretend to know what the hell was going on. She stays quiet, her eyes flashing across the table to whoever spoke next and drinks in the murderous tension in the air.

“Ross wouldn’t have killed you,’’ the alpha bit out. But even he seemed to know that the words sounded like little more than a lie the moment they slipped out of his mouth.

Picking up her blinding white napkin, Natasha wipes at her lips and breezily states, “Ross, the incompetent fool, couldn’t gun us down if he had an army at his back. But, be that as it may, I told you we were taking time off. I put trusted competent agents to handle what needed handling. What we decide to do in our private lives is our business. Not all of us like to live under the scope of a camera lens. We have no need and you have no right to demand from us the intricacies of our lives. You lost that privilege the moment you hunted us down like we were little more than war criminals —like we were enemies. No, I’m sorry, you hunted allowed them to hunt us down like animals.”

“Nat, I didn’t know—how was I supposed to know he would take it as far as he did?!” the Alpha pushed out, ignoring the waiter that pulled up at his left elbow.

“Regardless Tony, what was done was done.’’ Natasha states with ease, looking completely done with the conversation, the meal and the man in question. Regal as only she could ever look while being entirely fucking pissed, Natasha begins to rise from the table, “As always, it was a pleasure, Pepper.”

“Nat, please,’’ Pepper half whines in her plea. Her eyes flash desperately from Natasha then over to Clint. As if willing all the bad blood away by staring it in the face and refusing to back away.

There was no doubt in Lela’s mind, Pepper had just as much iron in her spine as any DomBeta. Even if her smiles were soft and her words butter smooth. There was iron there. Born of from some type of suffering. There’s a part of her that kind of wants to stick around to see what could’ve brought that about, but, Lela’s not about to stay anywhere near an Alpha in a bad mood. So she rises from her seat too only a half second after Clint has done the same.

In his rush to stop them, Tony rises fast, half knocking his chair back in the process and sending the Gamma waiter scrambling back. He makes to reach out for Natasha, his hand outstretched and his lips pulled up into a frustrated snarl.

And, he’s not reaching for Lela—not at all—he’s not even looking at her. His hand is reaching, obviously, for Natasha, close enough that it almost lands. Lela knows Natasha is probably more than capable of handling herself. Like, Lela knows that on an instinctual level. Natasha would probably break the fingers coming her way before they ever actually hurt her. But all the same, something wild and half mad rises in Lela’s blood.

Something boils and burns, it twists up her stomach and makes her fangs drop before she even registers she’s done it. Before she can process the wild pulse in her brain and the furious roar on her lips, Lela’s stepping forward. She’s putting herself square in front of Natasha’s body and between an Alpha and a Beta.
On any other day, Lela would’ve steered the fuck clear of a situation like this. She’s seen plenty of times the way an Alpha can run themselves into a rage when plainly challenged like this. To be denied what they thought was their right by a lesser rank. Lela’s seen people die from it. Drop dead at the razor sharp fangs of an Alpha and the brutality of their strength. Lela knows it’s a bad move, one she can’t afford to make. She should just step aside, let what happens happen. Because suppressors and blockers aside, she is on the lower side of shit and she never could stack up to an Alpha’s might no matter how hard she tried.

But that madness clogging up her brain, like a haze of a red cloud sitting heavy over her eyes, pushes those rational thoughts aside. Something in her screams—practically burns—to keep the Alpha’s touch clear off Natasha. Her hindbrain slithers, sinks into itself and turns itself inside out. All the submissiveness that she’s come to expect from her second nature just boils away. She’s left with something entirely fucking feral. Something that claims, dark and proud, that Natasha wasn’t the Alpha’s to touch, to grab, to halt. It screams in Lela’s face to keep it away from the Beta, from the Gamma, to keep his damned scent off them because it didn’t belong.

She can feel the silk ribbon and iron band grow dark and strained, pulled tight as piano wire and ready to pop. It’s a wildly strange emotion she’s never felt. Burning up in her veins, making her feel like she’s been doused in kerosene and lit up.

Heart racing in her chest, Lela growls dark, low and dangerous in the mans direction. Her teeth are bared, her eyes hard and glinting a dark promise that if the Alpha so much as touched Natasha Lela would rain down pain onto him. She’d sink her teeth into him and shred him.

All the dark things she promises in her growl are clearly understood for the Alpha man stills in his step. His brown eyes—fanned by thick and curled lashes—grow wide as they flashed away from Natasha and down to her. The snarl he’d worn on his face falls as he took a step back and away. His body suddenly angled to keep the Beta at his back protected. He moves like he sees her like a threat, like a cocked and loaded assault rifle aimed at his chest.

And it’s strange that only now does Lela really look at him. That up until now, she realizes, she’s been avoiding his gaze. Now, caught in a challenge—one the Alpha was clearly backing away from—she see’s him for all that his is. Past the confidence he exuded, the arrogance and the flash of his bright indulgent smile. She see’s him, tanned skin, charming features and big brown eyes, and see’s the brokenness about his gaze. The way it looked as if sadness, regret and something like tragedy hung in the depths of his soft brown eyes. Lela see’s it and finds a lone stray bit of second natured self stir. It was a little like looking into a mirror, those eyes, her own heartache and pain reflected in those eyes.

In his eyes, Lela could make out rage born of a life built on tragedy and loss. In his eyes, in his dark heavy gaze, Lela can make out a soul that was just as much damaged as hers. Chipped and broken, bent and twisted into a shape that could never resemble what it had once been. It banks some of her fury, makes it burn a little less, because the man—Alpha or not—practically wore his heart in his eyes. And it makes Lela fucking marvel. It’s then that she smells his strange floral scent. Jasmine and Orchid leaves. Motor oil grease and something like an aged leather jacket. It fucks with her head that smell.

Still, dark vicious pleasure makes Lela spread her lips wide in a smirk because it was the Alpha who stepped back and not she. A challenge that was initiated and she had won. Without saying a word Lela wrapped her hand over Natasha’s left wrist and tugged just once. Without taking her eyes off the Alpha, Lela calls out to Pepper hidden behind him:

“See ya around Pepper.”
Lela can make out the way Pepper scrambles up out of her seat and pushes around her Alpha’s reluctant body, “Lela wait, please! How do I—when are you—”

“She’s with us,” Clint states. The words are simple enough but what gives Lela pause is the way Clint issues them. The way they fall into the space around them. Claiming and yet not. Possessive and yet…true.

“If you need to reach her, you have my number,” Natasha informs the blonde easily.

And before anything else can be said, Lela drops her hand away from Natasha and begins to make her way out of the restaurant. It’s only when their out onto the cool night air—at least three blocks away from the restaurant—that Lela feels the strangeness of that wild feeling begin to ebb away. It goes reluctantly, settling down like a great big giant kicking up dirt as it went. She can still feel the phantom hum of it in her mind and in her veins. Aching to flare up and swipe anyone that came near the red head or the blonde. It’s a disconcerting feeling, one Lela hasn’t felt for anyone…ever. too busy looking out for herself she’s never once entertained the thought of doing so for others.

She kills the thought almost immediately, pushes it far enough away from herself that she can’t register it much. She lights up a smoke much to the displeasure that lines Clint’s face at the smoke he has to pass through. When the silence begins to stretch she tosses over her shoulder, over the butt of her smoke:

“You can grab a cab now Chuckles. I’m fucking tired.”

“Oh thank fuck!” Clint breathed out a heavy put upon sigh as his head flashed around looking for passing yellow taxis, “Hotels clear on the other side of town.”

Natasha is quiet as she walks on Lela’s right hand side. Her eyes trained in front of her and her pale jaw set like she was clenching her teeth especially hard. Every line of her body—though loose and casual—scram of her displeasure. Pursing her lips, Lela flicks the growing ash off her smoke and bumps her shoulder against the red heads:

“Your night to pick Red.”

Dark red brows pinched, Natasha casts her a confused look before digging her pale hands into the pockets of her denim jacket, “To pick what exactly?”

“Food. I mean, I don’t know about y’all killer fucks, but that shit in there was not food. I’m hungry as fuck right now,” Lela announces as her stomach issued a particularly violent grumble.

Snorting a short laugh, Natasha shook her head and said just about the same time Clint managed to wave down a passing cabbie, “Are you ever not hungry?”

“Bitch, you started this. I was making it good on my bi-weekly meals. You had to come in and fuck up my schedule,” Lela pretends to scowl as she flicked the cherry off her cig and slipped it behind her right ear.

Pulling up a brow, high on her forehead, Natasha sends her a dry look with a wayward smile, “From the bottom of my heart, I’m sorry.”

Lela can’t resist the way the ends of her lips pull up into a reluctant crooked smile so she rolls her eyes and walks over to Clint’s flourishing hand wave, saying as she goes, “Damn right you should be. So what’s your pick?”

“I’m not sure. I’m feeling partial to pad thai though,” Natasha announced as they three climbed into
the back of the taxi.

Frowning at the fact that she’s being sandwiched between them both, Lela mumbles as she jammed her elbow into Clint’s ribs, “What’s pad thai?”

Grunting at the blow, Clint huffs out, “What seriously? You’ve never had pad thai?”

“Obviously, fuckhead, or I wouldn’t be asking,” Lela sniped as she forced Natasha’s thigh back with a kick of her booted feet.

“Okay, we’re getting Pad Thai, it’s the fucking shit!” Clint announced as he leaned forward to the driver and listed off a new address. Lela assumes the address to whatever restaurant served whatever the fuck they were talking about.

“It isn’t gunna be like the shit we had back there right?” Lela asks Natasha, already growing weary.

Shaking her head, Natasha tells her, “No, trust me you’ll like it. Are you partial to any kind of meat? Beef, Pork or maybe Chicken?”

“I’m good with whatever, chicken maybe?” Lela offers as she drummed her fingers on the flesh of her knee that peaked out of her torn up jeans.

“We’ll just order one of everything, yeah? More choices to choose from,” Clint announced happily, his grin spread wide as his eyes practically danced with excitement.

Twisting up her lips, Lela sends a questioning glance at the gamma before asking, “I take it that’s more for you than it is for me, huh?”

Clint laughs at that but doesn’t bother to refute her accusation. He just sinks back into his seat and lets his weight crush Lela into Natasha. Lela puts up a good enough fight, digs her elbow into his ribs and snarls at him. But Clint just laughs as Natasha grumbled about kicking them both out of a moving vehicle.

And it strikes Lela a little weird that she’s so comfortable in their presence, all smushed together as they are. Half piled on one another on account of Clint stealing more space and widening his legs. It doesn’t bother her as much as it would, as much as it should. But Lela pushes those thoughts away too. Lets herself rest up against the silent strength of Natasha and the bubbling warmth of Clint until they reach wherever their headed. There’s a comforting feeling that swells just below her chest and wraps her up tight till she feels like she can barely breath from it.

The ribbon silk and steel band go soft again, grow warm over it.

Lela labels it yet another one of those strange emotions and lets it go because she can’t complain. There are worst places to be than here, piled between them two.
Oh Tony, my insufferable baby. so apparently, I was on Pinterest looking at concept arts and aesthetics and guess what I found out? There's a shit ton of Anti-Tony's. Like that's a thing. People are like heavily divided on my dude. It's crazy. Like there's a lot of love and shit but a hell of a lot of hate after Infinity War. Like I get it. A fuck ton of shit happened. But seriously, there's like a following on Insta, on Tumblr and everything else of just outwardly pouring hate.
It's insane. Bummed me out because I'm a fan of Tony's sarcasm. of his wit and of his heart. He makes a shit ton of bad decisions but don't we all?? He kind of just makes them on a bigger scale.
My heart goes out for him.

Anyways, I hope you guys liked this update. It was a brief interaction between Poppa Tony, Momma Nat, Step-Momma Pep and big bro Clint.
Setting up the next scene where Tony's gunna just dash all his hard earned progress and just do like he's always done. Which is to say, he's gunna put his nose where it doesn't belong. Cuz that's my trash baby, always willing to make the same mistakes twice for the fuck of it.

Hope you guys liked it
As always, thank you for reading!!!
Leave comments or opinions, all is welcomed.
-Ani

Oh, just a PS, I get that you guys want for the super hunks to make an appearance, and I'm working on it, seriously guys, I want the romance to kick up already, but I kinda want to set the foundation for a family that loves their chosen Pack-Mates. That shit takes time and effort. I hope y'all can bear with me on this.
There’s a tension in the air. A dark rumble of a storm about to break over them three. Bruce feels the hairs along his arm rise up in response. He can feel the way his instincts are screaming for him to head in the opposite direction. To get going while he still stood a chance.

Bruce doesn’t need to take a whiff of the air around them to know a fight was brewing. Tony was a stubborn obstinate jackass and Lela was an immovable mountain. This type of standoff wasn’t about to just wash away. It was an Alpha pushing and an Alpha refusing to move.

“This is a bad idea,” Bruce mumbled as he nervously shifted form foot to foot. His anxious hands pushed at his slipping glasses before he glanced behind himself as if expecting to find someone standing just behind him.

“No it’s not, it’s the best idea. I mean, between my doctorates and yours, we legally can’t have a bad idea. We’re certified geniuses Bruce-baby,” Tony muttered as he slurped from his bright hot pink cup noisily. His eyes were hidden behind purple tinted shades which did no favors to hide Bruce’s slightly even around the edges face.

“Puerto Rico,” Bruce suddenly states, firm and unyielding as he shot the alpha man a glower.

Popping his lip open into a slim little o, Tony purses his lips and wobbles his head, “Okay, Puerto Rico wasn’t entirely my fault. Jarvis was on the fritz and he calculated it’d be a decent enough throw —"

“You chucked a charged particle beam reactor into the ocean which imploded in on itself and nearly dragged the coast line into the bottom of the ocean,” Bruce bit out. His dark brows pulled down tight on his bedraggled face.

Waving his hand as if to say the matter was neither here nor there, Tony ignores the good doctor’s words and simply says, “But did anyone die?”

“Uh, yeah, kinda? I mean, the damage to the coral reefs still hasn’t been assessed in it’s totality. People are still trying to make heads or tails of where the components to that weapon went and—”

Bruce goes on to list the seven other things that Tony’s split second decision had caused. but is thwarted by the way Tony suddenly ducks behind a fed-ex drop box.
“Hush it big guy, I think I see her?” Tony hisses out.

The squeak that leaves Bruces lips is not at all dignified as Bruce dove to hide behind Tony’s slightly hunched over form. Ducking his head of dark curls out, Bruce tries to follow Tony’s line of sight and spot their ‘target’ of sorts. Across the street, walking with a smoke pinched between her lips, goes a small dark haired girl. Her face, familiar as it was, looked entirely different now—Bruce thought.

What with the way there was no blood, no swelling, she looked like any regular person. She was dressed in that familiar leather jacket. Her hands tucked casually into the front pockets as the undone laces of her boots jangled around the flared out tops. The ends of her torn at the knee skinnies were messily bunched up. The dingy off white of her muscle shirt did little to hide the fact that she wasn’t exactly wearing a bra underneath.

A heavy sigh of relief leaves Bruces lips as his body psychically sagged, “She looks so much better.”

“She looks kind of like a thug,” Tony mumbled as he drank back his glittery monstrosity.

And yeah, Bruce thought, maybe a little bit. Lela walked down the street like maybe she was two seconds away from punching someones teeth out. There was a permanent scowl on her face. A purse to her pouty dark lips that made the pull of her full black brows seem menacing. Bruce wouldn’t be surprised if he were to walk up to her now, he’d find she’d been growling that insanely deep growl of hers.

But she looks better—far healthier—than she had been when he’d first laid eyes on her. Lela looked world better than when she’d been laid up on that medical bed. Wires trailing out of her frail body like she was one bad infection away from just blowing away. The burned and frayed edges of her giving way to dust and scattering in the wind. She looked just as pissed as he remember when she’d woken, all fury and murderous death, but she looked healthier.

Her skin was no longer that yellowing white but darkened too a smooth brown that reminded him of wet earth. Her hair, longer now, was set a glow in the early evening sun. Dark as the shadows in her eyes.

The anxiety he’d felt when she’d left settles then. Knowing that Natasha and Clint had both brought her back from the brink of death as they had.

When Tony had suggested this little recon mission, Bruce had flat out denied to be a part of it. Tony’s increasing curiosity of the girl had worried Bruce like nothing he’d ever felt. Over-protective anger had surged white hot in him. He’d growled, flat out growled, in the face of the Alpha. He had wanted nothing to do with it. Didn’t want to get himself entangled with another one of the man’s hair-brained ideas. The last time Bruce had decided to go along with one of Tony’s ideas, they’d managed to demolish a city.

But the thought of Tony going on his own, to stir up more of his signature styled bullshit, had left him feeling unsettled. It only took Tony three whole days of poking and prodding for Bruce to cave. Despite himself, he had wanted to see how the girl was doing.

Of course, Pepper had filled him in on everything. How Lela had just dropped by the tower with Natasha and Clint in tow. How they had spoken, how Lela was doing infinitely better. Pepper had let Bruce know she was clean now, working on fixing herself up, and Bruce was glad. Both for Lela and Pepper. For how the dark haired girl was trying to put her life back together if a bit reluctantly. For how she had reached out to Bruce’s Beta.

Bruce was glad and normally he would’ve left it at that. Taken Pepper’s word for what it was. But
something in him had gnawed at him to the bone. Made him restless in his thinking. He had wanted nothing more, after Pepper had come to him, to see it with his own eyes. To make sure Lela was whole and hale and breathing with his own hands. The other guy had roared in his face because he wanted to fills his nose with the harshness of that scent that had lingered long on Pepper’s skin.

“She looks better,” Bruce repeated, his voice soft as he smiled.

For his part Tony only grunts. Bruce knows exactly how much Tony now knew over the whole of the situation. It’d taken the man exactly one hour after he’d left the restaurant to find the needed surveillance videos. It had taken Tony exactly five minutes after watching to hunt down his ex-employee and seek his own pound of flesh. As if Happy, Natasha or Clint had left anything of the man when they were done. It had taken Tony about one whole day to get the details out of both Pepper and Bruce.

Admittedly, Bruce had said only the bare minimum. He’d said how he was involved, how he had tried to help her, but offered no real details. Bruce had left out the intricacies of the girls injuries—the extend of them—to himself because it wasn’t his place to say. Bruce knows, Pepper did the same. Pepper had only told Tony how she’d met the other girl. How it had all come to be. And though Tony probably knew there was a lot they weren’t telling him, the Alpha had been mildly appeased. But Tony’s curiosity was a monster when left unchecked. Which was why they were here, hiding behind a fed-ex drop box spying. Or at least, attempting to spy. Bruce was a great many things but a spy was not one of them. He lacked the finesse, the grace, the subtlety and the general composure for it.

“All right. We’re close enough,” Tony announced before darting across the street. Uncaring at the clear fact that he could side swiped easily.

Sometimes, Bruce thought, Tony forgot he wasn’t wearing his suit just underneath the softness of his henley’s.

It’s only when Tony has made it onto the other side, unscathed, that the man’s words register in Bruce’s mind. Squawking, Bruce dares to rush out onto the street when he spots a big enough gap. He almost gets hit about two times by the same red car and gets honked hard enough to rile the green thing underneath his skin before he makes it to the other side. When he catches up to Tony, he’s panting, frazzled and entirely far too shaken up to deal with the dumb shit that comes spewing out of Tony’s mouth:

“So what’s her deal? Is she in the know or something? Like a Meta?” Tony questions as he pushed the rim of his ridiculous looking glasses further up. Ridiculous they may be, but Bruce was almost positive they cost at the very least a good grand.

“A meta? No,” Bruce panted as they dropped into step a good ways behind the dark haired girl, “Why would you think she’s a meta?”

“Because have you heard her growl? It’s insane,” Tony announced with a firm glare over his shoulder, “It’s not normal.”

“Maybe she’s an alpha,” Bruce tries even if he kind of holds his doubts after all that has been said and done up in the tower.

When he’d first laid eyes on Lela, first heard the growls she was able to produce—built of hell fire and seeped in death—Bruce had thought: Alpha. He’d felt it in his bones. The power that flowed off her small bleeding frame. The way it had rattled him, brought very sense he had to full attention, and
silenced the battering drum of the other guy just underneath.

Bruce still had trouble putting her growls together with the knowledge of what she really was. Some part of him thought the good doctor Manveer had gotten it all wrong. Because Bruce had never met an Omega that could do what Lela could do. To fight against every instinct an omega was born with. To hold her head high, to fight back the need to bare her throat. To force another dynamic—higher up—to bare their throat. Bruce had found himself baring his own throat. Something he never imagined he’d do for anyone. Because yes he was a a Gamma but the other guy refused to bare his throat to anyone.

And he’d done it, with little hesitation under the sheer might of the girls growl. Bruce doesn’t think he could’ve done that for an Omega.

Not to say he was one of those who believed in the utter rigidness of the dynamic pyramid, there was much he couldn’t agree with, much more that he flat out knew to be untrue. But he’s never heard of any Omega that could do what Lela had done with out effort. That could rile in another dynamic the need to submit. And if Pepper was to be believed—which she was, Pepper never lied—Lela had brought to heel even Tony. An Alpha born of two Alphas. An Alpha that was every bit on top of the pyramid.

“Maybe,” Tony mumbles, as he side stepped a man juggling six bags of groceries, “She sounds like it. Never knew Alpha’s could be so small though. Have you ever heard of that?”

“No, but I mean, I did meet a man the other day who could bend metal to his will, so. Stranger things have been known to happen.” Bruce lightly states, trying his very best to keep his tone as casual as he could manage.

Tony doesn’t say anything to that. His eyes flash over to Bruce and for a split second seem to darken in their color. Bruce is self aware enough to know he isn’t the best of liars. He’s probably just above a guilt ridden ten year old. And Tony, well, Bruce is aware enough to know Tony was hell of a lot more perceptive as people gave him credit for.

Certified genius or not, Tony could read the smallest of things in a persons gaze. Tony could read the seven different things that went unspoken in a gesture. The man could practically wrote a book on a three worded reply.

It was kind of the whole reason Bruce half fell in love with the man in the first place. Tony had eyes that sharp as Natasha’s knives. He had a heart just as big as Peppers—if a hell of a lot more guarded. Tony had a wickedness about his smarts that had rendered Bruce speechless and had him playing a terrible game of catch-up half the time. Tony sprinted and Bruce walked in terms of literally everything.

The chase and the run was another reason Bruce fell as hard as he did. Tony egged him on, taunted till all Bruce wanted to do was run up ahead and let the Alpha catch up. There was a thrill in it, Bruce supposes, to have someone like Tony wanting to catch someone like Bruce. That an Alpha like that wanted him as pack and something more. That someone wanted to be his Alpha point period.

Nowadays, as much as Tony wanted and as much as he himself still kind of did, Bruce didn’t run after Tony and he certainly held no kind of thrill in being chased. Not anymore. What dreams and hopes he had of an Alpha had died in the wilds of some nameless jungle. He was content now with the Beta he had and that was that.

Ignoring those thoughts, the lingering heat of Tony’s knowing gaze, Bruce focuses on the girl up
ahead. He watches as the girl flicks her dead butt into a trash can and continues on. They’d been ‘tailing’ her for little more than an hour since she’d stepped out of what Tony had assured him was the shared hotel room of Natasha and Clint. A hotel room, Pepper had informed Bruce of, the girl lived in for the time being.

“We should go,” Bruce mumbles as he stumbled to keep upright with a broad shoulder Alpha woman that half rammed into him, “We saw her, she’s fine, we should go.”

Guilt sits in his chest the longer he continues to follow the girl—stalk her. It feels like a gross invasion of privacy. How much had Bruce himself hated it when he was tailed. When he was followed through nameless cities while he tried to hide. The fact that he’s doing it now, sits uncomfortably on his shoulders.

“What? Why?” Tony asks, seems to be absolutely guilt free as he sped up his walk to keep up. Lela was making rapid turns erratically. She didn’t look bothered at all, didn’t give any signs that she knew she was being followed, but was moving in a way like maybe there was an inkling in her mind.

The fact that Bruce recognizes the behavior makes bile rise up in his throat, gritting his teeth he says, “Because it’s wrong Tony.”

“Are you serious?” Tony bites out, his face looking a little aggrieved that Bruce is putting up a fight over this.

“Yes,” Bruce hisses out, glares at the man beside him. Forces himself to keep a tight grip on his frustration lest he turn a shade of green in broad daylight.

Tony opens his mouth, to argue, to offer some kind of Stark brilliant refute when suddenly a familiar voice spills out into the air. It’s familiar in all it’s husky deep baritones. Gravelly like maybe all the user ever did was scream and inhale wood smoke. Dark like the speaker was more accustomed to speaking through growls than any living person.

“There a reason you’re following me around town dickheads?”

Snapping his head around, fast enough to give himself whiplash, Bruce spins about and comes face to face with Lela. Her face is pulled tight, anger and fury pulling on her face until she looked like an Alpha about to rampage. Bruce has dreams, vivid nightmares, where he remembers that snarl covered in blood. The way it had looked like something out of a horror film. Bruce sometimes couldn’t help but think it was the type of face one made when in the throes of committing an especially violent murder.

Healthier Lela might look, sans blood her snarl might be now, but it was still terror inducing. Bruce can’t help the way he stumbles back a half step. Everything in him wanting to put distance between himself and an obvious threat. If he manages to somehow place Tony firmly in front of himself, Bruce isn’t about to acknowledge that fact. Ignores it as much as he ignores the brush of a mangled pack bond that stubbornly refused to die.

“Uh,” is about as much as Bruce can come up with. His eyes wide as he fumbled for something to say.

“H-Hey, kid,” Tony starts, choking a little on the drink he still had in his mouth and attempting to pull something out of his ass, “What a coincidence seeing you here.”

Swiping her tongue over her teeth, a blatant act to show the sharpness of her fangs, Lela drawls out,
“Is that what you’re calling it? Coincidence? You two fucks have been following me for about an hour. Why?”

“Us following you? Well, clearly someone thinks very highly of herself,” Tony laughed out, smiling that magazine ready smile and dropped his drink into the near by trash bin.

And Lela isn’t buying it. Bruce can see it in the way her dark eyes narrow and grow about ten shades darker. Bruce felt like suddenly, if Lela opened her eyes now, Bruce would be sucked into an infinite black hole. Devoured and made nothing by the vastness and boundless power of her gaze.

It’s that fear, caught in that gaze, trapped by the weight of it falling out of someone so much insanely smaller than him, that has Bruce admitting, “It was his idea.”

“Whoa!” Tony shouts, garbled and surprised as he turned an stupefied gaze on him, “Dude! Are you serious right now?! Did you seriously just throw me under the damn bus here?”

“I told him it was a bad idea,” Bruce continues on, completely ignoring Tony’s affronted noise, as he raised his hands up in surrender, “Such a bad idea.”

In Bruce’s mind, it feels like an entire eternity before finally Lela’s gaze looses some of it’s sharpness. It feels like the seconds get pulled apart, atom by damnable atom, before her body leans back and her fangs no longer peek past her plump bottom lip. It feels like ages before she rakes her fingers through her long black hair and she manages to throw him a weary smirk.

Huffing out a small laugh, Lela says, “It’s good to see you Dr. Banner.”

“U-Uh, ye-yeah.” Bruce mumbles, trips over his own tongue as he awkwardly brought down his hands and forced his head straight. Not realizing until now that he’d been baring his throat without prompting, “It’s, uh, it’s good to see you too, Lela.”

“So why’re you following me?” the girl demands again, her tone a little less murderous but her gaze just as hard as before. Her gaze flickers off of Bruce and over to Tony, the Alpha, the clear threat.

Lela shows absolutely no struggle at all in the way she’s able to meet Tony’s gaze. Her head doesn’t go to the side. Her scent, which Bruce is having a hell of a time picking up on the busy street, doesn’t flare up. No notes of submission, of peace, of omega, hang in the air. She stays still, her body poised for a fight she doesn’t know will come from her left or from her right. Every inch of her screaming that she was willing—eager almost—to meet either one of them in a fight.

Bruce marvels at it. Feels now more than ever, that there was no way the girl could be what Dr. Manveer had implied she was.

“Okay, since we’re all about selling each other out today,” Tony groused as he dug his hands into the front pockets of his sinfully form fitting dark jeans. He stands tall and proud, completely unrepentant in being caught in the act and announces, “I was curious and Brucie wanted to see with his own four eyes how you were holding up.”

Quirking up a dark brow, Lela purses her lips and levels Bruce a bland look, “What for?”

“Uh, because uh, Pepper told me you came to the, uh, tower a few days ago. That you two, or erm, all of you went to some restaurant. She said you looked better. I guess I, uh, just wanted to make sure?” Bruce feels how he makes the end of his statement tilt up into a question. He scrubs at the back of his neck and forces his heart rate down. To keep from spinning on his heel and sprinting back to the tower.
This wasn’t a bad idea. This was a shitty idea. Bruce should’ve known better. But he was a sucker for sad brown eyes. Always had been.

“You came, you saw, and now what?” Lela bites out, her tone growing harder and far darker, “Y’all stuck around for what exactly?”

Bruce holds not a damn ounce of guilt for the way his eyes cut over to Tony. The way he lays the blame at the other man’s feet as easy as breathing. Bruce isn’t about to go down for this. Not at all. Bruce just wasn’t ready to be murdered by a maybe-Omega, maybe-Alpha. Not at all.

“Well,” Tony starts, frowning for a moment as he thought over his words. Bruce isn’t going to lie he’s waiting for the response too.

Bruce had wondered why the hell Tony had developed a sudden and avid interest in who or what Lela was. Tony had only ever seen that type of manic energy and it usually only occurred when Tony had found himself stonewalled by multidimensional mathematics. Tony was close to cracking those theories though, this was a little more complicated, and Bruce knew Tony usually ate up intricacies like they were an especially rare food stuff.

The brow Lela’s raised inches just a tad bit higher as she cocked a hip out and crossed her arms: waiting.

“Been waiting for your resume kid,” Tony suddenly says which, well, pulls Bruce up short.

“My what?” Lela says, her words colored in her confusion.

“Your resume, offered to give you a job and you haven’t gotten back to me,” Tony elaborates easily. If he’s lying, Bruce can’t tell. Never has been. Only Pepper ever seemed able to tell when Tony was bullshitting or not.

“Are you fucking serious?” Lela demands, sounds angry now as her brows pinched tight and she issued a deep throaty growl.

Smiling, Tony shrugs, “Dead ass. I mean, I was serious then, I’m serious now. When are you gonna send it in?”

“Fuck you,” Lela bites out, her teeth sharp as she pulled her face into a snarl once more.

Quirking up his own brow, Tony says, “Not really what you say to a possible employer, but never let it be said that I’m not a sucker for individuality.”

Bruce can’t help himself, the disbelieving laugh he issues feels kind of like it was punched out of him. He shakes his head as he takes two more steps back from the situation. He’s just about done with it. If he can make his escape now, Bruce is pretty sure he’d get out of this unscathed.

There’s a tension in the air. A dark rumble of a storm about to break over them three. Bruce feels the hairs along his arm rise up in response. He can feel the way his instincts are screaming for him to head in the opposite direction. To get going while he still stood a chance.

Bruce doesn’t need to take a whiff of the air around them to know a fight was brewing. Tony was a stubborn obstinate jackass and Lela was an immovable mountain. This type of standoff wasn’t about to just wash away. It was an Alpha pushing and an Alpha refusing to move.

“O-okay, I think, I think we should head back now,” Bruce puts out into the air. He’s willing to leave Tony here. Let him get ripped to shreds if the man was so eager for it, but not without at least
offering the token route of the man’s possible escape.

“I’m being serious kid,” Tony continues, sounds less like he’s saying it for shits and giggles, “I know about what happened in my lobby.”

If there was a damn way for a human being—living flesh and blood—to go statue still, well Bruce was seeing it here. Lela’s whole body goes taut, like she’s coiled tight and ready to spring and sink her teeth into Tony’s neck. There’s murder in her eyes as she glares holes into the taller man’s face. when they flash over to Bruce, Bruce feels his heart drop down to his shoes. There’s an accusation in the girls eyes. A promise and a threat, a damn switch bladed gaze, that makes Bruce’s head spill to the side and a whimper stumble out of his mouth.

“Yeah?” Lela hisses out, growls, unholy and vengeful, spill out of her mouth. The darkness in them rumbling and darkening the sky above them, almost, “Which part?”

“No employee of mine attacked you, unprovoked,” Tony states, sounds every bit like the master of industry, the Hero in the iron suit then.

The accusatory stare in Lela’s eyes ebb away, if only a bit, as she bit out, “So?”

“What? What do you mean so?” Tony huffs out, sounding both confused and a bit irritated, “It was a gross breach of protocol. The man in question has been dealt with.”

“That why you offered me a job?” Lela demands, looks about as finished with the man before her as Bruce suddenly felt.

Shaking his head, Tony takes a step forward going still only when Lela met his step with one of her own, “I didn’t know about it then. But I figure, two wrongs means I gotta make a right.”

“That’s not how the saying goes,” Bruce mumbled out, can taste his own anxiety on his tongue.

“Bruce, hush,” Tony tosses over his shoulder, “So whaddya say kid? You need a job, I got one. Interested?”

It feels like years before Lela forces her own body into smooth lines. It feels like centuries of her glaring up into Tony’s face before she runs her tongue over her lips and bites out, “Pretty sure I told you the first time, I aint office work material.”

“Kid,” Tony laughs out, his shoulders loosing their own tension, if a little bit, “There’s plenty of things to do at my tower.”

And with more ease than Bruce thought possible, Tony deliberately turns his back to her and begins walking back in the opposite direction. Bruce follows because, well, because he’s not sure what else to do. It’s only when it becomes as obvious to Tony as it is to Bruce, that Lela isn’t following at all, Tony stills and calls out:

“You coming?”

Hesitation, reluctance, and clear distrust on Lela’s brown face. They sit there as if etched into her face. Bruce watches as her face twists and pulls and the girl spits ugly into the pavement at her feet and forces herself into motion. By the time she’s standing shoulder to shoulder with Tony, she’s got a cigarette pinched between her lips—lit and smoking.

Between a particularly harsh pull off her cigarette, Lela bites out, “You try ay bullshit Alpha,” she sneers the word in his direction, spits it out like an especially ugly curse, “and I’ll fucking rip your
throat out."

The clear threat makes Bruce blanch, but does little to knock the smirk off of Tony’s lips as they walk. With a laugh, Tony simply says, “Man kid, I don’t know who taught you these epic business skills of yours, but you’re already hired. You don’t have to suck up so much.”

Tony’s words are met with an especially brutal growl. A growl that has Bruce looking up to the sky and pleading with every deity he’s ever heard the name of and begging for a second chance at life in general.

*~*

Dr. Banner—Bruce—is a literal ball of breathing anxiety. He fidgets in his seat as he casts nervous glances around the room. He keeps fiddling with his glasses and tapping his fingers across his knees. Lela doesn’t remember him being so…panicky the last time she saw him. She remembers the calmness he emanated. The sheer beauty of his cool words and undaunted ability to stare the brutality that was her appearance with very little hesitation.

The man that sits before her now, across the way in what looks to be the fanciest fucking office on earth, is a far cry from that. His hair is longer, far more disheveled than she remembers. The white dress shirt he wears is lined and wrinkled, like maybe he’s worn it longer than strictly necessary. There’s a stain on his brown slacks that looks like spilled food.

She can smell his apple pie and cinnamon scent from where she sits. It’s littered in his climbing anxiety which leaves it sharp and unpleasant. She has no doubt the source of his unease is Lela herself. There’s a desperate part of her that wants to snap at the man. To get him to tone it down. To snap her teeth and get him to stop. There’s another part of her that wants to reach out, to comfort him. To let his anxiety still if only for a moment. Lela wants him to grow soft, like she remembered, to speak through calming notes and tones.

But Lela does none of that. She sits in place on her sleek black chair and refuses to bend to her stupid fucking instincts.

Instead, she bites out, “Hey doc.”

Bruce’s head snaps up, instantly alert, like he might need to fly out of his seat in a second or two, “Uh, y-yeah?”

“What’s your deal?

“Oh, my, my deal? What do you mean?” Bruce asks, his soft brown eyes are twisted up in concern behind his thick broad rimmed glasses.

Heaving out a sigh, Lela chews the inside of her cheek before kicking her legs out, “You’re like two steps away from having a fucking panic attack. What’s your deal? Last time I was here, you were cool as a fucking cucumber.”

Barking out a nervous wobbling laugh, Bruce tugs off his glasses and attempts to clean them with the edge of his shirt, “Last time I was here, I was acting as your impromptu doctor. I had to be calm. Had to stuff all my anxiety to the side. Now, I, uh—”

“Now I’m not so helpless and can sink my teeth into you without trying?” Lela’s words are meant to be sarcastic but they hit Bruce dead center. They snap the other man’s teeth together with a clacking snap.
“Uh, not entirely. I mean, you could’ve done that when you woke up. I mean, if you wanted to. Not that you didn’t want to. I mean, you probably did, you woke up after a serious procedure, in an unfamiliar place, I would understand if you had attacked me.” the gamma says with a strained smile spread across his face.

Lela doesn’t bother to offer anything like an apology or a reassurance that she wouldn’t have attacked the man. Because as much as Lela was in the throes of an approaching heat then, Lela would’ve sunk her teeth into the man’s jugular way before she ever tried to do something stupid like fuck him. Lela knows, she probably would’ve hurt him had she not managed to leave when she had. Lela was all kinds of fucked up then.

Not that she was any better now. Not really. Sobriety hadn’t really changed her that much.

When she’d realized that she was being followed and turned around to find that Alpha fuck from before and the good doctor, she’d been surprised and instantly on edge. Lela’s no stranger of being followed down back alley streets. She’s no stranger to turning around and finding sharp toothed Alpha’s or Betas. Gamma’s on the rare occasion when they were desperate enough. It’s left her with this trained sixth sense to just know when someone was dogging her heels.

The worst of her had tumbled out of her when she faced that Alpha again. Every ounce of her wanted to lunge across the way and slam her fist into his stupidly charming face. She wanted to break those stupid purple tinted glasses into his skin. To splinter the tan unblemished lines of his face. She had wanted, with everything in her, to force him back and away. Like a cornered coyote, she had snapped her teeth and left little doubt in their minds that she was a feral beast.

She’d snapped her teeth, growled low in her throat, presented herself like a threat of the worst kind. Forced Bruce back until he was throwing his hands in the air for mercy and surrender. The alpha/Tony had met her head on. He’d kept a steady gaze on her like only an Alpha could. And Lela had seen red because of it. Her hindbrain had whispered submission from it’s drug cage. Had asked her with lilting pleas, that it’d be easier to bare her throat than it would be to fight.

That scent, of orchid, of jasmine, of leather and oil had made her stomach twist tight. Paired together with Bruce’s cinnamon and warm apple pie smell, Lela had felt her limbs go soft. It was only by the will of about twenty two years of shit life, that she’d managed to keep herself face forward. She’d pushed herself harder, to be damn near impossible to approach, with every passing second on that street.

So maybe, this is why Bruce—a well meaning Gamma man—was sitting on the very edge of his seat. Because last time they had met, Bruce was a doctor treating a desperate aid seeking person. A girl that was bleeding through her jeans, reeking like pain and something far darker. Lela herself had wanted—needed—help, so she hadn’t put up such a hard wall. She’d growled at him then, but only to keep him from hurting her more, from asking questions, but not to hurt him.

Guilt forms like an ugly lump in the pit of her stomach.

Pursing her lips, Lela rips her gaze away from him and eyes the entrance to the office they’re both in. Tony, the alpha, had left them after only five minutes. He’d stepped out to get some kind of forms and hadn’t returned.

Dread had coursed rabid and wild in her on that street about an hour ago. Had made her even more of a threat of ripping into Dr. Banner’s face. Because, the alpha had claimed to know. Said he knew how Lela wound up knowing Pepper and Bruce. All of Lela’s feared had kicked up, burning like pyres of the fucking dead kings from ancient times, had made her ache for her old switch blade she’d lost. What the alpha knew, Lela didn’t know, but she fucking wanted to.
“So, doc,” Lela begins, leaning her elbows on her knees, she hunches over and pins the doctor with a hard stare, her tongue swiping out to wet her bottom lip, “How much did you spill?”

Lela doesn’t even pretend to ignore the very clear waves of aggression she’s pumping out. She needs to know what Bruce has said. Pepper had seemed so sure, knowing what Lela was so desperately trying to hide away. Maybe Bruce knew too. And that thought sits ugly in her. Makes her want to rage and punch a hole into a wall because this was way too many people. Natasha and Clint she had to accept knew. Pepper too, if only because the woman didn’t seem like the type to use it against her. She didn’t Bruce. Didn’t know the type of man he was. Couldn’t begin to trust him with information like that.

“Uh,” Bruce squirms back in his seat, his brown eyes shift from her face and over to the door rapid and fearful, “Wh-What do you mean?”

“I mean, how much did you fucking tell that Alpha of yours?” Lela bites out, savage and cruel.

“About your, uh, injuries?” Bruce half squeaks out. His adams apple bobs in his throat and a small sheen of sweat begins to shine on his forehead.

Nodding tightly, Lela continues to glare unforgivingly.

“Nothing! I, I told him you were injured when you came in and that I treated you because you.” Bruce sputters out. Looks about two shades whiter in his panic.

It’s then that Lela figures, Bruce might not actually know what Pepper has priced together. Relief has her half sagging down into herself. If only by the grace of her elbows, perched tight on her knees, does she does she not go tumbling down to the floor.

Biting back the regret she feels for treating the sweet gamma man, Lela spits out, “Good, keep it that way.

“Of course,” Bruce mumbles as he rubbed his hands over the knees of his slacks.

That regret she’s swallowing back makes her heart wrench uncomfortably in her chest. It makes her feel like the biggest shit head around. So she pulls herself back and leans back in her seat. forces her body to go casual and ease filled. And maybe because she really is the worlds biggest shit head, Lela flashes the man a smirk and asks, “Why’d you send the wonder-dicks after me doc?”

Confusion, quickly followed by understanding and then something like fear soaked worry twists up Bruce’s face until he heaves out a wobbling, “Ah, uh, Pepper was worried.”

“So you sent two assassins to make sure I didn’t die on the side of a street?”

“Uh, I guess?” the man offers her a meek strained smile.

Rolling her eyes, Lela huffs out, “Hell of a doctor you are doc.”

Laughing like maybe he’s one bad push away from imploding, Bruce nods his head which makes his curls bounce about, “Yeah, I’m not actually that kind of doctor.”

“No shit?” Lela questions, right brow quirked up.

“I spent some years treating people in third world countries, but I’m not a licensed professional, not like that. I’m actually a nuclear physicist,” Bruce confesses, a wry smile lightening his face and making the lines around his eyes crinkle.
Lela doesn’t know what that actually means. But she figures it probably means a hell of lot. So she frowns a bit and nods her head with a casual, “Good to know.”

If Bruce notices that she doesn’t actually know what he means, he doesn’t say. He simply offers her a timid little smile and nods his head. They fall into silence as they wait for the Alpha to return. The tension in the air isn’t so thick anymore. Neither is the stench of Bruce’s anxiety. Lela pretends she doesn’t feel relieved by that fact.

*~*

Tony is quiet as he works on the tablet before him. He ignores the quiet suspicious glances Margarette—his 65+ secretary—sends him. She’s not even bothering to hide the way she’s not at all working and is clearly watching him. Her light green eyes cataloging every fast type of his nimble fingers.

“No one here by that name,” he sing songs, his eyes never leaving his tablet.

Margarette has been a Stark employee since Tony was old enough to walk. She’d worked for his fathers company at first. An office aide that had steadily risen to his fathers personal secretary. Which then became Tony’s secretary when he had decided to take the helm. She was a spite fire, the woman, built out of steel like the building they stood in. A complete and utter tyrant bundled up in soft spring colored shirts and christmas sweaters.

“Anthony,” Margarette called out, firm and unrelenting. It was a no nonsense tone Tony remembers from the brightest parts of his twisted childhood.

The tone paired together with his full name makes tony lift his head. His eyes flash to the woman easily, a purse twisting up his lips, “I’m your boss you know. I sign your paychecks every week. When I tell you to call me Tony, I mean it.”

Rolling her eyes, actually rolling them so hard Tony figures it might have hurt, Margarette waves her hand at him like he was an especially annoying fly. “The day I call you Tony is the day you smarten up and get down on your knees and make an honest person out of Pepper and that cutie-patootie in there.”

Sputtering at her words, Tony pulls down his tablet and glares, “Might I remind you that I can fire you?”

“So then do it,” Margarette snapped back. Her delicate wrinkling hands firmly placed on her desk like she was daring him to even try.

Tony totally could fire her. He’s fired loads of people. He’s done it nicely and not so nicely. He’s made a joke of it and been civil about it too. He knows how to terminate employment with utter ease. so he could, in theory. But he won’t, can’t.

Taking his tongue, Tony flashing a look around his secretaries office and deems the coast clear, “Pretty sure marriage is the last thing on either of their minds right now.”

Which wasn’t a lie, though it kind of felt like a cop out. Tony could’ve proposed any number of times to Pepper and Bruce. Both of them respectively. But things were different now. Neither of them wanted him like they did in the past. they barely had any pack bonds left. And Tony was trying to come to terms with the fact that he had a great big hand in severing them.
Tony may want—desperately—to mend the broken edges of what were the two biggest relationships he’d ever had. But Tony couldn’t. Bogged down by the something that was entirely self destructive.

“Please tell me you apologized?” Margaretté demands of him, when Tony says nothing she gapes at him and tosses a pink pen in his direction, “Oh, you pig headed idiot!”

“Margie!” Tony bit out as he dodged the object flung at him, “I told you these things take time!”

“Lord Mary and Joseph, I’im going to die by the time you get to wisening up!” Margaretté cried, her eyes pointed heavenward, “If I was either of them, I would’ve kicked your ass a long time ago!”

Putting a hand to his chest, Tony exclaims, “Language young lady!”

Twisting her face up, Margaretté tells him, “Oh be quiet, do you hear the filth that comes out of your mouth sometimes? I go every day to confessional just listening to you. I get sin by proxy!”

Barking out a genuine laugh, Tony smiles bright and happy, “Margie, are you saying I’m a bad influence?”

“I’m saying, my church is running out of candles for me to light for you and I’m getting tired of saying my hail mary’s for you,” Margaretté griped, a smile tipping her pink lips up and lighting up her face.

Tony remembers the first time he’d ever seen Margaretté—‘Call me Margie sweetie’—back when he was a kid. All wide eyed and barely able to reach the length of her hip. She’d looked after Tony whenever he was forced to come to his father’s workplace. Kept him well fed and entertained when he was left alone in empty rooms for far longer than you were supposed to leave a kid in. She always remembered to wave to him goodbye and when no one remembered his 12th birthday—all too busy looking at his father’s newest glistening invention—Margie was the one who took him out to Coney Island.

She’d been beautiful then. Though Tony’s mother hadn’t thought so. His mother had called Margie’s face mousy. She’d said it like it was a bad thing. His mother had stated that a Gamma girl with gapped teeth and short stubby legs wasn’t likely to have decent kinds of suitors lining up at her door. But Tony never thought so. Tony had loved the way Margie’s face lit up every time she smiled and threw her head back and laughed. Tony had instantly adored the way her nose had crinkled up and she snorted out her laughter. Tony had loved the way her hands, boney and long, had held him tight when he had gotten a fever and had been forced to wait for his parents big important gala to end.

Tony loved it then and he loved it now. Far more than he had ever loved his mother’s glaring eyes and his father’s absent stares. Far more than he loved the way his father’s hand had fisted in his shirt and the way his mother’s hands felt cold like ice when they had smacked across his face.

Tony didn’t have much a family, had more memories of nameless nannies than he did of his own parents, but he figures Margie was family to him since, well, since he met her. She had, after all, stuck around when everyone else had fallen away. Kept his head above water when all he had wanted to do was drown in the misery of it. Margie was family, Tony’s only family, that stuck to his side for better or worse.

For all that she’s aged, couldn’t understand half of what the company was distributing these days, Tony only saw beauty in her lined face. It was why he would never fire her and why he refused to let her retire every time she complained that the company had outgrown her.

Just last week, she’d learned that an automated system—Tony’s cellphone app—could quite literally
do her entire job. Tony had bought the app out and discreetly relabeled it and never let anyone mention the damnable thing anywhere near Margie. Because the Gamma Girl was going to stay there, at her desk, until Tony faded into nonexistence.

He was just…never going to tell her that to her face.

“I’m the best kind of influence,” Tony announces with surety and confidence. He was after all a multibillionaire with the literal world at his finger tips. People actually paid for his advice with cold hard cash.

“You’re an arrogant ass,” Margie grumbled under her breath as she tidied up her knick knack laden desk. The whole surface of her desk and shelves that lined the wall were filled with strange and colorful odds and ends. Cliche little toys that had no business in a fortune five hundred building.

But they were things Tony had picked up for her every time he flew around the world, saving it in his Iron Man suit, and brought back for her. A trinket from a part of the world Margie had never so much as heard. A quiet kind of warmth slips through Tony’s stomach and up his heart. As ugly and cliche as they were, Margie always found space for them. Never threw any of them away even if some of them were entirely inappropriate for the work place. she just dusted off a new spot and put it front and center.

Tony idly reminds himself, he has to call someone up to install more shelves by the end of the week. Margie was running out of space again.

“What are you doing out here when you have guests in your office?” Margie asks, her eyes full of suspicion.

Picking up his tablet, Tony sets himself back to the task at hand, “I’m working.”

“On what exactly?” Margie demands.

“I’m pretty sure I already covered this once before. I’m the boss so I’m doing boss related business.”

“You look like you’re up to no good.”

Sighing, put upon and dramatic, Tony sends her a sly smile, “That’s just my regular face Margie.”

Humming, Margie goes to say something else but her phone rings. With a purse to her lips, she answers and the pause allows Tony to finish up what he was doing.

With a triumphant little noise at the back of his throat, he closes his tablet and folds it back into it’s compact form. It slips easily into the back of his jean pocket with ease. Grinning, he heads for his office door and calls out, “Margie be a dear, hold all my calls.”

“All of them?” the woman asks, dark blonde brow arched. Suspicion flying high across her aging features.

“Yes, all of them. Tell anybody that calls I’m in a meeting. A very important meeting.”

Clicking her tongue, Margie shakes her head, which in turn makes her head of dark strawberry blonde curls bounce, “You are trouble Anthony, a literal devil in pressed jeans and shiny shoes.”

Pushing open his door he laughs out, “I’m a saint! I save people Margie!”

Whatever Margie says is lost when he closes the door firmly. Tony has no doubt in his mind he’s
going to pay for the action in badly brewed coffee for about a full week. But Tony was a sucker for instant gratification. He’d take the cookie now please, dammit.

Spinning on his heel, Tony smiles wide and happy at the two people who sit in his office. Tony pretends like he can’t smell the sharp vinegar stench of Bruce’s fear and anxiety that seems trapped in the air. There’s also the burn of something like a brush fire smoke hanging in the air too. The girl’s—Lela—anger had bled out of her again. Burned a hole clear into the air and settled in deep. Tony knows it’ll take a good hard passing by the night crew to clear the smell out. But he doesn’t make any indication that he smells it at all.

Grinning wide, Tony drops into his desk chair and presses the buttons on the screen that made up his desk. In a flash of bright blue lights. A hologram comes to life and displays the Stark logo. The one Pepper had so long ago designed. In less than seven seconds, Tony pulls up the thing he’d been working over in Margie’s office.

It’s a long compiled list of every available job in Stark industries. A list that hadn’t exactly existed since just right now.

“So kid,” Tony starts, moving around pieces bathed in blue light, “What are you interested in?”

“What kinda jobs you got?” the girl asks. She’s lounging back in her seat. All splayed legs and aggressive energy.

Everything about her, from the downward tilt of her pouty dark lips to the scuff of her shit kicker boots, screams mayhem. Tony had only been half joking when he’d offered her a job back when he first laid eyes on her. An opening he had pounced on because he was nothing if not opportunistic. When both he and Bruce had been confronted on that street corner, Tony had fallen back because he remembered that video.

The one that showed the carnage that was her face, her neck, her fucking eyes, when she’d come in. By the very grace of Jarvis had Tony not managed to fly into an Alpha rage over it. That someone, so clearly a victim to a goddamn assault so brutal, had come to his building seeking help and had been attacked? It had made Tony growl wild and unhinged. It had made him dig through every bit of information Tony could legally, and illegally, obtain on his ex-employee. tony felt not on ounce of sympathy when he’d put an end to that man’s attempt to become a corrections officer in an all female detention center.

The offer he had given on that street corner was far more genuine than the previous one. And maybe that’s why the kid agrees. Because she saw in his eyes the sincerity of it.

“I got all kinds of positions open,” Tony admits, because he did, he’d made at least four hundred and something new positions available or just plain made up, “You have any degrees?”

“Don’t even got a high school diploma,” Lela admits with a scoff.

Flashing his gaze off the screen in front of him, tony frowns, “What? Why?”

“Because I dropped out,” Lela states easily, her tone dry and hard. As if growing defensive for what might come out of Tony’s mouth next.

“You know, there’s tons of programs out there that can help you get one, some are pretty much free,” Tony offers off handedly, seems to see the misstep he makes almost instantly the moment those dark black eyes narrow on his face. Clicking his tongue, Tony shifts his attention back to the moving screen in front of him, he eliminates almost half of the list entirely and says, “What kind of work
laughing, dark and vicious, Lela swipes an ugly glance to Bruce before announcing, “Not the kind you’d want.”

Confused, Tony looks at her and asks, “I’m sorry?”

“Since about the time I turned nineteen I’ve been a hooker,” she tells him with a tight jaw. Her eyes daring him to say one single word about. to give her a reason to knock his teeth into the bottom of his stomach.

Obviously, Tony says nothing on the matter. Just nods his head and fiddles with his screen before saying, “Heads up.”

And with a flick of his hand, the screen goes spinning in Lela’s direction. It stills just at her lap as the girl reels back in surprise an a hot flash of fear. When the lit up hologram of lights sits still she sends him a murderous glower. Tony merely sends her an innocent little smile.

“What the fuck do I do with this shit?” Lela asked, her dark brows pinched.

Twirling his finger in a circular motion, Tony tells her, “Scroll through it, pick out whatever catches your eye.”

A very dubious expression falls on Lela’s small angular face. It makes her large doe shaped eyes grow slant—like a panthers—as they sat high on her cheekbones. A small little wrinkle forms on her forehead as she raised up a small right hand and began to fiddle with the hologram. She moves through the list slowly, her eyes running over the bright blue letters like she’s trying to piece the words together.

There’s a worry, in the back of Tony’s mind over exactly how much schooling the girl might have. He wonders if maybe he should have edited the list a little bit more, taken out more than he had. His eyes flash over to Bruce who sits nervously fiddling with the frayed edge of his left cuff. Bruce hasn’t said a word since Tony’s entered. But Tony just had to look at the Gamma’s face to know exactly what was running through his mind.

Bruce was concerned.

Worried to the bone for everyone involved in Tony’s split second decision to do this.

Tony could see it in his stress lined face. Tony could see it in the sharpness of his cheekbones. Tony saw it in the beauty that was his rugged square jaw. Tony could see in the way his plump pink lips twisted down. Tony could see it in the way Bruce’s scruff was beginning to grow out, dark and rough on his face.

Tony looses himself in looking. In noticing the differences between the Bruce he see’s now and the Bruce he’d first met. The way Bruce had changed with the stress of having been on the run from government agencies. There were lines on his face now that aged him and showed all of his short 33 years of life have been hard and ragged. They are lines, Tony knows, he himself must have put there himself.

“This one,” Lela gruffly announces, her deep voice breaking Tony from his thoughts.

Only when Lela has clicked the listed position does Tony bring it back to himself with a click of a button. It spreads out on the surface of his desk and blinks up at him. Surprise makes his eyes widen as he asked, “Are you sure?”
“A job’s a job,” the girl roughly states, yet another challenge in her voice as she begged Tony to 
argue with her.

Pinching his lips together between his teeth, Tony nods his head and bites back whatever comment 
he might have said to that on any given day. After a brief pause, where he’s tapping his foot beneath 
his desk, Tony nods firmly and pulls up all the necessary forms the girl would need to get signed to 
be a permanent employee at Stark industries.

The word custodian blink up at him with a slight glare. But Tony figures, the kids right, a jobs a job. 
And he figures, if he’s ever going to uncover whatever it is she’s hiding underneath that insane growl 
or hers—where she lets him in close enough—it’s going to be like this.

Like he said before, he was nothing if not opportunistic.

---

Chapter End Notes

Oh Bruce, I want to cuddle you close and keep you nice and warm and cuddly. Lela was so mean to him!!!!! I wanted to whine and complain at her!!!! He didn't deserve it!!!!! He deserves love and peace and goddamn snuggles!!!!!!!

Tony. tony tony tony tony, it was an adventure trying to write him. Love him.

Okay, so we're moving on to employment!!!! Holy shit!!! This chapter came literally out of left field for me. I was sitting here answering comments and it just basically wrote itself. Which I'm so happy for. Honestly. This fic is so much easier to write now that Sam talked some sense into Lela. I promised him another chapter because he damn well deserves it.

Okay, so I know in the movies, Tony like loved his parents, and they might have been loving folks. But for this Fic, not so much. I don't know why, but it kinda just went there. Which I'm not going to fight because it might just help with Tony trying to forgive Bucky, maybe. Idk. sometimes this thing has a mind of it's own you guys.

And Margarette? Totally made up but I would literally die for her. The thought of Tony caring about an older lady makes me smile. So there it is. Not going to change it. Plan on making her Tony's wayward conscious that kicks his ass into gear when he decides to be a prick about anything.

Hope you guys liked it. Spent like zero time editing it because I just didn't feel like hacking at it. I like it the way it is and it's well past my bedtime you guys.

As always, thank you beautiful people so much for reading and commenting!!!
Hope you guys leave some love down below!!!
I love hearing from you guys and love answering!!!!
-Ani
(PS. I think I use the word literally way too much. I keep reading it in my chapters and it's seriously pissing me off. So I'm avoiding reading through my chapters because I hate looking at it. Anyway, GOODNIGHT!!!)

(PPS. I don't know science stuff, so I'm making stuff up on the literal fly.)

(P-PPS. there's that damned word again!!!)
Chapter Summary

She doesn’t know why it strikes her down deep in her chest, rattles her, sinks into her like a hot from the dryer hoodie, cradling her around her shoulders, but it does. She feels it like she’s wearing some kind of cape over her back. The feeling resonating in the way something strange wraps itself around her heart and sits light as air but as hot as an ember. It curls up delicate and painless, ignoring the silk ribbon and the steel bands she’s got. It makes itself at home in her chest and refuses to budge.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s only when Tony leads her down to the proper level and office that would be handling her employment, is Lela hit with the strange reality of the situation. It’s only as she’s getting handed a freshly printed badge, her finger prints being scanned and her information logged away, that Lela starts to think this might not have been the smartest decision to make. It’s only when she’s being introduced to Mr. Owens, the official branch head, does Lela remember that both Natasha and Clint might not totally be on board with what she’s just spent hours signing herself up to.

It’s only when she’s being handed at least six different uniforms all a dark set of navy blue, does Lela regret fighting for Wonder-Dick-less times. She’s always been shit at making decisions.

Lela has precisely zero reasons to trust this Alpha man. To believe his intentions were as pure as he was pretending they were. Lela shouldn’t trust him. She shouldn’t have been so fast to make a decision. But, she’d been caught up in the way that man spoke. The sincerity that sat beneath the bright eyed gleam of his. For as much as the Alpha practically oozed confidence and arrogance, there was a delicate softness to him. A strange vulnerability that softened him around the edges.

The sight of it, like it had back at that shitty ass restaurant, had made Lela act before she could think. She’d gone along with the Alpha, followed him back to his Tower, and sat in his office. Lela had hardly put up a fight when presented with the fucked up light show that he threw in her face. She’d scrolled through the list, read off what she could understand—half the shit were job titles she didn’t know existed—and picked the simplest one she could find.

In the end, that had been a mistake too. Lela was pretty sure she saw a listing on that strange light show called ‘pencil sharpener’. Lela’s not entirely sure what kind of job that was either, but, she figures it might’ve been a safer bet.

It probably wouldn’t have involved a stuck up Gamma looking old man. The kind with a long nose and beady eyes. The kind of Gamma man that Lela just knew—with a single glance—that the man
believed in the order of the dynamic with his heart and fucking soul. Lela could feel it in the way he looked down his nose at her. The way he’d snubbed her the moment she walked in—about three or so minutes before Tony could follow her in—and had informed her, like the rude prick he was, that she wasn’t cut out to be working in this building.

Lelas not all too sure what it was, if it was her growl—wild and dangerous as it was—or the sharp toothed grin Tony came in wearing—but something makes the Gamma quickly back track. He smiles wide and nervous as he scrambled to rearranged his entire life so that the Alpha in his office was accommodated.

If Lela is obvious in her dislike of the man, she doesn’t bother to show any inclination that she’s sorry over it. She keeps a dark scowl on her face as she was handed all that she was needed. She kept her teeth long on the off chance that Mr. Owens decided he wanted to sending her that disdain filled glance again.

“Claire will be in charge of showing you around and training you,” Mr. Owens tells her, looking nervous as his blue eyes flashed over to Tony standing at the entrance of his neat and tidy little office “We’ll work you into our schedule as soon as we’re able. Are you familiar with what the job entails?”

“I mean, yeah. Like you guys clean shit, right?” Lela gruffly asks, bites out her words as she fiddled with an unlit cigarette between her fingers.

Lela might not actually have shit down on paper, but she does have job experience, or at least something like it. When was a kid, probably around five or six, her mother had gotten a job at some little family owned cleaning business. Her mother used to run all over the richest part of their neighboring cities cleaning fancy houses up close enough to see the beach but not mingle with the tourists. When summer let out, Lela was brought along for the ride.

So, Lela figures, she’s been on her knees for a lot longer than a measly couple of years then. Though, certainly for different purposes. After all, only way to really scrub away years of grime off of base molding was to really put your back into it. And the only way to earn those fucking twenty bucks was to put her back into it too. She’s kind of hoping this isn’t the type of job to make her get down again.

Lela’s knee’s are scarring over at this point. Just like the rest of her.

Sucking in a breath, Mr. Owens eyes flash over to Tony all wide eyed and concerned, “Uh yes, we do. I mean, that is to say, that it isn’t the full extent of our duties. We’ll go over that some time later though. For now, I should warn you that we don’t actually use that kind of language here you lady.”

Something in Lela slithers tight beneath her skin. Makes her feel like she’s about to burn up and explode. Her skin stretches tight like she’s about to burst right through and unleash a dangerous kind of death. Like a goddamn volcano.

Lips spread wide, Lela’s tongue slips out to the right hand corner of her lips, swiping the whole of her bottom lip in one go. Through a mouth full a fangs, Lela smiles wide as she asks, “What kind of language would that be?”

Mr. Owens’ face twists up ugly and mean as he sent her a sneering glare. “Language like that, isn’t entirely professional. It’s uneducated.”

Now, Lela’s never been all that uncomfortable with the fact that she is essentially a high school drop out. She left when she presented and that was that. It had been, in the end, to keep her second nature
hidden. To avoid it being put down on paper what she really was. So she didn’t mind leaving behind the few bits of friends she had and putting an end to whatever education she was receiving.

At fifteen years old, Lela picked up what jobs were thrown her way and stole books off the shelves of her local library. She can read well enough alone, always could, it’s shit like intricate math and shit like that, that she’s got problems with.

She’s never been sure that the difference between a simile or a metaphor was. She couldn’t tell you the order of the planets because she just never actually got around the learning them in the first place. She couldn’t tell you what kind of things made up the periodic table because she didn’t exactly understand what the periodic table was.

It doesn’t bother her, not really. Lela knows what she doesn’t know in book smarts she makes up with a hell of a lot of life experience. She knows exactly how to shimmy a window open so the house alarm doesn’t go off. She knows which wires to cross on cars to boost them. She also knew which cars didn’t need to wires and just a sharp electrical shock to get them going. Lela knew how to grab snow and cut enough to last her months and sell on the side. Lela knew just how to get around places without drawing attention.

She might not be educated, not in the way the world deemed proper and necessary, but Lela knew enough.

So, no, it doesn’t really bother her that she’s got shit for her name. What bothers her is the way people look down their fucking noses at her. The way something like pity and contempt. Like she’s inferior to them on that fact alone. It reminds Lela that everything about her, from her missing education to her damnable DNA, was deemed fucking lesser.

That’s where Lela’s anger comes from. From the knowledge that everything from the way she breathed to the way she fucking spoke, was just less. Everything in her boils up, turns to red hot fires, embers kicking up into the air of her lungs. A vicious kind of anger swirls up her throat until Lela can taste it’s acidic tang on her tongue.

Ignoring all the fury she’s burning up with, Lela turns to face the alpha she now worked for and bit out as carefully calm as she could, “Hey dickhead.”

“Yes dear?” Tony sing singed as he grinned at her stepping in from the open door of Mr. Owens office. The bright smile the man wears across his face makes his big brown eyes twinkle like they’re loaded in mischief.

It washes away the years of stress that lined his face whenever he frowned. Made him look younger, lighter, far more charming. Lela stubbornly ignores that thought.

It washes away the years of stress that lined his face whenever he frowned. Made him look younger, lighter, far more charming. Lela stubbornly ignores that thought.

Ignoring all the fury she’s burning up with, Lela turns to face the alpha she now worked for and bit out as carefully calm as she could, “Hey dickhead.”

“Can’t cuss here at your place?” Lela demands of him.

Twisting up his face in mock concentration, Tony wobbles his head in a ‘so and so’ manner before telling her, “I mean, no, not really. We’re not really running a sailors dive here. Keep it PG-13 and I think we’ll be good.”

Huffing out a dramatic breath, Lela turns to look Mr. Owens straight in his beady little eyes and says with as much conviction as she can muster, “Well, fuck me in the ass with a huge donkey dick. That fucking blows!”

Mr. Owens chokes on an intake of breath as his blue eyes grew wide. He looks like he wants the ground below him to swallow her up as he turned fearful eyes over to the Alpha at the door. She can
hear Tony’s laughter—deep throaty and half giddy—from where he stands. Lela doesn’t bother to offer the man in front of her—possibly her manager of sorts—any kind of apologetic look. She just takes whatever else is in his hands and grins wide and mean before she left his office. If there was a way to kill someone through gaze alone, Lela would love to learn how.

Natasha probably knew how, Lela was willing to beg for the knowledge. But she figures after today, Natasha was likely going to passive aggressively murder her with healthy shakes. Clicking her tongue, Lela bundles tight the uniforms in her arms and presses the down arrow for the elevator.

“Oh my god!” Tony laughs out, his grin wide and shit-eating. He’s still snickering by the time he reaches her, “Kid, seriously! Too much!”

When the elevator doors open, Lela tells the alpha, “That dudes got the biggest stick up his ass.”

Snickering, Tony nods his head and wipes at his left eye, “You sure it’s not a, how’d you put it? A huge donkey dick?”

“I mean maybe. White old men have weird ass kinks man,” Lela sighs out, speaking from personal experience. She knows way more than she’d like on the subject, “Looks like a total fucking dick.”

Her words earn her another laugh before Tony gets a small twisted pinch on his forehead. Like he’s just remembered something he didn’t know he’d forgotten. Like he was biting into a lemon that was far more sour the second bite in. As Tony pushes the lobby floor button, he tilts his head down to look at her and asks:

“So, an escort huh?”

Now this, unlike the high school dropout thing, Lela did have a problem with it. Lela knows it’s stupid, to feel any type of way about it. Just like the school thing, she’d done what she had to do to keep her shit concealed. But Lela hates it. Hates that she went down that route, stayed in it for so long. Didn’t bother to get herself out of it. Just let it roll over her and drag her down.

Self hate and disgust swirl until they become one. They sit hard on her shoulders, whisper black little words into her ear until she’s slipping back into old habits. She wields the sharp ends of that statement back at Tony, hopes to slice into him like they’ve cut into her.

“Nope,” Lela feels the way her shoulder grow tight. She’s not ashamed, well, maybe a little. And by a little she means a lot. She’s done with her life what she’s done. She hates herself for fucking going down that road in the first place. Hates herself more than she’s willing to ever admit out loud. But it’s a fact of life, of her life, she had been what she had been. She’d done what she had done.

Couldn’t scrub it out of her flesh with an iron brillo pad. She can feel it still caking her over. Suffocating her with her sober mind making the memories vivid and in color.

“Escorts are fancy bitches,” Lela gruffly says as she rearranged the bundle in her arms, it’d have been nice if that prick had given her some kind of bag to carry this shit in. It was a lot. She’ll be surprised if she doesn’t drop it on her way back to the hotel, “I was your run of the mill hooker. Sat on street corners all night.”

“Oh,” Tony says lightly. It doesn’t sound like there’s any kind of judgment in his tone at all. He doesn’t smell like displeasure either. It doesn’t waft up in the shared space around them. He just absorbs the information given to him. Mulls it over with his sharp eyes.

And maybe because, Lela kind of feels like she’s scratching at a barely healing wound, she goes on to tell him, “That gonna be a problem?”
Shrugging his broad shoulders, the Alpha at her right frowns before telling her, “Not from me. We’ve all got a past kid.”

Lela goes on to say something, she’s not entirely sure what, but the elevator doors sliding open still her. She goes quiet as the Alpha steps out and she follows. The lobby is as busy as Lela has come to expect it. Drove of people filing in and slipping out. Sharp dressed women and pressed looking slacks on men. All of them wearing some variation of an employee badge Lela held in her back pocket now. The large crowd unnerves her. She feels the difference between how she’s dressed, who she is, her station in fucking life, more so now than ever.

It’s only when she stills beside Tony that she realizes she’s followed him to the large front desk.

“Hey Adrian,” Tony calls out, happy and easy as he tapped a sporadic beat onto the counter top, “How’s it going in main central.”

Nervously, a gamma man smiles. His deep set eyes pinching and glittering as his young face lit up, “Pretty good Mr. Stark! How are you today?”

“Pretty good, can’t complain,” Tony announces easily and then motions with his head, “This is Lela, she’s a new hire.”

“Oh!” Adrian issues a little surprised noise before his eyes flash over to Lela and confusion sits in his eyes. For a beat, he says nothing, his dark brown eyes roving over her face for a second before he smiled wide and said, “Well, welcome to Stark Industries!”

For her part, Lela doesn’t say anything. She grunts out a noise but doesn’t offer any kind of greeting. She just stands, awkwardly, at Tony’s side waiting for whatever this was to end.

“Can you hand me a goodie bag?” Tony asks of the greeter.

As fast as humanly possible, Adrian pulls out a large deep gray tote bag, the word Stark largely emboldened in black letters on both sides. It rustles like it’s already full to bursting, But Adrian hands it over. His long lean arms holding it out for Tony to take it up.

With a smile, Tony grabs hold of it and spins so he’s facing Lela. Dipping his hands into the bag, the alpha rummages as he speaks, “Okay, lets see what we got here. Okay, so there’s a coffee mug, a thermos, a cap, your average promotional hoodie, a tablet, and some promotional Iron Man stickers.”

“Iron Man stickers?” Lela questions as she dumped her bundle into the open tote bag, “Why the fuck are you giving away Ironman stickers?”

Quizzically, Tony stares at her and asks, “I mean, because how else am I supposed to self promote?”

And it’s a pretty weird statement, but Lela just shrugs it off. Labels it yet another one of those things that would make sense if maybe she’d have stayed longer in a classroom. Grabbing the bag out of the alphas hands, she turns to head out the front doors. She’s already got a ‘see ya’ lining her tongue and an aching need to smoke building up in her chest. But then the alpha asks:

“Hey kid?”

“Yeah?” she stills in her step, looks at the man with as much suspicion as she can conjure up at the moment.

Face twisted up, the alpha asks like he can’t believe he’s even in the position to do so, “Do you know who I am?”
“Yeah,” Lela tells him, even if the answer is quite the opposite, “You’re the dumbfuck who followed me around the streets and hired me.”

“No, yeah, but do you know who I am right? You’re kinda standing in my building right now,” Tony states, waves his hand around to emphasize the whole of the room around him.

Face pulled up in her confusion, Lela goes, “Thought this was Peppers building?”

“Ha, yeah, I guess it kind of is. But, like, do you know who I am? Right?” he asks again, his brows climbing up into his face like he can’t believe he’s gotta ask twice now.

Frowning, Lela shakes her head, “Not really, no. Why? Are you like some hot shit or something?”

Barking out a laugh, Tony runs a hand through his dark black hair, the muscles in his lean arm flex and bulge under the material of his maroon shirt. He laughs, unbelieving, before he nods his head, “A bit, yeah.”

Quirking up a dark brow, Lela merely tells him as she starts her walk out, “Good to know.”

“Your day starts at 8, don’t be late!” Tony shouts out, happy and laughing.

Lela says nothing to that, simply flips him the bird over her shoulder and heads out.

*~*

Now, Lela’s not hiding. She refuses to admit that even if it is true. She’s dreading having to walk into the suite and admiring her less than stellar decision making. To tell Natasha or Clint what she’s gotten herself into. Especially, because it’ll be a cold day in hell if she can manage to slip in unnoticed with the bulging bag beneath her arm.

So Lela’s not hiding. Only she fucking is.

She’s got anxiety clogging up her veins. Something like fear twirling up her guts into ugly double twisted knots. She can barely think, her hands shake and she’s thinking about maybe hurling or running. It’s a state of mind she hasn’t felt in a good long while.

It reminds her of the times she had to come home to her mother. The fear of not knowing if she was going to walk into a calm house or her own personal type of hell. It reminds her that sometimes, no matter how sweet someone could smile, there was always some type of pain just waiting to eat her up.

Natasha and Clint weren’t anything like her mother, though. Lela knows that. They don’t get high on meth and drown their pain in booze. She knows that. But Lela doesn’t know how they’ll react when she comes back to the suite with news that she’s picked up a job with someone they both clearly do not like. A person they were going toe to toe with at a fancy restaurant over something Lela did not know or begin to understand.

It’s that fear, caught up in the black taloned clutches of it, that Lela feels small and helpless again.

Like a child waiting for the sword to fall onto her damn neck again. No amount of gritting her teeth, of balling up tight her fists, makes it go away. Her heart keeps hammering in her chest. Anxiety keeps getting pumped into her whole body. She feels like maybe if she pushed it into her fists and cracked them against someone it’d go away. She feels like maybe if she got something, downers, tar or something, it’d fade away some.
And it’s with that thought, that she half sprints to the nearest payphone. She’s got her shitty torn up pleather wallet out, digging through what little sits in it to pull out a piece of paper she’s worn to bits. The scrawl of letters and numbers is easy enough to read though. And so when she grabs onto it, puts the change into the phone, she dials.

Sam picks up on the third ring. His voice spilling out confused and familiar:

“Lo?”

“Hey,” Lela starts, feels like shit all over again for calling, even if the man always told her she was more than welcomed to. Feels like she’s encroaching on a strangers time and life, “it’s Lela.”

“Oh! Hey, how you been?” Sam asks, sounds bright and chipper now that the confusion has been washed away.

Confusion over having a payphone number popping up on his cell, probably.

“Uh, pretty good,” Lela lies as she glared at a Beta man huffing angrily at her slow pace at the phone. She flashes her fangs at him, takes a step closer and forcing him back. The cord to the phone stretches and puts her at a weird little angle, but the look on the Beta man’s face is worth it. He scurries away with a yelp and a curse flung at her.

Licking her dry lips, Lela asks, “You busy?”

“No, not really, just here at home. Why? Did you wanna meet up? Talk?” Sam asks, sounds like he’s got no issues at all meeting up—with an admitted recovering hooker—out of the damn blue.

Biting back the bitter guilty nausea that always accompanied calling Sam, Lela nods her head and gruffly tells him, “As long as you’re not busy.”

She hates the thought of putting the Beta man out. Of puling him away from some other person that might need his help more than her.

“Nah, it’s all good kid. Usual spot?” Sam questions over the static of the phone call.

Chewing on the inside of her cheek, Lela says, “Yeah.”

“Okay, I’m on my way. Be there in less than 30 minutes.”

“Kay.” Lela says before she hangs up the phone.

For a beat or two, she stands at the payphone, listens to her change get dumped out and the sound of people moving around her. She licks her lips again as she feels her heart hammer in her chest. Sweat lines her palms and the longer she sits still—staring at the grimy payphone—the more she thinks she shouldn’t have called Sam.

Sam never seemed or smelled like Lela calling him out to talk was bothering him. He always smiled, always thanked her for calling. Always told her it took a hell of a lot of courage to pick up the phone and reach out when all she wanted to do was drown. Sam never implied Lela shouldn’t ever call. He just smiled and asked what was on her mind.

Straightening the lines of her shoulders, Lela scoops back up her bag and heads for the spot that Sam called their spot. She has to walk the whole way there, considering she’s got shit for cash. Which wasn’t for lack of trying on Clint and Natasha’s end of things. Lela kept finding neatly folded bills in pockets she knew damn well should’ve been empty. It bothered her way more than she’d thought,
receiving free money.

Having all her shit paid for, it sat wrong with Lela. Felt like one of these days it was going to be picked up and slapped across her face. Or used against her. Not that Clint and Natasha were the type, they didn’t look it, but Lela’s been through enough bullshit to assume anything out of anyone.

Hence the job. She needs one and this one didn’t mind that she didn’t have all the necessary documentation needed for one. Tony had merely nodded when she’d turned over half filled out forms. He’d accepted her excuse of not knowing her social, of not having an ID, or a dynamic registration card. He just filed it away and hired her regardless. Didn’t seem to care just as long as she was willing to work.

It takes her longer than thirty minutes for her to reach the little park in Harlem. ‘It’s an art park’ Sam had told her with a smile as they’d listened to some jazz musician wailing away at his saxophone. By the time she rolls up, Sam’s already seated in the little picnic table under some trees. He wears a big bright smile when he catches sight of her. Rising up to his feet he waves her over like maybe Lela didn’t see him in his bright sunflower yellow tee.

“Hey!” Sam calls out to her once she’s close enough. His bright face light up against the brilliant green foliage that surrounded him. He waves at the other side of the table, welcomes her to sit like maybe Lela’s about to bolt.

Which isn’t entirely an unfounded suspicion, Lela guesses. She can feel the way apprehension sits on her shoulders and pulls at her face. Guilt lines the whole of her body at this point. Seeps in deep into her bones till she can feel it.

It washes away a bit the moment the scent of him welcomes her. Cool waves of lilac and warm tones of honey clash and pull at her, pull her in like she was sinking into a warm hug. The musk of his oak wood smell reminds her of nights she spent deep in the woods of her home town. surrounded by the cool night air, the cicadas and the heavy unblocked moon. As much as she didn’t think she should, Lela likes the scent. It welcomes her as warmly as the man it belonged to.

“Sorry to call you out, again,” the words slip out immediately as she drops into the seat. Her feet are aching. Tossing the bag next to her, she pushes her elbows onto the top of the table.

With a sunny bright smile, Sam waves away her apology—like he always did—and tells her, “I told you, call when you need me to and I’ll come.”

“Yeah, but this is, like,” Lela tries to think of the number, finds herself unable to recall the exact number of times she’s forced Sam to come out on her whim. Lela knows it’s got to be at least four or so times now. And the thought of that forms a lead rock in her belly, “Ya sure ya don’t got better shit to do than listen to me fuckin’ whine an’ complain?”

Huffing out a laugh, Sam shakes his head as he slides towards her an unopened can of coke. Somewhere along the way he picked up on her side addiction. If she wasn’t smoking, she was drinking that dark liquid. Lela knew if push came to shove, she could go whole days with only smoke in her lungs and soda in her belly. Sometimes, she skipped meals and fell back to that unhealthy habit.

When that happened, Natasha wasn’t the only one trying to stuff some kind of food down her throat. Clint’s mother-hen routine was harder to dodge on account of his viciously adorable puppy dog eyes.

“Told you, I don’t mind.”
Popping the crisp tab, Lela frowns, “Ya sure?”

“Kid,” Sam starts, levels her with a look she was becoming familiar with that meant, don’t, “If I minded, I woulda just told you.”

“But, don’tcha got, like, a job or some shit?” Lela argues, taking a careful sip and dragging her tongue over her lips to chase the flavor, “It’s like three o’clock on a wednesday?”

“I got a pretty lenient arraignment with my boss,” Sam scrunches up his nose as he drank from his own unsweetened tea. When silence drops for a beat, Sam picks it up with, “So, what’s on your mind Lela?”

Rolling her lips between her teeth, Lela offers a single shoulder shrug and pulls her gaze off his face and down to the bag at her right hip. It looks far more harmless than a guilty object should. She’d prefer it if the tote bag had some kind of vulgar word spray painted across it. Lela would feel worlds better if it held some kind of spikes or some crazy shit like that. Because sitting as it was, innocent and unassuming, it didn’t look like how it was making her feel.

“Got a job,” Lela informs the Beta man. Keeps her gaze on the bag for a few seconds longer before looking up at him.

A strange type of emotion flutters across Sam’s handsome features as his brows inch up his forehead. He wears a small smile as he asks, “Oh yeah? When?”

“Today,” Lela doesn’t tell him how out of the blue it really was. She doesn’t tell him how it had all come to be. Just leaves at, “A dude my…my friends know kinda hooked me up.”

Friends, sometimes, the word still tripped over Lela’s tongue. They were her friends—the wonder-dicks—even if sometimes the word felt like it couldn’t sum up the totality of it. Of their relationship.

“What kinda job is it?” Sam questions, keeps his tone as casual as all hell. But there’s worry in his eyes. Worry that bleeds out into his scent that turns it sour around the edges.

Frowning, Lela pins him with a flat look and tells him, “It’s legit, if that’s what you’re wondering. Some swanky ass building. Some kinda hot shit important douche owns it.”

“What’re you gonna be doing?” Sam doesn’t even bother trying to hide the apprehension in his tone. The way his eyes roll over her face like he’s two seconds away from reaching over and taking her hand to steer her in the other direction, if necessary.

Lela wouldn’t even put it past the man at this point. Sam was all heart. She could see it in his eyes. The way he practically ached to offer her what he could, what she needed or wanted. And it’s strange, seeing that on someone she barely knows. Like it had been strange to see it on Pepper’s face. On Natasha’s. On Clint’s. On Bruce’s. And maybe even on Tony’s—when he wasn’t being a total asshole.

“It’s a janitor gig. So I’ll probably be mopping up floors and emptying trash cans, or some shit like that.”

“Oh,” Sam physically deflates, his whole body goes slack like he had been pulled taut and ready. Running a large dark hand over his impeccably faded hair, he smiles—bright and happy, “That’s awesome, congrats!”

“Yeah,” Lela draws out lazy and half begrudgingly. She purses her lips up before admitting, “I don’t know if it’s a good idea though.”
“What, why?”

“I mean, there’s like this whole tension between my friends and this dude,” Lela admits, tries to put into words the tension she’d seen from the restaurant, “Like bad blood, or some shit. They’re not exactly meeting eye to eye on shit.”

Humming, Sam takes a drink from his can and asks, “Are you worried about how your friends are going to react to the news, of you getting a job with him?”

Lela remembers then, with clarity, how their second meeting had been. The way Lela had shown up all sharp teeth and broody ass moods. The way it had felt like she was pulling teeth instead of talking. She remembers how Sam had been patient, hadn’t pushed her away when she’d snapped her teeth at him. He’d just let her talk, growl, snarl and say her piece until he needed to talk.

It hasn’t been like anymore. Talking with Sam was beginning to feel as natural as anything. Like there wasn’t a time before where they didn’t meet up to talk about what was tying Lela up into knots. It’s weird, Lela’s self aware enough that she knows it’s strange. But she isn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth, or whatever the hell the expression was.

“Probably, I mean, I don’t know why they’ve got beef, but I’m pretty sure they’re gonna shit a brick house when I tell ’em,” Lela tells him with a snort. Her hands busy themselves with pulling out her dwindling pack out of her jacket pockets.

While she’s busy lighting up a smoke, Sam lightly asks, “And you’re afraid of their rejection?”

Blowing her smoke away from Sam’s space, over to the side, down wind, Lela bites out, “I’m not afraid.”

Which is bullshit. Lela knows she is. She can feel the fear of what they might do biting at her heels. It’s taking chunks out of her flesh and getting to the marrow of her bone. She can feel it like the angry hands of her mother pinning her by the throat on the kitchen floor. She can feel it like she once felt her bones breaking when she’d denied her ex’s desires. When she went against his commands. She can feel it like the blare of the sun peeking through the tree leaves overhead. Lela’s afraid, she knows it and so does Sam apparently.

“Kid, we’ve talked about this,” Sam sighs as he looks down at her clenched left fist and then back up to meet her eyes, “No bullshit, not with me.”

It’s one of the only things Sam’s ever asked of Lela. Honesty. If they were going to be meeting up on the literal fly, then all Sam asked for was her honesty.

She is. Lela knows she is. She can feel the fear of what they might do biting at her heels. It’s taking chunks out of her flesh and getting to the marrow of her bone. She can feel it like the angry hands of her mother pinning her by the throat on the kitchen floor. She can feel it like she once felt her bones breaking when she’d denied her ex’s desires. When she went against his commands. She can feel it like the blare of the sun peeking through the tree leaves overhead. Lela’s afraid, she knows it and so does Sam apparently.

“Kid, we’ve talked about this,” Sam sighs as he looks down at her clenched left fist and then back up to meet her eyes, “No bullshit, not with me.”

Her face pulls up into a half snarl as she blew out a lungful of smoke. She wants to snap at the man. Bite into the meaty flesh of his thick biceps and draw blood. She wants to make him draw back, away from her, with vicious growls. All of her instincts are blaring, bright and angry, to push the man back. To prove to him, she isn’t a scared little thing. A simpering defenseless little puppy dog omega. She’s a goddamn monster.

Built of misery, pain and fury. Caked in her own blood. She wasn’t some little fear filled omega.

But Sam’s asked her, trusted her, to only come to him with the truth. And Lela’s called him out here, in the middle of the day and in the middle of the week. She’s pulled him away from whatever kind of life he led to listen to her bullshit once more. So the least she can do is bite back her instincts and
shove them into the pit of her chest. The very least she could do was give him his honesty.

Gritting her teeth, Lela nods harshly and ashers her cig. She’s quiet as she burns the smoke down to the very end of the filter and flicks it into the near-by trash bin. Only when her hands are empty does she speak.

“My friends aren’t exactly the kinda people you’d wanna get into a fight with.”

“What do you mean,” Sam asks, confusion coloring his face, “Do you mean, are they like, violent?”

“Probably,” Lela huffs out a dry laugh. Wouldn’t put it past Natasha to be as violent as a damn devil if the need ever arose.

Sam’s face goes hard, looking like a statue carved from obsidian stone. His eyes grow steely as he gruffly demanded of her, “Will they hurt you?”

“What? No,” Lela tells him, drumming out a quick beat with her right fingers, “Pretty sure they won’t. Like, if they wanted to, they would’ve done something a long time ago.”

Which was true, Natasha and Clint could’ve hurt any number of times. They could’ve turned on her a handful of times. When Lela was caught up in her heat, fighting off withdrawal, it would’ve been easy. It would probably still be easy for them to hurt her now. They were fucking assassins. Lela’s dirty little back alley skills wouldn’t get her even one hit in.

But they wouldn’t, something in Lela whispers. There’s a part of her, that was all hindbrain instincts, silk ribbon and steel band made, that assured her they wouldn’t. Something delicate wafts up in her, stretches like the swirling hands of gray cigarette smoke, and grips her tight around the neck. It feels a little like hope, maybe. Tender and stupid like that.

They probably wouldn’t, Lela thinks, but she isn’t sure. Lela can’t afford to hope for the best out of people. She’s gotten burned enough times to know you didn’t do shit like that and wall away whole.

And it’s in that uncertainty, in her past experiences and the darkness of the knowledge she’s gained from them, that Lela’s fear catches aflame. Like year long tinder over burning embers.

“What kind of people are they? Your friends?” Sam starts with a tone as casual as before. But his eyes haven’t lost that harsh rigidness.

If Lela needed reminding that Sam was a DomBeta, then here it was. For Lela can smell that oak wood begin to catch fire. She can smell the way it stretches out and tries to drown her. The way it sits heavy between them as Sam stared at her.

Confused, Lela shrugs, “Pretty normal dudes, for the most part. I mean, they’ve got a pretty sketchy job and shit, but they’re pretty cool.”

“What do they do for a living?” Sam probes, his eyes flashing around like he might need to suddenly fight whatever came popping out from around the trees.

It’s weird, but Lela’s not about to touch it.

“That’s not really something I can actually go around talkin’ about,” Lela tells the man, pops open the tab of her pack and stares longingly at the ten or so cigs inside. She debates whether or not to pull one out before heaving out a sigh and closing it back up. It’s probably enough to last her the walk back to the suite and maybe have one left over before hitting the sack.
She’d have to ration it.

“Why?” Sam demands, his tone harder than Lela has ever heard it be.

It catches her attention as much as it causes her to trip. Frowning, she picks up her drink and says, “Because I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t believe me.”

Lela’s not entirely sure why Sam’s suddenly got a burning interest in shit pertaining to the wonder-dicks. Doesn’t exactly make sense. But, Lela figures it’s got something to do with the way she’s being vague. The way her answers, honest as they were, felt like lies.

“Trust me Lela, you’d be surprised by how much I’m willing to believe these days,” Sam says in a tone that was as dry as her hometown’s ground. Like a damn bulldog whose found himself a pretty bone, Sam wasn’t about to let go. He sunk his teeth in, dug his paws into the earth, and readied himself for a tug of war he was likely to win.

That’s weird too, and this time around, she wants to get to know what the hell it means.

Thinking, to hell with it, Lela pulls out a smoke and lights it. She kind of wants to know what Sam will think when she says, “They tell me they’re killers.”

“Are they?” Sam doesn’t even flinch. He keeps his hard gaze on hers and waits.

Shrugging, Lela tells him honestly, “I don’t know man, probably. Who fucking lies about shit like that?”

Pinching his lips up into a tight frown, Sam nods once and asks, “And you run with them?”

It’s about as smooth as one could think a person could word asking if someone was a killer to. Smooth like shined glass. Smooth like he could care less that they might actually be killers and more like he cared whether she was or not. Like it mattered to him that Lela wasn’t the one running around with loaded weapons and blood on her hands.

It’s fucking weird.

Cracking a smile, Lela huffs out a dry laugh before saying, “We’re tight, but we ain’t that tight. That’s there shit, not mine.”

Lela can see that her answer doesn’t exactly settle whatever worry Sam’s got in his eyes now. She can see the way it only adds to it. Builds it up more solidly till it practically sits on the man’s broad muscled shoulders. The man opens his mouth, looks to be about to issue some kind of worry filled statement about how that isn’t exactly safe or sane, to surround herself with people like that, when suddenly her name is being called out.

Turning in her seat, Lela looks to her left and finds Clint. He stands tall and worry filled. His blonde hair is sticking up at odd angles like he’s been running his fingers through them again. Like he’s been pulling at it again the way he did when he got himself in a tizzy. He’s dressed in a long sleeved plum colored shirt that was just a bit snug on his toned torso. He’s holding in one hand a sleek black cellphone, his fingers tight over the plastic.

“Clint?” Lela calls out to him, confusion and surprise coloring her face and tone. Brows pinched tight, she begins to rise up to her feet, “What the fuck you doing here?”

Huffing out a disbelieving breath, Clint sends her a wry smile before walking over to the table, “Looking for you babe. Where the hell’ve you been? You were gone all day!”
“Told you I’d be gone a while,” Lela tells the blonde, feels exasperation bud up in her as she met him halfway. Only when she’s close enough to reach a hand out and touch, does she still and ask with a twisted frown, “Were you looking for me?”

“Uh,” the gamma starts, his face scrunching up in that usual ‘shit’ expression he sometimes wore, “A bit, yeah.”

Rolling her eyes, because she fucking figured. What were the chances she would be followed by three separate individuals in one single day? Probably slim, but here it was. Pulling her smoke to her lips, Lela levels the man with a hard glare and says nothing on the matter. She lets her displeasure slide into her glaring eyes

Clint, at least, has enough sense in him to look a little bit like he’s ashamed. Not by the fact that he’s been following her but by the fact that he’s had to admit to it.

“Barton?” Lela hears Sam call out from behind her.

Turning, Lela watches as Sam pulls himself up to stand. His face lined in his surprise as he stared over her head and to the blonde in front of her.

“Wilson?” Clint says, sounding just as surprised.

“You two know each other?” Sam questions, swallowing up the distance between them three so he stands at Lela’s right, close.

And Lela tries not to read into the fact that Sam looks to be a little like he’s trying to wedge himself between Lela and Clint. Like he’s trying to put Lela behind him and away from Clint. Lela also tries not to read too hard into the way Clint’s body goes tight and he steps just a little closer to her.

Ashing her cig, Lela announces in a plum of smoke, “Yeah, you?”

Face pulled strange, like he’s going for casual, but falling just short of it, Sam nods his head while Clint offers her, “We kinda run in the same circles.”

Lela’s puzzled by the announcement a whole of a minute before she’s flooded with something like mild irritation. Because, of course they did. Clint was a self proclaimed assassin and Sam was a veteran. It isn’t totally outside the realm of possibility that they might know one another. That they might’ve run into one another at some point. She doesn’t want to know the kinds of odds she’s beating at having befriended them both at two wildly different times and places. The circumstances worlds apart.

She chalks it up to life being funny like that and the world just being that small.

Clicking her tongue, Lela runs it over her bottom lip and asks the blonde, “Why’re you running ‘round town lookin’ for me?”

“I, uh,” Clint starts, looks away from Sam and down to her before telling her, “You missed lunch? How do you know Bird-Brains?”

“Who?” Lela asks just as Sam huffs out a laugh and mutters, ‘fuck off man’.

“You’re the last person on earth to be making bird jokes Clint,” Sam says rubbing a hand over his head. The lines of his body have eased, somewhat. He smells less like he might be gearing up for a fight.
A shit eating grin spreads wide across Clint’s face before he jokes, “Are you kidding? I fucking cornered the market on all bird related jokes man. That’s like my shit right there.”

Lela’s confused, but she doesn’t say anything. Just stands in place and watches the two men as they interacted. She watches as they clasp hands and bump fists. The worry they both held in their eyes bleeding away.

“How do you know Lela?” Sam asks of Clint, completely disregards the fact that Lela’s standing right in front of him.

“She’s a friend,” Clint admits easily, his eyes flashing down to Lela before going back onto Sam, “You?”

Straightening his shoulders, like he was bracing himself for a fight, Sam goes, “Same.”

Quirking up a brow at the way the two men were posturing, Lela pulls the last cloud of smoke off her cig and stubs it beneath the toe of her right foot. With as much sarcasm as she can produce, Lela announces to the whole of them:

“Well, now that we’re all caught up…”

With little trouble, Lela walks back to the table and snatches up her tote bag and hauls it up her shoulder. When she catches Sam’s eye, she tells him, “Thanks for coming out.”

“Yes,” Sam nods his head, pulls his attention from the Gamma and over to her, “Keep telling you, it’s no problem. If you ever need anything, just call me.”

“Yes, I know…” Lela begins to say only to get cut off by the way Sam continues on.

“I mean it Lela, you need anything,” he puts emphasis on the word as he shot a sideways glance at Clint and back over to her, “You call me and I’ll be there, no questions asked, yeah?”

Lela doesn’t know why that statement strikes her a bit odd. The way Sam moves, speaks, is as if he’s worrying about something only he can put into words. But, Lela blames that on the fact that she had told him, she was technically afraid of two killers. One of which was clear, Sam knew. Which meant, Sam might now the true depths of that statement more than even Lela.

She doesn’t know why it strikes her down deep in her chest, rattles her, sinks into her like a hot from the dryer hoodie, cradling her around her shoulders, but it does. She feels it like she’s wearing some kind of cape over her back. The feeling resonating in the way something strange wraps itself around her heart and sits light as air but as hot as an ember. It curls up delicate and painless, ignoring the silk ribbon and the steel bands she’s got. It makes itself at home in her chest and refuses to budge. Almost like a stubborn cat that’s curled up somewhere warm and wasn’t about to give up it’s spot.

Brows pinched in confusion, Lela nods her head tightly and meets the Beta man’s gaze. It takes her a moment to find the words. A while longer before she can push them past dry lips. Ignoring the Gamma waiting on her, Lela says:

“I know. I’ll call you, yeah?”

“I’ll answer kid,” Sam tells her, face set in determination as something like hope and relief flashed in his eyes. Something weighted like an oath sits in his tone as he promised, “Always.”

Confused and a hell of a lot stunned, Lela merely jerks her head into a nod and begins to walk her
way out of the park. If Clint and Sam say goodbye, Lela doesn’t hear it over the pounding beat pulsing madly in her ears. She keeps walking, eyes unseeing the things she passes by, trusting in the fact that Clint will keep her from tripping over anything.

When they’ve left the park behind, Clint calls out to her, soft and tender, “Wanna catch a cab back?”

Lela only nods, can’t find it in her to look up into his eyes just yet. She doesn’t know where this queer little uncertainty comes from, but her hindbrain slithers and whines. It tells her she’s done something wrong. Made an error bigger than getting a job at some place they might not approve of. Her hindbrain blames the little lump of burning coal on her heart. Tells her that it shouldn’t be there. That she should get rid of it.

As Lela waits in silence for the cab that Clint’s trying to wave down, Lela lets herself reach for the ember. Like she could call the feel of silk and steel, Lela finds she can pull the warmth of that ember towards her. She feels the heat of it, pulsing in her chest like a separate heart beat, as she held it in imaginary hands. She can feel the way it unfurls, like a flower reaching out for sunlight, at her touch. The way it goes soft and tender. Lela feels its comfort and is reminded of Sam’s smiles.

The screech of the cab’s brakes makes Lela snap away from the ember. The petals fold themselves back up, painless and seamlessly, but without protest. Content to have been held at all and not scorning her for the way she retreated.

Wordlessly, Lela climbs into the back seat of a yellow car and waits for Clint to close the door. Clint is the one to speak to the cabbie, firing off the name of the Hotel Lela hasn’t bothered to learn. When the silence treads on being just shy of brick heavy, Clint says:

“Sam’s a good guy.”

Surprised, Lela turns to look at him but remains quiet. Clint’s looking at her too. His eyes boring into her without judgment or resentment. Like the silk wrapped around her chest, Clint’s eyes are cool to the touch. His honey eyes glitter with understanding that Lela wishes she could purchase somewhere.

“He’s a good friend to have at your back.” Clint states weighted and meaningful.

Lela doesn’t know why, but it feels like approval sits at Clint’s smile. Pointed at her like he’s telling her it’s okay. That he’s fine with whatever Lela’s done. But Lela doesn’t know what she’s done, doesn’t understand anything. She doesn’t know why she’s got silk ribbons running around her chest. She doesn’t know why she’s got steel bands around her right wrist. She doesn’t know why she’s got a burning ember on her heart. She doesn’t understand but Clint does. And he looks like it’s okay, like there’s nothing for her to worry her head over.

Grunting, Lela pulls her gaze away. She shoves silk ribbons, steel bands, burning embers away from herself and settles her bag over her lap. She’s got a shit ton of bullshit to unpack but she isn’t going to fucking touch it anytime soon. Lela can taste the fear of what she might find if she does sitting like moldy fucking bread on her tongue.

Taking her silence for what it was, Clint lets the subject drop and instead asks, “You hungry?”

Sighing, Lela rubs a ragged hand over her lips and nods, “I could eat.”

“I’m supposed to tell you not to grab anything ‘cuz Nat’s cooking tonight, but I saw her pulling out brussel sprouts and I’m pretty sure I’ll fucking die if I have to eat that again,” Clint announces with such vehemence one would assume they were trying to get him to rip his Gamma fangs out of his
Smirking, Lela shakes her head and grumbles, “Gross.”

“We can grab burgers, before we get there though,” Clint says, hopeful and desperate, “Just don’t tell her it was my idea, yeah? We’ll just say you were hungry and wanted to eat, she likes you more than she likes me.”

The words startle a laugh out of Lela because she’s pretty sure they aren’t true, but they makes her relax back into her seat, “You’re still gonna have to eat it. You know how Red gets.”

Groaning, Clint lets his head thunk back on the seat and mutters, “She’s the devil.”

Lela laughs but doesn’t argue because, yeah, Natasha was. Letting her head fill up with the easy mundane routine of her life with the wonder-dicks, Lela lets everything burn away until she feels a little lighter. As promised, they stop for burgers. When they reach the suite room, Lela’s still working on her triple meat burger. The murderous glare Natasha sends over head towards Clint almost makes her choke on the piece she’s working on.

“Clint! You knew I was cooking tonight.” Natasha accuses with a raised brow and cocked hip.

“She was hungry!” Clint shouts in his defense, his hands going up to show he was defenseless, “She wanted burgers!”

When Natasha levels a stern glare in Lela’s direction, Lela shrugs and takes a careful swallow as she admitted, “It was Clint’s idea.”

She feels absolutely no amount of pity when Natasha throws an empty pan in Clint’s direction. The yelp Clint lets out as he ducks and rolls makes Lela bark out laughing. Like a scared cat, Clint goes scrambling out of the little living room and into the bedroom Lela slept in.

Some type of foreign language comes spilling out of Natasha’s snarling red lips as she chased him. Her hair waving around behind her like a crimson banner. For her own safety, Lela gets herself far enough away from the carnage by slipping over to the half set table. She lets her bag down on a chair and slips onto another.

It takes about five or so minutes for Natasha to exact her pound of flesh out of Clint. When the redheads done, she comes gliding back into the kitchen area. Her head held high like a regal queen. She doesn’t still to look at Lela at all, but as she continue’s chopping up raw meat she tosses over her shoulder:

“You went to Pepper’s?”

Lela feels her body go stiff as she recalls the thing she’s been readily ignoring. Swallowing down her anxiety, Lela nods tightly before saying, “Met that alpha, Tony, on the street today. We got to talking.”

“What about?” Natasha breezily questions, sends her a simple glance as her hands worked swift and precise.

Swiping her tongue over her lips, Lela tastes her burger and it swirls her stomach, “He hired me for a job.”

“Oh?” Natasha doesn’t sound surprised, but her shoulders go tight. She’s focused on her task far more than necessary, “Why?”
Confused, Lela kicks her feet out from under her and turns her body towards the redhead and says, “I mean, cuz I kinda needed one? Right? Can’t stay up in this room forever, sleeping till fucking midday. I mean, I gotta pay you assholes back.”

“We’ve never asked you to pay us back,” Natasha smoothly refutes, her sharp shoulders are as stiff and as deadly as the knife she wielded.

Lela tries not to acknowledge how the steel band around her right cuff begins to grow cold. The burn reminds her of frost bite. Something she’d never felt before until she stayed stranded up in Michigan so long ago. It feels a little like that, only, a shit ton harsher.

Tightening her fists, Lela bites out, “What kind of asshole you take me for Red? I was a fucking hooker, not a goddamn scammer.”

Clint walks in then, his face pulled up into confusion as he nursed his left arm. It’s bent carefully, slung in his right hand. When he hops up onto the barstool and leans his weight onto the counter, he asks, “What’s going on?”

Before Lela can even begin to think about what she’s going to say, Natasha beats her to the punch by informing the blonde in a cold tone, “Lela got herself a job working for Tony.”

Whipping his head around, so he’s facing her, Clint goes, “Why?!"

Sucking on her teeth, Lela snarls, “I didn’t think I needed fucking permission to fuckin’ make a grown ass decision for my-fucking-self.”

Lela had known, she’d fucking known, that taking up that job would cause problems. she just had been hoping it wouldn’t. She’d hoped, like she’d hoped on that park bench, that they would’ve just been okay with it. She’d hoped they would’ve just left it alone, taking it as it was and just moved on.

But Lela knew better than to expect better from anyone. Lela was wrong and she doesn’t know what else she could’ve gotten wrong about them.

How long would it be before their hands went from caring to hurtful? How long would it be till they turned on her like everyone else did? Lela wonders which one of them is going to be the first to pin her down by her throat and force submission out of her.

Tight in her chest, her heart hammers, brutal and unforgiving. It slams against the bone of her rib cage, threatens to splinter them in half. Lela can feel the way the silk wrapped around her torso grows tight. The way the softness of it’s edges digs in like piano wire pressing in. She feels like she’s choking on it all.

Steel band grown ice cold, silk ribbon slicing into her flesh, she feels something in herself grow wild. The ugly beast she’s become snaps her teeth at the feeling. It runs it’s jagged claws down the inside of her mind and roars to be released. To push out and break something bloody and torn. It paces, silences the cries of her second nature with vicious swipes, tearing up at her until she’s gushing blood.

Snarling, Lela kicks herself up until she’s standing. She heads towards the balcony because she needs fucking air. She needs distance between herself and them. She needs to run the strange coldness of that silk and band down till she can barely feel it. Molten hot lava has been poured down her throat and Lela was choking on the goddamn fumes of it.

“Lela!” Clint barks out, gamma barks infused into his voice, he calls out to her.
Lela goes still halfway to the balcony whether she’d like to or not. She doesn’t turn to look at him, keeps her fists balled and her back straight. There’s growls leaving her throat she’s only just registering sound like she’s two seconds away from into someone or something. An old familiar fire is burn her up from the inside out. Telling her she’s got to do something, something stupid and cruel. It croons at her, madly and tempting, to just let go, to fall back into the dark rhythm she’s come to half love. She feels like a cornered coyote, ready to gnaw her way through a person or herself to reach freedom.

Turning slowly, Lela levels her glare onto Clint. She bares her teeth at him, sharp and dangerous, and snarls like a feral animal. She’s one second away from lunging, readying her body to spring forward into a fight she’s not sure she want to pick up, when she feels it.

Warm petals unfurl.

Spreading like the delicate petals of a white lilac, the bud opens and it’s roots twirl and twine into the passage ways of her racing heart. It’s pulsing beat steady her heart, thump stubborn and true until her heart slows to match the pace. Lela feels the way her burning inferno banks until the only warmth she can feel at all is coming from that strange flower. She feels the way it clears away the smoke in her brain and lets her lungs expand till she’s gulping down clean air.

That flower, delicate as it was, flooded her with strength. It cooed to her that all was well. All would be well, if she could only breath, if she could only still. It shoves aside her panic, her anger, her hate till all that was left was it’s understanding, it’s patience, and warming touch.

Lela is struck then, that it reminds her vividly of a certain dark skinned Beta.

With a swaying step, Lela pulls back. She takes a slow step back till she can catch herself on the plane of glass separating her from the outside world. Lela leans up against it, tries to understand what the fuck she’s feeling but keeps coming up empty.

“Lela,” Natasha’s cool voice calls out to her, makes Lela’s eye’s snap up to meet the red head who’s suddenly so much closer.

The hand that reaches out for her is slow in it’s approach. It shows her that no harm comes to her, just care, but Lela flinches away from it all the same. She hates herself for it immediately. Makes her pull her head up and snap her teeth until they clacked. Lela pushes every bit of strength she’s got into her growl, forces Natasha back until Lela’s got her weight under her again.

Ruby red lips pulled tight into a frown, Natasha takes a step back and levels Lela with a glare of her own. A growl, low and threatening, bubbles out of Natasha’s throat.

The sound of it makes Lela’s hindbrain, all stupid useless second nature instincts cry out, whimpering and crying for Lela to just go belly up. But Lela forces them back as she issues a roar dark and ugly. She’s panting by the time she’s done issuing the challenge. Breath coming in quick and sporadic.

Fast and as silent as only Clint could be, he appears between both of them. His head bowed like he’s baring his throat for both of them while still denying them the blood their after. He keeps his body loose and as non challenging as possible but Lela still feels fear come tumbling out of her.

“Enough,” Clint demands, his tone hard as stone and gentle as always.

Lela refuses to be the one to back away, she keeps her eyes on Natasha with her body ready to go. Natasha doesn’t seem as eager to let the issue drop as Clint. She keeps her gaze steady, doesn’t give
a single inch.

“I said,” Clint growls out, his tone growing louder—far more deadly—as he roared, “Enough!”

And like ice water’s been dumped onto her head, Lela snaps back. She rears back as if struck. The silk ribbon turned wire flexes and digs in deep. Slices deep until Lela’s sure it’s gone clear through the bone of her spine. Her head snaps against the window behind her hard enough to crack it. Surprise filled fright makes her scramble to get up and away. So she side steps them two, finds space enough to get away until she’s found herself in the living room, the couch between them all.

“Hey,” Clint calls out to her, his face pulled into regret and fear, “Lela it’s okay, I’m sorry. It’s okay.”

He approaches her with his hands out, splayed like he’s trying to show her he’s got nothing in them, and slow. His head is bent low like he’s trying to keep his unprotected neck in her eye sight the whole way. When Clint reaches the couch she drops down to sit on his heels and stills.

Wildly, Lela reaches into her chest, grabs hold of the flower still pulsing and spread out so it fanned the length of her whole chest, she finds her center again. Taking a ragged breath, Lela runs her hands through her hair and grips tight her swirling mind. Digging her nails in, Lela drags until it burns. She feels something like a lump forming at the back of her head and pushes especially cruel into it. Lela finds relief in the pain that blooms and scatters behind her eyes.

Dropping into the lone lounger Natasha was partial to, Lela sprawls. She lets her body sag as she propped her elbows upon her splayed knees. She hangs her head as she dragged in breath after breath. Only when she’s feeling less like she’s about to throw up her burger, does she look up and pin Clint with a glare:

“What the fuck was that?”

“You two were ready to tear into each others throats,” Clint explains, looks guilty as all hell for it and brokenly offers, “Sorry.”

For some reason, Lela feels like Clint isn’t exactly apologizing for the roar or the command. It feels like maybe the apology he offers bears more weight. Like it ran a little deeper. But she doesn’t understand it. Can’t begin to understand what that feeling had been. The way she’d felt like she was being pulled in opposite directions. Her entire being being bitten into and ripped apart in three separate directions.

She doesn’t understand and it makes her hindbrain writhe because it aches to know. It feels like it knows already, like it’s just on the verge of understanding, but can’t quite get there just yet.

Lela says nothing to that. She lets her gaze drop down to her scuffed and worn down boots. She counts the lines on them until she can piece herself back together. Feeling a little like a hurricane picked up all that she was and scattered it to the wind, torn apart by the strangeness of silk, steel and flower petals, Lela feels her body tremble. She feels shivers run down the length of her spine that makes a cold sweat kick up over her forehead.

There’s a dull pain throbbing in the back of her head that she thinks has little to do with the goose egg that’s forming. It pulses like the worst kind of headache. Makes it so when she clenches her teeth together it fucking hurts.

Frog walking his way towards her, Clint stops just at her left knee and reaches out to touch her. He moves slow and careful, like he’s willing to let her sink her teeth in if she felt like it, and he wouldn’t
fight her for it. Lela feels the food in her stomach swirl further.

When his hand engulfs hers, swallows it with it’s large span, Lela jolts violently in her seat. She yanks her hand back but watches as Clint’s follows too. Gritting her teeth, Lela glares and bares her teeth at him, wills him away from her.

“When’s it gonna end?” Clint whispers, as he made himself comfortable against her left thigh, “I’ve got you.”

For a split second, Lela entertains the thought of pushing him away. She feels bitter resentment swell up in her that wishes him gone. She’s halfway into doing it before the warmth of him seeps into her suddenly chilled skin. It keeps her still. Makes the rumble in her throat choke up and die.

Whatever fight she’s got in her goes flying out of her body then. She crumples like a house of cards. Her body goes boneless as she sinks further into her elbows. Her head hanging low.

“I’m sorry,” Clint speaks the words into the inside skin of her wrist. His lips dragging like smooth silk against her flesh.

“Fuck you,” Lela mumbles, ragged and tired. If it sounds broken, Lela’s not about to acknowledge it. Not now.

“Yeah, I know, I’m an asshole,” Clint says into her skin, those strange rumbling half purrs rumbling in the back of his throat, “I didn’t mean to do that to you. Scare you like that.”

Yanking at her hand but doing nothing to dislodge his hold, Lela growls, “You didn’t fucking scare me, dickhead.”

Lela won’t admit that he had. Whatever he’d done, it’d scared her. Sent her scrambling like she’d seen the ghost of her mother on a dark moonless night. Lela won’t admit it, but she had been. she’d been scared like nothing she’d ever felt before. The whole of her body feeling it bone deep.

Grinning, Clint continues to issue those strange noises and mutters, “Why ya always gotta call me the worst shit?”

Huffing out a dramatic and long sigh, Natasha says from somewhere behind Lela’s seat, “Because you are a dickhead, dickhead.”

Lela goes stiff at the knowledge that Natasha was at her back. Her entire back was exposed now, bent as Lela was. But she makes no effort to move. Lela keeps her self still. the warmth on her leg pinning her down. The strange purring grumbles spilling from Clint’s mouth keeping any kind of protesting growl buried deep.

When Natasha’s cool long fingers slip into her hair, brush against the knot she’s got going, Lela feels the tension in her spine loosen. Natasha is quiet as she runs her fingers through Lela’s hair. The coolness of her touch a balm against the dry burn of the scratches Lela had left behind. For a long while, Natasha says nothing, doesn’t offer an apology, doesn’t act like she needs to. The redhead simply runs her fingers through Lela’s dark hair and pulls apart the tangles she found hidden within.

The only sound in the suite is that of Clint’s weird ass rumbles.

“After a while, Natasha asks, “What kind of job did you get over at Tony’s tower?”

Brows pinched, Lela stares down at the carpet beneath her boots and says, “Janitors gig.”

Natasha says nothing, simply hums and goes quite.
“Is that gonna be a problem?” Lela bites out, feels the blossomed flower pulse low and tender in her chest.

“It’s not that we don’t trust you Lela,” Natasha starts, her fingers working through whatever knot she’s found at the base of Lela’s neck, “It’s that we don’t trust him.”

And as much as she wants to know the story behind that, Lela doesn’t feel up to pulling that shit up now. Not when she was struggling to get her body to stop it’s fucking shaking. Not when it felt like she’s had all her energy stolen from her very soul.

“I start tomorrow morning,” Lela says instead, tries to say with as little words as possible, that whether they liked it or not, she was the one calling the shots in her life.

“What time?” Clint asks, his voice thick and rumbling.

Licking her lips, Lela whispers, feeling as her eyes grew heavy and half lidded, “Eight.”

She’s half expecting some kind of fight again. For Natasha to put up some kind of cold retort or for Clint to grow outraged once more, but instead all that she feels is the silk and band grow warm again. They twirl and twine until the settle up high with the flower petals currently closing to mid blossom. They don’t fight one another, they swirl and fix themselves up so they share the same space, accepting each other in her. Lela doesn’t know why her hindbrain heaves out a cry of relief. Only that it does and Lela feels the last string holding her up snap in two.

Lela’s not entirely sure if she meets the floor or not because before the carpet can kiss her face, her lids grow heavy and she’s out like a goddamn light.

*~*

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” Clint asks, about the fourth time since they’d all climbed into the same bed—Lela’s bed.

Natasha is quiet as she ran careful fingers down the two butterfly bandages Lela’s head injury had required. Well, they hadn’t required it, but Natasha had put them on regardless. The injury had glared at her, accusingly, angrily. The trickle of blood that had slipped out had felt like a gushing river. Natasha had figured, since it was her fault the injury was there at all, it was her job to care after it. She’d done more than was necessary.

“Probably, she’s pretty tough, she’s proven that already,” Natasha whispered, kept her voice low lest the disturb the sleeping girl wedged between them.

Lela’s dark head was nestled on Clint’s chest, close to where she could better hear the purrs he emitted. Her legs tangled tight between Natasha’s own.

“I used my pack bond against her,” Clint admits, his tone practically bleeding his regret and remorse. His handsome golden face pulled up tight in self loathing.

No one had been more surprised than Natasha at the fact that Clint had done just that. That he’d grabbed half formed bonds and yanked them until Lela had stilled. In Clint’s defense, Lela had looked two seconds away from going full feral. Natasha had been willing to do all that was needed to stop her from hurting herself or Clint, but she hadn’t been eager to do it. Natasha would’ve gained no pleasure in fighting the dark haired hellion.

If Clint hadn’t done as he had, things would’ve been a hell of a lot worse than they turned out to be. It was the right call, Natasha knows, but not one Clint felt comfortable making. Not when they both
knew Lela didn’t seem to understand what it was that she felt for them.

There was a reason, Natasha knows, why the bonds were half formed as they were. Strange shaped and sharply ridged. Lela didn’t know what they were. And as such, hadn’t fully accepted them. Natasha could feel the confusion in their bond every day. The way it bleed into it and into Natasha’s own chest. They way it grew cold and distant and then flaming with purpose as she grew angry.

“You made the right call,” Natasha offers her Gamma, tries to send him comfort and compassion through the bond they two shared. A bond, Natasha was coming to find, tied them to Lela in a way that felt far more intense than anything either of them had ever felt before.

Grimacing, Clint tears his eyes away from Natasha and down to the girl between them. He wears a sorrow filled expression and whines low in his throat. Natasha cannot pretend to understand what it might feel like for another person to twist something like a pack bond to tame and hurt. She’s never had the privilege of ever building any kind of bonds with anyone. The red room had never allowed it. If girls were found with bonds, they were killed before the others, an example made of their weakness.

Natasha cannot begin to imagine what that must feel like. to have something that was meant to keep one a float, whole and hale, get twisted around to settle and tame into compliance. Natasha doesn’t know but Clint did.

Clint knew the type of pain that could inflict on a person. The way it tore a person to shreds to have a piece of a person get turned sharp and inward. Clint knew because that was how Clint was raised. His own flesh and blood, his brother, had torn Clint up with the bond they shared. Torn him up until Clint was so bloody there was hardly any piece of him left whole.

The fact that he’s done the same to Lela eats at him.

Reaching a hand out, Natasha grips at Clint’s tightly clenched hand. She works careful fingers till they twine around his and grip tight. she says nothing for a long while, simply rumbles low in her throat, like he’d taught her and says:

“You did what you had to do to keep her from hurting herself.”

Clint remains quiet, doesn’t turn his eyes to her, keeps glaring up at the ceiling. Willing his actions away. After a while, he asks, “Are we ever going to tell her?”

“About what?” Natasha questions, her brows pinched together.

this time around, Clint does turn his head so he’s looking at her over the swell of Lela’s dark haired head, “That we’re pack now. That we’ve got pack bonds running through us. Are we ever gonna tell her?”

Lips growing tight, Natasha mulls over the question. Natasha’s about as eager to tackle the situation as Lela is. If it was up to Natasha, she’d leave up to the dark haired girl. Let the girl figure it out as she went. But she knows Clint’s running in the opposite direction of that. His bond is restlessly fluttering about. Stretching out tight to reach Lela and close the gap. It slithers like a snake with it’s head cut off. Natasha knows Clint wants to complete the bonds. To bring them all together, tight like a pack ought to be. But, Natasha thinks, Lela wasn’t exactly ready to deal with all of that.

Not yet anyway.

Reading the answer on her face clear enough, Clint tells her, “She’s got another pack bond now, you felt it too. That’s why you got so angry, don’t try to tell me your little tantrum was all about Tony.”
Pursing her lips, Natasha glares at her gamma and tightens her grip on his hand till his face twists in pain before easing back. Natasha could lie, could pretend, that she’d been angry based entirely on the fact that Lela had gone out and gotten herself tangled up in Tony’s bullshit. She could blame her anger on a grudge she was still nursing. But Natasha knew that wasn’t what had burrowed into her skin like it had.

Natasha had grown inexplicably angry at the bond she felt humming through Lela. A bond that was far more sturdy, far more formed than hers was. A bond that wasn’t Clint’s. A bond, Natasha had feared, belonged to Tony. Natasha had grown wildly possessively mad over the thought of that Alpha sinking his claws into one of Natasha’s pack. That he would take from her Lela. That he would pull her away from Natasha and Clint. Natasha had grown wild at the thought that maybe, maybe, Lela would leave them with half formed bonds.

“It’s Sam’s,” Clint informs her, reads the fear in her eyes for what it was. He squeezes her hand and tells her, “She’s been meeting up with Wilson, he’s the friend she goes out to meet.”

Surprise flickers across her face before relief spreads through her limbs at the knowledge that it wasn’t a bond towards Tony. She sinks further into the bed, her body leaning further into the girl slumbering.

“Small world, huh?” Clint questions with a small smile.

Huffing out a short laugh, Natasha shakes her head, “Not really.”

The knowledge of it belonging to the beta man—staunchly loyal and golden hearted—abates some of Natasha’s fears, but not all of them. She’s still got a possessive feeling biting at her. Pulling at her to lay claim, to force the bond into completion and pull Lela tighter into her Pack. But Natasha pushes it away. Lela wasn’t ready for that, even if maybe she was well on her way to doing just that.

As if to prove the point, Lela shifts and nuzzles her face into Clint’s chest and growls. Lela curls up tight, drags Natasha’s legs with her own till she became a creature with six arms and six legs. Lela forces them tighter together and digs herself deeper into the comfort of the mattress and the embrace. The bonds they share swell full to bursting, flooding with the containment Lela feels in that moment. Wrapped up between them both, curled up away from the bustle of life and the complications of the people in their lives.

The bonds bend and then explode until Natasha can barely breathe. The bonds complete themselves as if never was there a day that they were half formed. The action forces out a ragged gasp from Clint’s chest.

Grumbling, Lela snaps at them, “Shut the fuck up and go to sleep assholes.”

“Sorry,” Clint gasps out, grips tight at Natasha’s hand like it’s the only thing keeping him tethered to this world.

Growling, low and sleepy, Lela mumbles something in Spanish that Natasha’s ears can’t make out for the way their pressed into Clint’s chest.

Wide eyed, Natasha stares at Clint’s excited grin and mouths, ‘You felt that?’

Nodding excitedly, Clint grins wide and unabashed.

Flustered as she is, surprised and wildly pumping joy, Natasha grins until she feels her cheeks ache. She says nothing more as she pulls herself tighter towards her pack and keeps them safe around her arms.
They would need to talk about it eventually, but Natasha would deal with it when the girl was awake. For now, she was going to let her rest because Lela did, after all, have work come morning. And if she thought she was going on her own, Lela was sadly mistaken. Tony needed to know, Natasha did not appreciate any of her pack being encroached upon.

Chapter End Notes

OH MY GOSH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
This took forever to write out!!!

So who saw a bond forming with Sam outta nowhere??????
ME EITHER!!!!!

But he's so sweet, I had to do my boy some justice. I just left him out in the rain and shit!

Hope to pick up some momentum on the next chapter. We'll be in the tower so I'm pretty sure we'll be meeting some highly anticipated faces now.

I didn't exactly proof read this. I just wrote it out and posted it. Didn't want you guys to have to wait. Hope you guys liked it!!!!

As always, thanks for reading and feel free to comment!
I love speaking with you guys. I get the best kind of inspiration from you guys!!!
-Ani
The Many Shades of Cowardice

Chapter Summary

Too fucking afraid, like the coward she was.

But Lela owes him now. She’s tethered the man to her. Sealed him in a bond he hadn’t asked for. Guilt, raw and angry, burns at her. The force of it makes her want to dry heave onto the grass right at her feet. She feels the way her stomachtightens up and her head spins with it. The least she could do was tell him. Let him know the extent of the fuckery she’s pulled him into.

But, Lela’s a fucking coward. She wasn’t going to touch that tonight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The pants she wears are a soft black color. They kind of resemble slacks but the material is thicker, like jeans. They’re a size too big so they sag a bit on her. They’re also clearly made for someone who was a hell of a lot taller which caused the extra material to bunch up over her boots. The uniform shirt is a deep charcoal gray The kind she liked to think was the exact shade she considered her favorite color, which, went a long way in her book. The shirt held only one logo on it: Stark Industries, in glimmering black letters.

All in all, it’s not the worst thing Lela’s ever been forced to wear.

Lela remembers this slinky metallic dress that rode up her thighs every time she so much as walked. The material of it had been scratchy. It had rubbed her skin raw anytime she forced herself to wear it. Lela remembers, with a burning hate, how much money that dress could pull in on a well lit street. It had been her most popular dress. The kind that reflected light and perpetuated the glittering veneer of her profession.

So yeah, Lela’s worn worse.

Still, the get up she’s got on isn’t all that bad. It doesn’t even feel like it might be cheap. The button up short sleeved shirt felt cotton smooth before she slipped it on over Clint’s plum colored long sleeve. The one he’d been wearing the day before. Lela had stolen it out of the hamper after she’d climbed out of the shower. The thought of walking around all day with her pink track marks on display had made her snarl.

Her belly had done all kinds of swooping fluttering nonsense whenever his scent wafted up to her nose. Clint’s scent somehow settled down the anxiety that was creeping up in her effortlessly. Sliding
her eyes over her appearance one last time, deeming it as done as she possibly could be, Lela clips her badge to her left lapel and calls it a job well done. Then she walks out of the bathroom and into the living room.

“Which one of you assholes got an extra belt?” she asked into the open air.

Without even glancing up from whatever she was reading on the screen of her computer, Natasha holds up a belt and waves it around delicately. Stomping over to her, Lela snatches the item out of the redheads hands and begins to loop it into the pants she’s got on. She does it quietly, keeps her eyes pointedly on her working hands as she moves to the table where they usually ate their meals.

Shit between them, since last night, was different. It wasn’t exactly strained as it was oddly quiet. When Lela had woken up, tangled in far more limbs than she owned, she’d been flooded by this immense weight of…something like peace and quiet. The silk ribbon and steel band had grown thicker, far heavier, and far harder to push away. They sat in her chest like organs now. Refusing to buckle because to buckle meant she might sputter out and maybe die. The flower bud refused to close now, left itself open and pulsing. A point inside her that reached out and told her she wasn’t alone anymore.

Lela’s not sure what’s changed, but she isn’t about to ask. She’s not about to tackle what they are when she’s got to get herself ready for her first real job since…well, since ever. So she keeps quiet, keeps her eyes on everything that wasn’t redheaded and blonde haired.

She figures, if there was one great thing about her, that summed her up to a tee, it was cowardice. Lela had that in spades. She figures, it’s the thing that’s kept her alive for so long. Knowing when to turn tail, when to duck, when to fucking ditch because everything in her was just that: cowardly.

Lela doesn’t bother to push it away from herself now. Lets it wrap it’s slimy little arms around her like a boa and keep her from addressing the shit she figures she has to.

Sitting at one of the many empty chairs the tables got, Lela sets out to fix her hair back. She’s never been one for fancy updo’s, doesn’t know where to begin to do something like that, but she knows how to braid. So she does just that. She works her fingers through her hair and begins at the tip of her hairline, at the center. Her fingers work quickly to tightly place the pattern of an inverted braid. The kind that let the twisting pattern sit on top of ones hair as opposed to hidden away beneath.

It was one of the patterns her mother had taught her, so long ago. But Lela refuses to think about that now. Even good memories of her mother had a habit of twisting her up and tearing her down.

It’s only when she’s reached the end of her dark hair does she realizes she’s got shit for ties. Lela’s about to rise up to her feet and head back into the bathroom when she’s stopped. Clint holds out a hand to her, a tie delicately sitting at the heart of his palm. He smiles down at her with this impossibly soft thing on his face, as he said:

“You ready to go?”

Swallowing past the lump that’s suddenly formed in her throat, Lela nods and takes the tie. She winds it tight over the end and flips the long strand over her shoulder so it sat on her back. Her hair was getting incredibly long, again. It was brushing well past the mid of her back now. It wouldn’t be long now before Lela would find herself suffocated by it and shear it all off, again.

She’d deal with it later though. Like she was willing to deal with everything that required even a smidgen of careful thought, Lela was putting it off. She was dreading the day she had to shift through the rubble that was steadily building up into a mountain.
With a shrug, Lela gets to her feet and grabs her leather jacket off the back of the couch and tells him, “Yeah, was just about to head out.”

It’s nowhere near 8 o’clock, Lela knows, it’s about the third time her eyes have run over to the clock hanging over the tv. But she’s always been an anxious kid. She had a habit of rising early to get to wherever she need to be at least twenty minutes early. Those twenty minutes usually served to give her enough courage to do whatever she needed to do. Or, gave her a long enough window to come up with a good enough excuse for the finger shaped bruises that lined her throat.

“We’ll drive you,” Natasha announces as she slapped her laptop shut without hesitation. She’s got her keys in her pale hands, gripped tight as she pulled herself up and over to them.

Brows pinched tight, Lela feels something like suspicion fueled irritation swell up in her. It bubbles up and makes her feel far more on edge than she wanted to be. Jaw set tight, Lela demands, “Why?”

“Well, wanna see you off on your first day,” Clint says with a hopeful smile and tender honey colored eyes.

Feeling the silk ribbon twirl and slip around beneath her ribs, Lela finds her irritation and suspicion flutter. Whatever peace and quiet she’d woken up with today was easily falling away beneath the black suspicion of her mind. Old habits were hard to kill especially when Lela wasn’t trying all that hard to lay them to rest. Gritting her teeth against the strange feeling, Lela bites out tersely: “I’m not some kid going to her first day of school.”

Because she’s not. She’s not some fucking little kid who needed people to follow after her. She didn’t need them to butt in and try to run her life like they had tried the night before. She didn’t need looking after. She’d made it well enough getting here and now.

Which, Lela knows, isn’t saying much. Because look at how far she’d gotten and just how fucked she was because of it.

That wasn’t the point, though. The point was that she was not a kid who needed handlers.

“No you’re not,” Natasha agrees, seems undisturbed by the tone Lela’s using. Her beautiful face is pulled into utter ease before her green eyes pinned Lela down and in place, “We just want to make sure you get there safe.”

And it’s not what Natasha says but more like what goes unsaid. Lela feels it down to the very core of that steel band. The way it fits just a little tighter against her skin. Keeping her settled in her own skin. It’s weird the way she feels strength, encouragement and ease pulse from that band. The way it tells her sorry in the same breath that it asks for her to forgive.

Clicking her tongue dismissively, Lela looks away and heads for the door. She’s the first one out the hotel suite and the first one into the elevator. The beta and gamma at her back following her for once. None of them say anything, they keep their silence until they reach the front of the hotel where Natasha’s sleek black car awaits them. Lela slides into the passenger seat, Natasha the drivers side and Clint rides in the back.

Eventually, Lela feels her jittering nerves begin to fire up. She feels the way they light up beneath her skin and ache for her to throw herself out of a moving vehicle. Suddenly, Lela isn’t so sure about this whole thing. Which, Lela realizes immediately, is a shitty thing to come to fear on the day of.

But that fear’s sinking its way into her. Like a broken ship out in the middle of uncharted water, she’s sinking. Scrubbing a hand raggedly down her face, Lela growls low in her throat at herself and
forces the feeling away. She feels inky swirls of her usual bitter hate float up and sting her around the edges of her mind. That cowardly part about her makes her want to duck out and do something else. To beg on street corners for change, or hock illegal goods by shifty eyed vendors.

But Lela doesn’t. Can’t. Because she’s already made her bed. She’s gotta lie in it now.

And anyway, there wasn’t a damn good reason Lela could think of for feeling so damn nervous. This job, this fucking cleaning after people shit, sounded as easy as fuck all. Lela knew for a damn fact she could handle it. She’d handled worse before. Endured the very worst of what cruel people could do. Endured what she could do to herself. So this should be easy as all hell. Lela should be jumping for goddamn joy that this is what she was forcing herself to do rather than what she used to do.

Anything was a step up from bending over for nameless fucks. Anything was better than having to throw up their spunk behind rotten filled dumpsters. Anything was better than having hands pulled tight into fistfuls pulling at her head. Anything was better than being bent over, fucked into raw, till she was bleeding. Anything was better than having to work herself onto some nameless pricks dick until he came and paid her thirty measly fucking dollars.

Anything was better than that.

Sinking into the bitterness of her thoughts, Lela bites at her bottom lip. Chews it up raw and taps an erratic beat on her knee to stave off the need to smoke. Natasha was a fucking demon if so much as caught a whiff of cigarette kicked up in her car. Lela wasn’t about to start up an unneeded argument today.

When they pull up to the building, one that Lela now knew was called Stark Industries, Natasha parks out front. A place Lela knew wasn’t exactly a parking space for anyone. But the red head doesn’t seem to particularly care as she snapped her car into park and killed the engine in one fluid motion. Before anything can be said, Lela flies out of the car. She half chokes herself on the seatbelt in her haste.

“Lela,” Clint calls after her as he opened his door and rushed out to stop her.

Lela barely turns to acknowledge him, but she’s still standing there so it counts as something, right?

“Hey Lela,” Clint starts again, he sounds so concerned, unsure and all kinds of nervous. It’s enough to get Lela to turn to him, for her to meet eyes that were a darker shade of green than she was used to. Lela doesn’t think she’s ever seen or heard Clint like this.

Worry swallows her whole. It flows out of her like black smoke and chokes up her lungs. Taking an awkward step forward, Lela goes to Clint and roughly demands, “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing—well, nothing’s wrong. I mean, it isn’t wrong per say. Like it’s totally cool, I mean, I totally don’t mind it,” Clint babbles while his face looks as if he’s running through six million different emotions in one go.

Confused, Lela’s brows pinch tight as she frowned, “What the fuck are ya’ goin’ on about Chuckles?”

Glowering at her, Clint tells her, “Hey, I’m trying to have a heart to heart, don’t be an asshole.”

“Why the fuck are you trying to have a heart to heart with me?” Lela bites out, sends a wild look around her as if to point out to the man exactly where they’re standing.
In the middle of busy New York sidewalk.

Which was the last kind of place Lela was willing to do any kind of heart to heart. Actually, Lela was damn sure she didn’t wanna have any kind of heart to heart ever, with anyone.

Against her panic the steel band Lela can practically feel like a goddamn bracelet goes oven warm. It causes the silk ribbon to unfurl from the complicated knots it was currently bundled up into. She feels a strange type of warmth seep out of her chest and down the length of her suddenly sweat chilled limbs.

“Clint,” Natasha starts, her voice leveled firm as she walked up to them, “this is hardly the time or place.”

“We gotta talk about it though,” Clint argues, his eyes flashing over to the redhead pleadingly.

Twisting up her face with impatience, Lela turns to the beta and demands, “Talk about what Red?”

Natasha is quiet as she stared down at Lela. Her face is set impassively, casual, but her eyes are just as twisted up in apprehension as Clint’s.

Whatever the two wanted to talk about, Lela guesses, was something pretty important. Lela could feel the weight of it begin to set upon her very shoulders. Lela’s more than half afraid of what’ll come tumbling out of their mouths. She wonders if it’s because of what happened last night. She wonders if it’s because of the job. If she fucked something up between them all.

Fear mixes into her anxiety, twists it up until Lela feels like she wants to gag. Her hindbrain kicks up then, barely doused on account of how Lela’s barely taken her meds, and tells her she’s got a better chance of survival if she just booked it. For once, Lela is inclined to listen to her fucking second nature. There’s a burning need to tuck tail and run.

But Lela wills it away. Bites at it till it slithers to the confines of it’s iron barred cage. She stands stubbornly still. Keeps herself in place by planting her feet and bracing her body for any kind of blow. She’s got her jaw defiantly jutted out like she’s just asking for someone to try to pummel it down.

In spite of this, or maybe because of it, Natasha heaves a tired sigh and crosses her arms over her chest and asks, “What do you know of pack bonds?”

Like a car screeching to a halt while it’d been running at a flat 150 fucking miles per hour, Lela hears the spinning tires scream. She can taste the smoke of the burnt tires of her mind as her jaw slips loose and slack.

“Pa—Pack bonds?” Lela hears the way her words come out breathless and confused. They sound like they’re punched out of her chest. Every letter feels like it’s wrapped in fish hooks and it’s pulling a piece of bloody meat out of her.

“Last night, we kind of established pack bonds,” Clint cuts in, his voice tinged in his happiness and giddy excitement, “You can feel us, right? We feel you.”

Lela’s mouth feels bone dry when she works at it to make words. Like a fish that’s been dragged out into the middle of land, her lips open and close but no sound escapes. Even if she could force her mouth to work, Lela isn’t entirely sure what she’s supposed to say. She’s not entirely sure what to make of Clint’s words.

They don’t fit right in her mind. They don’t sound right. Especially, Lela thought, when said in her
direction.

Pack bonds?

Now logically, Lela knew exactly what those were. They’d been brushed upon when she was younger, in between reading and math classes. Fit snug between sex ed and dynamic ranks. Lela knew what they were, everyone did. Pack bonds are what kept packs tightly knit. Pack bonds is what kept people from going feral. Pack bonds is what the whole of the dynamic rested on. Pack bonds, knows what they are, because of course she did.

But on a real level, Lela wouldn’t know what the fuck they were if someone offered her a million dollars and asked her to explain. Right around the time she presented, 15, knobby kneed and buck toothed, Lela hadn’t had the luxury to form any type of bonds. She’d presented a fucking goddamn Omega. And that meant she couldn’t be afforded something so simple as that.

Lela had been too busy pushing people away, keeping them from so much as touching her, to ever form a bond. If people had known, if they’d known what she was, a simple pack bond would’ve been turned against her. Used as good as a mate mark, to chain her down. To own her like a prized dog. So yeah, Lela doesn’t know what to make of pack bonds.

Up until now, Lela hadn’t even entertained the possibility that she fucking could form a bond. She’d laid thoughts like that to bed alongside happily ever after and other fucking fairytale stories you told children. Lela had long ago accepted that she’d just die the same way she’d come to be, alone. Because even her own mother hadn’t bothered to stretch out a hand like that. Lela’s mother had died and Lela had to find that out by finding her mothers decomposing body.

To hear that she’s got one now, a pack bond, makes Lela feel a little like she’s being told that santa really does live way the fuck out there in the middle of the fucking snow. She feels like she’s being told the sky is actually a deep shade of violet and not the blue she’s come to know.

And maybe that’s why she laughs. The laugh she issues comes out startled, unbelieving and hysterical. She’s laughing hard, clutching at her sides as she tried to drag air up to her fluttering mind. If people stare at her for her wild barking laughter, Lela doesn’t notice.

“What—What the fuck are you talking about?” Lela huffs out, the smile she’s got spread across her face hurts her cheeks. Roughly, Lela wipes at the tears that build up at the corners of her eyes.

“Lela,” Natasha sternly calls her name. It rips Lela’s attention from Clint and over to her. When Natasha’s got her full attention, Natasha says, “You’re pack now.”

Brows pinching together, Lela’s smile begins to die down a bit. Her heart hammers in her chest as she clicks her tongue and refutes the betas words, “Hate to break it to you Red, but I’m pretty much as packless as they come.”

Tapping harshly at her chest with a closed fist, Lela continues on, “Never had a bond, never will.”

It’s not entirely a lie. Lela figures that mate bond she broke doesn’t exactly count. Not when she’d never been the one to issue it. Not when she’d never bothered to feel it as she should. She’d been owned by it, owned by the scar on her neck, but she’d never felt it. Not like she remembers her teacher telling her she should.

'Those lucky few of you, and trust me when I say it'll very few of you, if you're ever bonded with an omega, you will feel it to the very root of your being. If any of you present as an omega, it is said to be all consuming. Your whole self being giving over to your chosen mate. It is unlike anything you
It hadn’t been as magical as her teacher had said. It had been all consuming but in the very literal sense. Lela was forced down to her knees. Her body owned like it was little more than an especially pretty thing. Whatever opinions she’d had, decisions she’d ever wished to make for herself, crushed under an alpha’s roar.

Lela had never felt Leo like she’d been told she would. A pack bond had never been formed between them like the stories said. It’d been like she’d been wrapped up in a black iron chain, rusted over and heavy. It had hurt her more than it had made her feel like she belonged. It had hurt her. Far more than his fists ever had. Far more than anyone ever could. Whatever they’d shared, it hadn’t been what the stories had promised her.

It had pulled her apart and broken her mind. Twisted up her soul and spit out whatever it was Lela was now.

So Lela doesn’t count that as a bond. She’d rather fucking die than call it one.

“You’ve never had a pack bond?” Clint repeats the words back, his eyes blown wide like he can’t believe the words can even be put in that order.

Running her tongue over her bottom lip, Lela pulls out a smoke and sparks up, only when it’s lit does she say over the butt of it, “What the fuck for?”

“Oh, okay, that explains a lot,” Clint sighs raggedly and broken. His right hand running through his hair and ruining what took him about twenty whole minutes to tame down.

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?” Lela bites out, her eyes narrowing onto the man.

“It means, Lela, that would explain why you never sealed the bonds since they formed,” Natasha informs her. Her green eyes are twisted dark like she’s debating jumping into her car and hunting down someone to hurt.

“What bonds?” Lela harshly growls out, smoke spilling from her lips as she felt a wicked and vicious kind of fire lick up the back of her throat. Whatever laughter the statement had prompted before is gone now. Anger replaces it now.

“Ours,” Clint tells her, soft and careful, like he’s trying to will her into understanding, his tone pleading for something Lela doesn’t get, “don’t you feel us?”

And as if to prove a point, the silk ribbon wrapped around her chest slithers. It runs warm across her, tugs at her heart like it’s trying to make itself known beneath her growing rage. Lela feels the way the steel band grows warm again, constricts to keep her tethered and not go flying. Lela even feels the way that blossomed flower pulses, confident and reassuring.

Her hindbrain, her fucking dirty back stabbing second nature bitch, crows happily from where she’s stuffed it down. It cries, joy filled and stupid, and makes her neck feel loose enough that it might tip back. It makes her chest grow tight like some kind of noise might come tumbling out. What kind of noise, Lela isn’t entirely sure, only that it’s building like steam in a tightly sealed valve.

The cigarette that had been tightly clamped between her lips nearly tumbles to the floor as her mouth goes slack. Eyes blown wide, Lela stares completely fucking dumbfounded up at the two of them. It takes her far longer than she’s willing to admit for her to gather enough of her mind to harshly spit out:
“Fuck you both.”

Lela won’t admit to running away, but it feels an awful lot like she is, as she books it into her new found place of work. Her mind is running a mile a second. Spinning in place as she tried to fit all these new bits of information into place. She doesn’t understand, she doesn’t want to understand. She wants to pretend she didn’t hear what she plainly heard.

But the damage’s been done. She knows now where the silk ribbon came from. She knows now where the steel band came from. She fears where the delicately petaled flower on her heart comes from.

Ignoring the men behind the front lobby desk, Lela heads for the elevators. She punches the button to the tenth floor, where Mr. Owen’s office sat, and forced the thoughts from her mind. Natasha was right, Lela grimly thinks, this was not the time or place for Clint to drop that fucking bomb on her.

In fact, Lela thinks, she could’ve gone her whole goddamn life without ever having felt the heat of that explosion on her flesh.

But the damage was done now, her whole mind made a fucking war-zone over it.

When the silk ribbon twists, the steel band thrums, and the flower pulse, Lela savagely and ruthlessly pushes them all away. She lets the fire of her anger keep them away. She grabs hold of the flames and lets her hands burn with it.

Some part of her, born of the worst of who she is, hopes to burn the bonds right out of her fucking body. She doesn’t turn back because she’s a no good fucking coward and just can’t will herself to do it. She just tucks tail and runs as far as her legs can carry her right now.

*~*

The person that’s in charge of seeing Lela around, of showing her the ropes, is an angry woman. From the tips of her toes to the ends of her fingers, the woman radiates stuck up bitch. Lela hates her almost immediately. She’s a bottled blonde beta with green eyes and a pretty enough face Lela wonders why she’s a janitor at all.

“How’d you even get a job here?” Claire demands as she watched Lela push around a loaded cleaners cart. The woman wasn’t even bothering to hide the disdain she held for Lela out of her voice.

And maybe it’s because she’s feeling all kinds of fucked up over the bullshit Clint and Natasha laid on her this morning, but Lela’s not up to dealing with this woman’s shit. So she shrugs, pushes the cart and hungers for a cig as she plainly stated, “Fucked the right guy, I guess. You?”

Wide eyed, Claire stares at her. Her face pulled up into shock and horror as she tried to work through the words Lela’s uttered. After a while, she purses her lips up ugly and mean and says, “Figures. You know how many of you come and go through here? Whore’s trying to sleep their way to the top. Trying to sink their dirty little claws into the avenger’s coat tails.”

Stilling only after Claire has done the same, Lela leans her hip against the carts railing and smirks up at her. Lela runs her tongue over her bottom lip and lets it peek out as she unabashedly declared, “Well, babe, Imma fuck my way higher than those bitches ever got. My pussy’s next level.”

“You’re disgusting!” Claire hissed, her scent—all faux flowers and lemon grass—burning up with her anger.
Now Lela isn’t looking for a fight. Not really. She’s pissed all to hell with the bullshit she’s trying to ignore, but she isn’t looking to punch a girls mouth in. Not really. Lela’s just in a mood and when she’s in a mood she gets to being the worst kind of fucking shithead.

“Maybe,” Lela shrugs and waggles her tongue at the obviously fake blonde, “But you’re stuck with me sweetheart, so just tell me what I got to do, where I gotta do it and get the fuck out of my face, yeah?”

“With an attitude like that, you’ll be gone in a week,” Claire informs Lela with a sneering smile. Her golden tanned arms cross over her chest as she put up a front. She’s got all the posture of a DomBeta but none of the actual mettle.

Lela’s pretty sure if she so much as grumbled a growl out—half heartedly—the girl would scramble out of her way. But Lela’s saving that up. She doesn’t actually want to get fired on her first day.

“You gonna show me what the fuck I gotta do bitch? Cuz it’s gettin’ real hard for me not to break your fuckin’ face in,” Lela spit out, her eyes growing hard as she let her anger bleed out of her. Lela can smell the way the hallway their standing in starts to reek of smoke like Lela’s thrown matches into a bin full of paper.

Racing to put space between them, the girl stares wide eyed at her before stuttering out, “Are you fucking crazy?!"

Scoffing, Lela grabs the handle of the cart and starts moving again throwing over her shoulder, “Maybe.”

After that, Claire’s eager as all shit to show Lela what needs to get done. She tells Lela the sections she’s been assigned, tells her how to clean and what to do when her cart got low or too full. When she’s done, Claire doesn’t even bother to say goodbye. She just turns tail and sprints to the nearest elevator. Her high placed pony tail bouncing with her hurried steps.

It turns out her job is actually pretty chill, all things considered. She’s just sweeping up floors, mopping the ones that need it and emptying out trash cans. Every once in a while she’ll get stopped by some sleek dressed business person and asked to wipe down their desk or window. Other than dealing with Claire’s shit, it’s pretty chill.

So Lela ends up losing herself to the steady rhythm she develops. Her mind clearing itself out as she worked to get places clean of grime that inevitably came back. So lost is Lela in the easy pace of it, she nearly misses it entirely when someone stops her cart clean in its tracks. Glancing up, Lela is met with just about the last face she’s willing to deal with today.

Grinning like he’s just been given the biggest fucking present on earth, Tony grips the cart and says, “Hey kid.”

“I’m working,” Lela bites out immediately as she pushed her cart into the body that was in its way.

“I can see that,” Tony laughs out as he slipped to the side and allowed her to pass. Only he falls into step, following her, “So how goes it?”

Growling at the fact that she’s being followed and bothered, Lela snarls out, “Don’t you got better shit to do right now?”

“Not really, I mean, I just ducked out of an ugly little meeting between the senator and the mayor, but no,” Tony informs her in a flippant manner. His whole body moving with the shrug he gives her.
Lela says nothing as she moves on to the next office. She knocks because she figures it’s the appropriate thing to do. When no answer comes, Lela swipes the badge she’d been given and pushes the door open with the heel of her foot and walks in backwards while pulling her cart inside. Lela leaves the cart in the doorway which acts like a not so subtle barrier between herself and the Alpha.

She sets to work with her broom and then clears out the trash. She’s in the middle of picking up her disinfectant sprays for the desk top when Tony calls out:

“So kid, what’re you doing for lunch?”

Spritzing the desk Lela doesn’t bother to pick up her gaze as she shrugged and lazily demanded, “Why?”

“Just wondering,” Tony mumbled as he rummaged through her cart, “Is the dynamic duo gonna drop by?”

“You mean the wonder-dicks?” Lela asked as she scrubbed at a questionable glob over the desk.

Barking out a laugh, Tony crows, “Please tell me you call them that to their face!”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Lela questioned brows pinched as she got a weird sense of deja vu. She feels a little like she’s been asked that before and a little like she’s answered the same way before.

When she glances up, Tony is smiling wide and happy as he nodded his head and fought off a round of laughter, “Because I’m pretty sure Natasha could kill you with a fucking thumb tack. She’s not the kind of girl you call names to her face. Or, you know, at all.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela fixes the keyboard back where she found it and eyed the large window at her back. It didn’t look like it needed a passing but Lela figures, it’s part of her job. Walking over to her cart, she replaces the spray she’s got with another and grabs her squeege. She works in silence to get the plane of glass clean and feels irritation bubble up inside her at the fact that Tony is still here.

She can feel his eyes boring into the back of her head.

Only when the window is spotless does she turn to glare at the alpha. Dumping her shit into the little spots it belonged in, she bites out, “Where’re you still here?”

Frowning, Tony moves out of the way for the cart again and says, “Still waiting on what you’re gonna do for lunch.”

“Why?” Lela repeats the word as she slammed the door behind her shut.

“Uh, you know, to eat. I mean, it seems pretty self explanatory.” Tony explained as a furrow formed between his brows.

“Obviously I’m gonna eat, asshole, what the fuck else would I do?” Lela snapped as she moved to the next office.

“Yeah, but like are you going to eat here at the break room, or are you going out?” Tony asks carefully, his voice doing something weird as it twisted itself into a casual note.

Swiping her badge again, Lela enters a new office and finds it in all kinds of shitty states. Grabbing her broom she goes through the whole motions and tosses over her shoulder, “I didn’t bring anything, so probably out, I guess.”
“Awesome!” Tony cheers from where he’s stuck in the hall again. His none too quiet shout makes Lela turn to stare at him. Her eyes narrowing in suspicion as she glared at him. When he see’s her expression he goes on to ask, “Wanna grab a bite to eat, with me, of course.”

Confused, Lela gets back to work. She doesn’t really get the alpha’s interest in her. She also doesn’t trust it. Alpha’s in general, Lela thought, were dangerous territory for her. She liked to keep them as far as humanly possible.

Almost every scar she’s got lining her body came from an alpha of some kind. She’s not eager to get to know why Tony’s fixated on her. She doesn’t think it’s fucking smart or safe. Sure, the dude had gotten her a job but Lela didn’t know him. For all she knew, he was looking to wrap a goddamn collar around her neck and tie her to some post.

With that thought, Lela finishes the window and pushes the man out of her way again while telling him, “No.”

“What?” Tony sounds surprised, whether he looks it, Lela isn’t sure since she isn’t looking at his face. When they’re in a new office he asks, “Why?”

“Because I fucking said so,” Lela bites out the words, lets them fall clipped and angry from her lips.

Lela’s never known an alpha to know the definition of the word no. For them to understand that it meant what it fucking meant. That no meant they couldn’t have whatever fucking thing they wanted. Lela’s always known them to take. To push because they were Alphas and everyone else wasn’t.

And so she’s hardly surprised when the man forces it, fights her on it.

“C’mon, I know a great place, it’s like two blocks from here. I can make reservations!” He offers, sounds eager like he’s excited at the possibility to get to sit down and eat with her.

All that anger Lela’s been trying to shove away from herself blares bright and hot now. The shit she’s trying not to think about, bonds and all that bullshit, rear their ugly little heads around. The flames of her rage lick up her throat till she’s spitting up lava and burning her tongue with it. Her anger comes from the way her hindbrain is demanding she reach it when all she wants to do is cut them off. Her anger comes from the way the bonds she doesn’t want keep scraping at her skin for attention. Her anger comes from the fact that she knows exactly what they are and what they’re doing.

Feeling her teeth grow long, Lela snarls, “I fucking said no! D’you know what that means? No? It means I don’t wanna. It means, if you ask me again, I’ll fucking rip your goddamn tongue out of your head. Do you get me?”

When she see’s the way the Alpha in front of her stumbles back and away from her cart Lela is given exactly four whole seconds of satisfaction. Something like dark pleasure swirls in the pit of her stomach at the way his eager expression crumbles. Something like hurt filed confusion causes his features to twist and Lela is happy for it all of four fucking seconds.

But then that’s when that damnable flower’s roots snake down and twist. It clears away the smoke of her rage and leave her with nothing but guilt.

Because, Lela’s self aware enough to know that the anger she’s got boiling in her has nothing to do with the man before her. He’s a fucking bystander caught in the path of her wildfire.

With a ragged breath, Lela drops her shit onto the desk and pushes the palms of her hands into her eyes. She wills her heart to slow just as she wills that pulsing flower away from herself. She doesn’t
want the comfort and ease it gives her. She wants it out of her. She wants that flower to wrap it’s roots around silk, around steel, and uproot the fuckers.

But that’s not how pack bonds worked, Lela thinks. Pack bonds, she’s come to understand, for better or worse, are stuck with you for life. Even if the bonds are neglected, willfully ignored, they don’t just fade. They lessen, sure, but never fade away. Bonds were for how ever long you lived. And Lela dreads with everything in her, that it means for a long while now that she isn’t dancing on the razors edge of life and death.

“It’s been a shitty day,” Lela tells the man as she pulled in a deep breath and let it rattle out from behind her sharp teeth.

“Clearly,” the alpha drawled, sarcastic and dry. No humor in his voice now.

Gritting her teeth, Lela drops her hands away from her eyes and glared at him. She’s got a fuck load of ugly shit to toss at him but she clamps her lips tight. Because Alpha or not, Tony didn’t deserve that. He didn’t deserve the vile shit that was seconds away from spilling out of her mouth. The man had, after all, offered her a job, hired her despite every reason not to. He’d done nothing to deserve all the hate she was pumping out at him.

Gathering her shit, Lela walks over to the cart and dumps them in. They don’t go where she’s been told they do but she isn’t about to rearrange them. Instead of pushing her cart out, Lela stands there and stares at the alpha. She wills her fucking anger to abate and says:

“I’m not eating any kind of weird bullshit.”

Quirking a brow, Tony smirks and asks, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Pushing her cart, Lela tells him, “It means, that place we went to last time was all kinds of fucked up.”

“I’ll have you know, that the Red Bell is a highly revered five star restaurant,” Tony announced as he followed her into the elevator and down to the tenth floor.

Scoffing, Lela sends the man a disbelieving look and mumbles, “It was fucking disgusting dude.”

When they reach the floor and the doors open, Lela heads to the room where the carts were housed and drops it off. Afterwards she heads to the room right beside Mr. Owens and clocks out like she’d been taught. Tony following her every step like if he lost sight of her she’d bail on her non-agreement to going out to eat with him. When they set to walking again, Tony’s only about two steps behind her. The tips of his shoes nearly clipping at her heels. Lela wants to snap at him for space but that dies the moment she spots Claires shocked expression.

Feeling a familiar kind of shithead twinge, Lela slows her steps. A half brilliant thought swirling up from the pit of her mind. She licks her lips as she allowed her face to go smooth and beckoning. In a tone she’d perfected long ago, Lela turns to the alpha at her side and practically purred out:

“So, what kinda place we headed to babe? I’m all kinds of hungry?”

“Uh?” Tony mumbles looking completely confused by the change of her tone and demeanor. With some kind of difficulty, he merely says, “Where ever you want to go.”

Eyes falling to half lidded, Lela let a lusty smile spread wide on her face. It’s the kind of smile that almost always guaranteed she’d get her ass into one of the passing cars back when she was living that life. She lets her body go smooth like she’s working a john and pushes herself closer to the alpha
once they’re stopped at the elevator doors. She lets her hand rest on the man’s forearm and looks up at him through her lashes.

Loud enough so that Claire can hear from where she’s standing shock still in the hall, Lela laughs low and flirtly, “You always so nice to the new girls, hun?”

Whatever Tony’s about to say is lost when Lela pushes him into the open Elevator doors. Before the doors can slide shut, Lela smirks darkly at Claire’s gaping face and sends her a wink with a smile that was all fangs and tongue.

Only when the elevator is moving and when they’re back to being comfortably distanced does Tony speak. He seems a little worried as he stated, “She’s going to think we’re sleeping together.”

Barking out a low laugh, Lela shakes her head and smirked, “Nah, she thinks I’m gonna try to fuck you.”

“And you…want her to?” Tony asks confused, his body is angled away from her like he’s not sure if he needs to push her away from himself. Like he’s no stranger to unwanted advances.

“She’s a bitch.” Lela informs him with a disgusted click of her tongue. When it still looks like Tony’s ready to dodge her, Lela laughs and tells him, “Don’t worry dickhead, you’re not my type.”

Issuing an affronted noise, Tony scoffs, straightens out the collar of his blinding white dress shirt collar, and says, “Kid, I’m everyones type.”

And yeah, maybe. Lela figures, he might be. What with the way Tony’s face was all kinds of handsome, he’d be just about everyones type. There was something about the thickly rimmed brown eyes he had. The way his pink lips, when smiling, could light up a room. Tony, alpha or not, probably had droves of people falling all over themselves trying to catch his attention. His face pulled in a way only older gorgeous men could have it. Tony was handsome as all hell, Lela thought, even with that weird ass goatee he had going.

All burning charm and bleeding charisma. But Lela’s not lying. Tony isn’t her type. Lela doesn’t really know what type she has, she knows genders never been an issue with her, but she doesn’t think she’s got a daddy kink.

“Sure dude, whatever helps you sleep at night,” Lela smirked as she dug her hands into her pant pockets and waited for the elevator to stop.

They both make their way out the lobby with little issue. It isn’t until they spill out into the city streets that Lela feels regret budding in her. Out where Natasha had parked her car sits a red sleek looking sports car. The kind you only saw in movies or fashion magazines. The kind of car that reeked of money and had droves of rap songs dedicated to it. It’s doors open, scissors style, upward the closer she and Tony approach. With a grin, Tony bounds to the drivers side and stares at her expectantly.

Lips pursed, Lela glares at the man as she stills just shy of touching the fancy looking car. She regrets ever feeling sorry for the asshole and coming with him. But damn if Lela wasn’t a sucker for big brown eyes. Tony had eyes that looked like they belonged to an especially innocent doe. All wide eyed and unassuming.

“What?” Tony asked as he pulled out a pair of sunglasses out of his dress jacket pocket.

“We can’t walk?” Lela gruffly questions, feels some kind of embarrassment well up in her at the thought of having to climb into a car she might dirty up.
Face pulled into genuine disgust, Tony tells her pointedly, “No. **Never.** I hate walking.”

Gritting her teeth, Lela climbs into the all black interior of the car and prays she doesn’t accidentally rip something up. The car, Lela has no doubt, probably cost about ten of her. She’s about to snap out something about Tony being an arrogant rich asshole when the doors swish shut and jolt her in place.

Grinning a wide and shit eating thing, Tony revs the engine and switches gears. The car roars to life; the explosion of sound only serving to unnerve her further. With ease, Tony pulls it onto the road and begins driving to wherever the hell he was taking her.

“So how do you feel about fish?”

Shifting in the deep set of the bucket seat, Lela sends the man a glance before fixing her gaze back onto the road, “What kind of fish?”

The man, Lela regretfully noted, drove like actual shit. He drove like his car wasn’t part of this reality and couldn’t actually burst into flames if it crashed into a running gas tanker. He drove like he was intentionally asking to become a splattered bloody smear on the tarmac. Lela’s been in exactly five different cop chases in stolen cars. None of them had been this dangerous or heart-attack inducing.

“Like, sushi?” Tony prompted as he literally pulled his car into the wrong lane and passed droves of cars in one go.

Wide eyed, Lela barks out a noise of surprise and gripped tight the door handle. Fear shoots up fast and hot up her spine as she stared wide eyed at the insane way Tony swerved in and out of the lanes. He runs about four red lights before Lela can work out the words:

“What the fuck is sushi?!”

“Oh kid!” Tony groans, his voice sounding all kinds of disapproving, “You’ve got to try it. It’s the best. Okay,” he says tapping his hands against the steering wheel before suddenly letting it go to pat at his pockets for his phone, “I’ll get us a table at my favorite sushi joint.”

A strangled kind of scream bubbles out of Lela’s throat as she scrambled to reach for the abandoned wheel, “You’re fucking driving!!”

Batting her hands away like Lela was being the insane one, Tony uncaringly says, “It’s fine.”

“Oh my fucking god!” Lela scram as he jumped the curb and proceeded to drive on the sidewalk and down an unoccupied alleyway.

“Shush!” Tony huffed out as he spoke into his phone, one left hand idly rested on the wheel, “I’m trying to get our table.”

“You’re going to fucking kill us!” Lela snarled out, her heart hammering wildly in her chest.

Face filled with bewilderment, Tony says as smooth as anything, “No I’m not, they don’t serve anything poisonous anymore.”

Lela snarls wildly at him as she worked to keep from screaming like a child. She watches with horror in her throat as a man coming out of back alley exit rushes to get out of their way. Lela swore, as she watched a pedestrian jump clear into a pile of trash, if she lived she was going to punch Tony hard enough to spill blood.

Eventually the high speed rush dies away as they pull up sharply to the front of a black and gray
restaurant. Tony throws his car into park on a fire lane and doesn’t seem one bit like he cares about fines or towing. He grins happy and excited as he turned to her and announced, “We’re here!”

Heart pumping in her chest, fear swirling up her brain, Lela flies across her seat with her fist clenched tight. A roar shakes the roof of her mouth as she cracked her balled up fist hard upon his face. She hits him dead center on his nose and watches his head snap back with the force of it.

“What the fuck!” Tony screams as he clutched at his now bleeding nose.

“You fucking asshole!” Lela yelled back, trying to gather enough breath to not feel like she was one bad step away from flying into a panic attack, “What kind of fucking asshole driving was that?!”

Tony doesn’t say anything, doesn’t answer her, to busy caught in his pain filled groans. He’s writhing in his seat as he clutched at his face. His eyes screwed up tight like he’s never been punched.

Mouth still spilling out growls, Lela sinks back into her seat and gruffly tells him, “Lean your head back, dickhead.”

Caught up in his pain or not, Tony listens. He tilts his head back and grips his nose tight. Nasally, he groans out, “I think you broke my fucking nose.”

“Good.” Lela hissed at him, teeth bared as she sent him a glower, “You fucking deserved it.”

It isn’t until Lela’s heart has slowed and fear has bled out of her does she feel a small twinge of...something for her actions. Obviously, the asshole did deserved the punch, but probably not the broken nose. She feels kind of bad watching his handsome face get twisted up into pain like that. His steady stream of orchid, jasmine and leather scent going sour with the smell of cooper tang. Just like back at the tower, Lela feels guilt well up in her veins.

So she purses her lips and fiddles with placing a smoke on her lips. With a click the door slides open and she spills out into the city streets. Lighting her cig she closes the door and makes her way to the drivers side as lazily as she can.

With little difficulty she pops open Tony’s door and watches as the man struggles to keep his bloody hands from making a mess of his face. The twinge of guilt she felt before intensifies. Makes her feel like a grade A asshole. But she bites it down and blows a plume of smoke out through her nose before gruffly demanding:

“C’mere.”

Big brown eyes laden in pain and discomfort, Tony glances over to her. He holds his head in an odd angle to keep the blood up. He doesn’t move, just stares up at her suspiciously, like he wouldn’t put it past her to lash out again and hit him. If at all possible, Lela feels that guilt get heavier. Her stomach ties itself up ugly and vicious. It leaves her with a bitter tang in her mouth because again, Tony probably didn’t deserve her shit.

Reluctantly and impatiently, Lela waves the man over to her. Beckons him closer with her right hand currently holding her smoke. She watches as the alpha rearranges his body so that his feet sit on the pavement and his ass sits in the seat of his car. It’s awkward, considering the size of the car and seats, but Tony doesn’t say a word.

Letting her smoke dangle from her lips, Lela stoops down and reaches for his face. To Tony’s credit, freshly injured from her or not, he doesn’t flinch when her hands come near. He holds himself
carefully still as she batted away his hands and assessed the damage. Lela’s got all kinds of experiences with injuries. She knows how to set a broken nose well enough that it hardly leaves a bump.

But when she takes in his nose, bloody and swollen, she knows by the simple glance that isn’t broken. Tony was just a bleeder. Pinching his nose between her thumb and index, Lela tells him from around her smoke, “It ain’t broken."

“It feels broken,” Tony petulantly states. Sounding for all the world like an angry child.

Whatever kind of reservations Lela might have had about Tony being a typical Alpha dies in this moment. Because Lela had just punched him, hard enough to bleed, and still the Alpha hadn’t so much as roared at her. He hadn’t tried to hit her back. His scent hadn’t even so much as bled into anger. He’d gotten hit and just kept his peace about it. Let her do as she did without ever presenting himself as the bigger threat.

Whatever kind of Alpha Tony was, it wasn’t the type Lela had grown used to. Her hindbrain slithers, treachously and pitifully, that maybe she should do something stupid. Like apologize? Bare her neck and offer herself up small and delicate like. But she crushes that down. Makes it so she can barely feel it underneath the guilt she’s got going.

Rolling her eyes, Lela pinches tighter and smirks at the way his face scrunches up, “It ain’t broken asshole.”

Pushing away her hand, Tony peers into the mirror as he cleaned up the blood with a wipe from the middle console. When he’s clean of blood he spends about the whole length of Lela’s cigarette looking at his nose in forty different angles. He frets over the swell of it like he’s worried it might stay like that forever.

“Don’t worry about it boss-man,” Lela scoffs, as she stared at his vanity, “Still be breaking hearts with a swollen nose.”

“You’re damn right I will,” Tony bit out determined, eyes cutting over to her like it was his personal mission now to garner more attention this way.

Laughing, Lela flicks her dead cig away and says, “Still not my type though.”

With as much dignity as he could, Tony stepped out of his car and closed the door with a firm hand. His smile is crooked as he slipped ahead of her, “I’ll grow on you.”

“Like fucking mold,” Lela snarked as she kept the pace.

To that Tony only laughs but says nothing else. Just like the last place, the restaurant they’re in is all kinds of fancy. It reeks money even with it’s sparsely decorated arraignment. The moment they walk in people scramble to get Tony seated. They give him the best table and immediately bring out trays upon trays of food. They sit everything between the two of them and then vanish.

The food that she’s been presented is fancy and strange. Lela’s not an actual hermit person so she knows what sushi looked like, seen enough movies and tv shows to understand what it’s supposed to look like. But Lela’s a country bumpkin at the heart of things. She’s never actually tried it.

“Okay kid, take your pick,” Tony waves his hand like he’s presenting the worlds greatest treasure.

Glancing down at her plate laid over with two little sticks, Lela goes, “What is it?”
“Sushi,” Tony announces as he picked up his chopsticks and began picking sliced little white rice rimmed circles. He loads up his plate with two of everything. Some of the shit he grabs has slices of raw fish laid over top of it.

With a healthy amount of suspicion Lela grabs a plain looking one with her fingers and pops it into her mouth. It doesn’t taste bad, but, it doesn’t exactly taste like anything either. It’s weird but not awful. Lela knows she’s had worse. So she swallows it down and reaches for another.

“Do you want a fork?” Tony asks before ignoring her completely and waving down a waiter. Calling out over the soft silence of the half empty place, Tony calls out for forks and then turns in his seat to send her a smile.

Brows pinched, Lela continues to chew through her food while thinking, she should’ve grabbed a soda.

“So kid, tell me a little about yourself,” Tony starts as he took from the waiter two pairs of forks. He hands one to Lela and abandons his chopsticks for the other.

Spear the prongs of her fork through an orange sprinkled roll, Lela shrugs and says, “Not much to say. I mean, you pretty much got the gist of it right?”

“Not really, I know what Bruce has told me and what Pepper’s willing to say, but I don’t know who you are,” Tony tells her, keeps his tone light as he dipped his sushi in a little jar filled with reddish looking mayo, “I want to get to know you for myself.”

“Why?” Lela grumbles over the food in her mouth.

Shrugging his shoulders, Tony levels her with an open honest look, his eyes glittering in a way that no eyes should ever do and says, “I’m curious.”

Quirking a brow, Lela glances over the spread of things and spots tiny little brown crescent shaped things. She’s working on getting herself one when she mumbles, “Curiosity killed the cat Tony.”

“But satisfaction brought it back,” the man argues with a sly smile.

Rolling her eyes Lela pops the crescent shape thing into her mouth and instantly groans. Past the strange flimsy brown covering, something meaty and juicy sits. The flavor explodes onto her tongue as she chews on it.

“Fuck,” Lela groaned as she reached for the whole tray of strange little things.

She’s working through a pork filled one when Tony blithely asks, “So I take it you’re a dumpling fan?”

“That what they are?” Lela says around a full mouth. She’s mixing pork and beef together and it’s fucking insanely delicious. Far better than the sushi had been.

“Seriously kid?” Tony huffs out, his face pulled into shock, “Where are you even from? Did you grow up in a cave by the sea side or something? How have you never tried sushi or dumplings?”

“Texas,” Lela mumbles as she dipped one of the dumpling things in some kind of vinegar type thing. Lela doesn’t even bother to feel any kind of shame for the way she moans out happily.

“Yeah but which part cause the last time I went to Dallas, it was pretty diverse,” Tony announces, confusion in his voice as he watched her with wide eyes polish off the twenty or so dumplings.
“Yeah, Dallas man, it’s a big city. I’m from the boarder side of things. Like, close enough to the beach to hit it whenever we wanted to but about a fucking twenty minute car ride from Reynosa. We don’t have shit like this back there.”

Or, at least, not when Lela was around. But things change and for all she knew there was a sushi shop on almost every corner of her sleepy town now. She wonders if people go. They should, Lela thinks, for the fucking dumplings alone.

“So what did you have?” Tony lightly probes as he worked on trying to steal one of the dumplings off her plate.

His hand stills when she glares at him heatedly, pulling the plate closer to herself Lela goes, “I don’t know, regular shit. Like taquerias.”

And man, Lela thinks, these dumplings might be the shit but how she missed food from her hometown. She’d stopped at any mexican owned restaurants when she could find them here in the city and she had enough money. But it wasn’t the same. It was the same dishes and everything but it was the flavor. It was that tang she was missing. The oily mess that was her culture and heritages givings. Which Lela figures is just homesickness and the minute cultural differences.

What she wouldn’t do for a papa preparrada. Dirty ugly shit, that’s what.

“Tacos?” Tony questions, looks like he’s trying to understand what she’s just said.

“Yeah, it’s like a mexican restaurant, but for like tacos and shit,” Lela shrugs finishing off the last of the dumplings.

Leaning back in her seat she stares listlessly at what remains of the spread. It’s mostly sushi but she’s not really feeling up for after she’s just had bomb ass dumplings. So she leans back and breathes out deep and satisfied. She could easily go for some more because she’s not exactly full, but, it’s as good as anything.

And it’s in that feeling of contentment that Lela almost slips and treads on the things she’s trying to keep buried within her. Almost as if they could feel it, which Lela guesses they kind of could, the bonds flicker up. They stretch outward towards her, timid and unsure, probing as if trying to get a feel for her. With a snarl ticking up on her face, Lela pushes them back and away.

Pushing them away makes some phantom kind of pain kick up in her chest. Makes it so she feels a little like she’s been punched a few days ago and can still feel the sore ache. Her hindbrain doesn’t like it. It writhes like it’s just been doused in boiling hot water. But Lela ignores it; beats it back like she’d been taught.

“So kid,” Tony starts, sipping from his strange cup of water with green leaves sprinkled underneath the ice, “We gonna talk about it?”

“Talk about what?” Lela grumbles, feels some kind of apprehension stir up caught underneath those big brown eyes.

Those eyes as unassuming as they sometimes looked, were sharp as Natasha’s. Lela had no doubt they were probably just as dangerous if they ever wanted to be. Lela guesses it has to do with how much sadness they held. After all, the people who knew how to hurt others best were the type of people who’d been hurt themselves. Lela wonders, briefly, if she’s got eyes like that too.

But then she figures, probably not. She’s a mangy little junk yard dog. Junk yard dogs didn’t need to be sharp eyed they just needed to be mean. And that’s her, a mean dog.
“‘bout why you snapped at me the way you did,” Tony tells her like he’s not at all hung up on the fact that it had happened. But more like he’s worried about where it came from.

“Told you, it’s been a shitty first day,” Lela rebuffs him easily. Ignores the way she kind of wants to talk about what’s currently eating her up.

“Kid, you just broke my nose,” Tony drily drawls. His brow sitting high on his face. What he doesn’t say is ‘you owe me’. But Lela hears it anyway.

Face pulled up into a snarl, Lela bites out, “It ain’t broken asshole.”

The expression he wears pretty much spells out, ‘still’.

And Lela guesses, yeah, she did kind of owe him. For the job. For the food. For the hit. Lela knows she could easily just tell the man to fuck off. It’d be more than just a little easy for her to push him back and away from herself. Because shit, if she could do it to the bonds she’s got running around in her, she could do it to this Alpha.

Lela knows, she could probably talk this shit over with Sam when she got off of work. It’d be easier. It was effortless going to Sam. Letting her shit just bubble out of her mouth. But then, maybe she’s getting to that point where not everything could be fixed by the man’s easy smiles and smooth scent. At some point, Lela’s got to work her shit out on her own. Sam didn’t, after all, sign up to be her personal fucking life assistant.

Huffing out a breath, Lela runs a ragged hand down her face and growls out, “You got bonds dude?”

“Uh, you mean like Pack bonds?” Tony starts, his face and voice filled in surprise.

Growling, Lela bites out, “Obviously dickhead, what else?”

“Oh,” Tony inelegantly goes. He drops his fork onto his plate and squirms uncomfortably in his seat for a second. Eventually, he says in a completely fake casual way, “Obviously.”

And Lela doesn’t know what it is, or how it’s come to be, but instantly feels that for the lie it is. Wide eyed, she stares at the Alpha before her and doesn’t bother to not gape in his direction. Because there he sat, an Alpha the pinnacle of the best of the dynamic, fucking packless. Lela would laugh if she didn’t feel the cold hard sting of irony keeping her quiet.

She understands where that sad eye look comes from now. The way Tony’s eyes practically bled with his heartache. He was packless. Alone and set a drift. Lela’s never heard of an Alpha like that. Even the ones on the street managed to get themselves some kind of gamma to keep them from going crazy. Alphas, more than any of them, needed bonds to keep them tethered. Or else the worst kinds of their instincts came running out.

Tony, Lela suddenly realizes, was just as much broken as she was.

That knowledge is what softens Lela. Makes her hindbrain sneak out and make her go smooth like. Pulling her gaze down, Lela stares at her hands and says, “Me either. Well, up until yesterday, I didn’t have any.”

“At all?” Tony sounds breathless as he asks, doesn’t bother to correct her when she lumps them both together.

“I mean, I was pretty sure I didn’t. And then, bam, wake up this morning and I’ve got three.” Lela
says with a dark laugh spilling from her lips. She’s got an ugly type of urge to smoke, but she’s got to make her pack last, and with the way shit’s going she’s not sure when she’ll be able to replace it.

“Three?” Tony huffs out, sounds just as shocked as Lela had felt over it all, “How? I mean, bonds take time, they don’t just appear out of nowhere.”

“I mean, I felt two of them, I think, before they could settle in. I just didn’t really know what they were. I figured it was just—“ Lela’s words die on her tongue as she realizes just what she was about to say. Omega bullshit. They’d wanted to come so easily off her mouth Lela feels blind sided by it. Gritting her teeth she goes on to say, “I didn’t know what they were. Haven’t ever felt bonds before.”

Feeling her reluctance for what it was, Tony doesn’t bother trying to dig at her. He merely nods before shifting his gaze to the drink her swirls around. It takes him a moment to find the words he wants to say:

“I get you. I mean, up until Pepper, I didn’t know what bonds were supposed to feel like. I’d never had bonds before. My parents, they weren’t the bonding type, you know? Half formed bonds, they just, they aren’t the same. But when I met Pepper, everything just fell into place. It took me two whole years to realize what it was. And Pepper, she’s a saint you know. She just let me work it out on my own. Let me figure it out and just accepted me as I was.

Bruce was a different story altogether. That man, he’s…he’s something else. Don’t let his little mild mannered doctor routine fool you. He’s got a wicked sense of humor once he gets comfortable. When we bonded, it just…it felt easy as breathing. Like, he was a piece of me I didn’t know I was missing until I found him. It…it was just easy.”

And for as much as Tony is smiling while he’s speaking, Lela isn’t so dense that she doesn’t see the pain in his eyes. The way it bleeds into his smile, turns it into a sorrow filled thing around the edges. His anguish, because that’s what it was, spilled into his scent. It turned the orchid flowery smell to him into something rotten and old.

“So what happened?” Lela finds herself asking, doesn’t realize she’s asked until the words are out. She’d figured Bruce had belonged to Tony in someway or another. What with the way the good doctor had hidden behind the man when she’d caught them following her. The way Bruce had stuck close to his side spoke of pack even then. Lela knew with a goddamn glance, they were something to each other.

Lela had also guessed much the same about Pepper. Alpha’s didn’t just angle themselves into a fight in front of just any beta the way Tony had done for Pepper back at the Red Bell.

The smile Tony wears is equal parts self deprecating and dark humor as he shrugged his shoulders, “I mean, what didn’t happen? I fucked up.”

Lela feels like there’s a hell of lot more to it than that. But she isn’t about to dig. Tony had left her gaping wounds alone. She was willing to do the same. So she simply nods, keeps her gnawing curiosity to herself. Leaves the man his secrets because she knows what it’s like to have ones mistakes spear into her with every waking breath. Again, Lela is hit with that feeling, Tony and her were much alike.

Broken and still breaking, trying to hold onto the shards of who they were by their mere hands. The razor sharp edges splitting into skin and leaving them bloodier for it.
Only when the silence stretches out deep does Lela huff out breath and ask, “So, d’you always bring out new hires for lunch?”

Laughing, Tony struggles to push away whatever past he’s got eating at him at the moment. Eventually he manages and tells her, “No, not really. But when someone calls me a dickhead at every twist and turn, well, I have to try my best to win them over. Call me a compulsive people pleaser.”

Smirking, Lela runs her tongue over her teeth and lets it peek out of her mouth as she asked, “I call you an asshole too.”

Pointing finger guns at her, Tony winks and says, “I know, you’re a sweetheart. I haven’t forgotten.”

Barking out a laugh, Lela shakes her head and feels the heavy tension fall away from them easily. Fiddling with the fork in her hand, Lela twirls it while casually asking, “So what’s the deal with you boss man? What kind of business you run that you can just ditch work to take out girls on an hours long lunch?”

“Oh, you know, a little of this, a little of that,” Tony shrugs, seems to find no interest in explaining the details of his job. He sounds a little dispassionate about it. Like it’s not something that’s got his heart and soul in it. Like it was something he did and not what he wanted.

Which is weird, but Lela understands at least a little, so she says, “Pays the bills then, yeah? I mean, you’ve got that little toy car out there out of it. Can’t be all bad.”

“Yeah, pays the bills,” Tony agrees with a laugh, his eyes crinkling up and showing laugh lines, “But I’d rather be stuck in the suit all day than be back there right now. The elections are coming up, every runner up is coming by asking for the support of the old crimson and gold.”

“The what?” Lela asks, confused. She’s taking a tentative sip of her own drink, pink and strange. It taste like strawberry and peppermint. It tastes like actual shit.

“Iron Man,” Tony elaborates with a grin that was growing on his face. It grew sharper the longer Lela looked at him with pinched brows.

“You know him or something?”

“Kid,” Tony starts, voice tinged with something like bubbling excitement, he leans his elbows on the table and tells her, “I’m Iron Man.”

Brows high on her face, Lela goes, “No shit?”

“Okay, kid, calm down,” Tony blithely states, grumbling under his breath as his face fell in mild disappointment, “don’t make a scene,”

“Seriously?” Lela questions, ignores the surprise running through her head.

“As serious as a heart-attack. Tony Stark, playboy billionaire by day and playboy billionaire superhero by night, that’s me,” Tony announces with his thumbs pointed back at himself. A shit eating grin spread wide on his face. Pride makes the alphas scent grow heavier in the air around them. All aged leather and musky.

For a good long while, Lela is quiet, she keeps nursing the drink she doesn’t really like. Her eyes stay pinned on Tony’s unmoving and unrelenting. Trying to catch some kind of tell that will let her know the man was full of shit. When it becomes apparent that the man wasn’t lying, Lela purses her
lips and abandons the drink in her hand. She swallows back the bitterness in her mouth and allows the truth to seep into her.

Lela figures this is just another one of those things she’d have gotten faster if she’d been a hell of a lot smarter. She’d have connected the dots because just now is she realizing why the name Stark had felt so familiar.

How or why she didn’t piece it together so long ago, Lela is certain it’s got everything to do with her missing education.

“That explains how you know the wonder-dicks.”

Brows pinching, Tony goes, “Does it?”

“Yeah, I mean, they’re assassins. I’m not sure how wall street works but I’m pretty sure they don’t running around with killers the way you and Pepper do.” Lela tells him.

“Ha, okay, I guess so,” Tony laughs, his eyes crinkling up before he turned a confused gaze her way and asked, “Wait, so you knew what Clint and Natasha were and you didn’t know who I was?”

Shrugging, Lela merely offers him a frown and says nothing else.

Pursing up his lips, Tony grumbles, “I’ve got to do something about my PR guy. This is getting ridiculous.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela kicks back her chair and gets to her feet. Wordlessly, Tony does the same and calls to end their little lunch. After Tony pays, gathers what looks like a whole six trays from the front desk, do they make their way out the restaurant. Slipping into the car, Lela sends the Alpha a vicious glare and threatens:

“You drive like shit again and I will break your fucking nose.”

“Kid, I’m pretty sure you can’t threaten an actual superhero. It’s like a crime or something,” Tony mused as he gunned the car into motion.

Snorting at the man, Lela sinks into her seat and thinks, Tony wasn’t all bad.

For an alpha.

She kind of liked him. Saw a hell of a lot of herself reflected back at her in his gaze. They probably held more common ground than she would ever understand. Even if they came from two different worlds and from opposite sides of the dynamic pyramid.

He still wasn’t her type though.

*~*

“Tony!” comes a sharp bark that was all kinds of frustrated and angry.

Lela doesn’t even need to look to know the beta bark came from a familiar blonde blue eyed babe. She could pick out Pepper’s voice out in the dark. It was just that impressionable. The moment they step out of the elevator, spilling into some off limits section Lela hasn’t been cleared to enter, Pepper descends on them.

“You ingrate little ass!” Pepper hissed, her whole body is poised like she’s about to fly across and hit the man currently hiding behind Lela, “You said you were going to the bathroom! You’ve been gone
for two hours!"

“Ah, Pep! Sorry, got lost,” Tony offers with his usual flare of shithead lies.

“I’ll have you know, that the Senator was offended. He spent the last thirty minutes before he left screaming about labeling you a damn criminal!” Pepper bit out. Her sky blue eyes hard as nails.

Lela’s never been afraid of Pepper, never had a reason to, but she’s well on her way. Caught in that face of fury, all beautiful and vengeful, Lela’s not above turning the fuck around and heading back to the job she’s currently not doing. She’s got this funny feeling building in the pit of her belly that reminds her what it was like to stand before her teacher and admit she’s done something wrong. Lela’s belly swoops out from underneath her and it has her stepping forward:

“Ah, he took me to lunch.”

Looking like she’s just realized there was someone between herself and Tony, Peppers eyes flash down and take in Lela’s face. Wide eyed, a breath taking smile spreads across Pepper’s whole face. Her scent, all cotton, lavender and chamomile explodes. It warms up and swaddles Lela like Peppers trying to drag her over into her body by that alone.

“Lela!” Pepper exclaims, sounds bright and happy as she wrapped her arms around Lela’s frame. Pepper doesn’t even mind the way Lela goes still and awkward. When Pepper pulls away, she goes, “I heard you started today! I’m so happy!”

“Uh,” Lela starts as she shifted so that Tony could walk around her, “Me too.”

“So Tony took you out for lunch?” Pepper asks her, seems less like she’s angry and now like she’s worried over Lela, “Did everything go alright?”

“Yeah,” Lela says, forces herself to be as casual as anything, “Pretty good.”

And as if she isn’t really trusting what Lela’s saying, Pepper glances back to level a firm glare over her head at Tony. Lela see’s the moment Pepper registers the tissue stuffed nose Tony is sporting. Where it had been funny to watch the people of the lobby gawk at Tony’s bloody nose, it wasn’t so now.

Lela regrets following the man up here. She kind of regrets following through on her threat and hitting the man on the nose again. Lela hadn’t broken it, but she’d made him bleed well enough.

Growling, Pepper straightens her shoulders and glares like a damn demon at Tony as she demanded, “What did you do?”

“Wha—Nothing!” Tony cried out. Putting the bags of food he’d brought with him at his chest, “I brought you a little late lunch.”

“Your nose looks broken,” doctor Banner’s voice says from somewhere behind Pepper.

Lela has to angle her body away from Pepper to see past her and over to the gamma man. He stands awkwardly at least a foot away from Pepper. His hands stuffed into the front pockets of his navy blue slacks. He sends Lela a wry smile before he ducks his face away.

“It ain’t,” Lela informs the doctor with a small grin. When it looks like Bruce is about to ask why Tony’s face is banged up, she tells him, “But trust me, it wasn’t for lack of trying.”

Tony was a strange type of Alpha, but like all Alpha’s before him, he was sturdy. his nose refused to
break under Lela’s fist.

“Tony,” Pepper growled out, stern and unyielding, “What did you do?”

“Pepper, honestly! Nothing! Why do you guys always assume the worst out of me!” Tony huffs out exasperated and just a tiny bit hurt. His face is all screwed up like he’s being cornered and outnumbered.

The man, despite being an alpha, was looking for any means of escape. And after spending an entire afternoon with him, Lela can find no compassion or sympathy for the ass. She finds herself grinning at his childish expressions.

“Because you have a broken nose,” Pepper harshly repeated, only to plant her hands at her hips and finish off with, “And that usually means you did something wrong.”

“It ain’t broken,” Lela huffs out a tired sigh and leans back on her heels. She’s smiling when she adds on, “And if he’d ‘ave driven like a normal person, he wouldn’t be bleeding again.”

“You drove?!” Pepper screeches like Lela’s only added fuel to the fire. Flailing her hands in the air, Pepper accuses him, “You know you can’t be driving! You don’t have a damn license Tony!”

“He doesn’t have a license?” Lela asks Bruce, who only seems to shrug and nod for his part. A reluctant kind of exasperated expression painted across his face.

“It got suspended when he managed to crash into a Starbucks four months ago,” Pepper tells her, her eyes on Tony but her ears catching all. Lela was just a tad bit intimidated.

“Tony don’t go flying around, Tony don’t go driving when you don’t have a license, Pepper make up your mind!” Tony huffs out, his face pulled up like he’s grown utterly tired with the tone of the conversation. Like he was already putting it down at his feet to be picked up at a later time. He continues on in a flippant note that even Lela can tell was dripping in sarcasm, “How do you want me to get around? I have yet to figure out teleportation. Brucie won’t help me!”

“You could’ve walked,” Bruce pipped up only to have Tony screech out:

“I will not walk!”

“Okay, I get why you hit him now,” Bruce sighs out as he pulled his glasses off the bridge of his nose and idly cleaned the lenses. When he looks at Lela he offers her a tired smile and goes, “I wanted to hit him the first time I made the mistake of getting into his car.”

Grinning, Lela holds up a lazy two finger salute and jokes, “Don’t worry doc, I tagged his ass twice, one for you and one for me.”

Bruce grins, his pale brown eyes twinkling as his lips spread. He looked far more prettier when he smiled, Lela noted. His face looked brighter when he smiled. Whatever dark shroud that hung on his head lifted. Made it so his head didn’t hang so heavy under the weight of whatever held him down. Lela liked it.

But that light is gone the moment his pale brown eyes zero in on her hand and he announces to the whole of the hallway, “You’re hurt?”

“Huh?” is all Lela says as she follows his gaze down to her own hand. There on her right knuckles is a scratch of red. They aren’t split, because the skin over her knuckles has long since hardened, but they are slightly swollen. She frowns as she shrugs off the doctors concern, “Nah, not really.”
Spinning on her sharp heel, Pepper turns to eye Lela’s fist and goes soft. Her expression morphs into worry as she reaches for Lela’s hand and cradles it. Lela lets her because, well…because.

“Oh, your knuckles are swelling,” Pepper tutted with her tongue and then looked onto Lela’s face like Lela was two seconds away from falling dead, “We’ll fix you right up.”

“Some ice should get the swelling down,” Bruce helpfully chimed, already walking back to wherever he came from, a determined set in his shoulders.

Hand still encased in Peppers’, Lela is forced to follow the blonde beta. She goes reluctantly her head only turning to Tony when the man cried out:

“Uh, Hello? Broken nose over here! I’m still bleeding.”

“It ain’t broken,” Lela tossed over her shoulder as she watched the alpha man follow after them all.

Glowering at her, Tony frowns and says, “Yeah, but I still deserve a little TLC.”

Laughing, Lela shakes her head and enters some kind of Lab. Bruce is pulling out ice from a large fridge and wrapping it in clothe when they enter. He motions for the only available chair and Pepper quietly leads Lela to it. With a stern blue eyed stare sent her way, Lela drops into it.

“Honestly, it’s fine,” Lela argues when Pepper takes the ice wrapped bundle and applies it to her hand.

“I know, but, I just want to make sure,” Pepper tells her a soft smile on her lips as she delicately placed the ice to Lela’s hand.

The ice does alleviate some of the burn on her hand, in the end. But Lela knows it would’ve been just fine if she had just left it alone. Peering around Pepper’s body, she spots Tony pouting on a work table, his bags of food sitting beside him. He’s broody right up until Bruce walks up to him and places a second ice wrapped bundle against his nose. The lines of his shoulders goes smooth and downward even if his face lights up in pain.

“Ow,” Tony complained.

“I’m barely touching you,” Bruce says, his face twisted up into quiet amusement.

“It’s broken,” Tony whined, eyes going big and puppy dog, “Be gentle.”

Laughing, Bruce shakes his head before repeating Lela’s words, “It isn’t broken Tony.”

“He just can’t take a punch,” Lela informs the group with a small smirk tilting up the ends of her lips.

“Oh kid, I feel personally attacked. Today alone you’ve called me an asshole, a dickhead, made a snide remark about my good looks and then hit me. It’s starting to feel like you don’t like me,” Tony huffed out as Bruce repositioned the ice.

“What kind of snide remark?” Pepper asks, a growing smile on her face.

Rolling her eyes, Lela tells the blonde, “I told him he wasn’t my type and clearly the prima donna that he is, is still hung up on it.”

Grinning, Pepper turns to share a look with Bruce. They say nothing, but their eyes glitter in shared humor. It strikes Lela then, that Tony might not be bonded with them anymore, but Bruce and Pepper were still very much so. Tied tight together by what was left of a Pack Tony had once been a
part of.

In that moment, Lela feels her heart go out for Tony. She remembers with clarity the sorrowful expression he’d worn at the restaurant. The way his eyes had fallen as he told her that he had been the one to make a mistake. Lela feels such sadness for the man then, she feels it pulse savagely in her hindbrain. Makes her want to push Pepper and Bruce tighter to the alpha man. Makes her want to pull the alpha by the ear and force him to fix things.

Lela cannot begin to imagine what it must feel like for the man to be on the outside of a pack he had once created. A drifter, a loner, an outsider. Forced away.

Something like bitter kind of pity swells in her chest. Makes it so that Pepper’s soft hands feel like anvils on her flesh. Because there she was being fretted upon by a pack that didn’t belong to her. Slipping into the cool rhythm of it like she belonged but didn’t. With a firm push, she pulls away from Pepper’s hands and rises to her feet.

“I should be heading back,” Lela says to the room, starts heading towards the door.

“Are you sure?” Pepper asks, doesn’t reach for her but her face looks like it’s a near thing.

Nodding, she glances at the alpha whose got his eyes pinned to her face, “Been gone for a lot longer than my break shoulda been.”

Pulling away from Bruce, Tony reaches for a stray bit of paper and starts madly scrambling to write onto it. When he’s done, he hops off the table and hands it to her with a wide grin, “Here, in case you get any trouble.”

Brow raised, Lela takes the paper in her hand and flips the thing over so she could read it. On it is the elegant words written far too large and with too much flair:

‘Please excuse the kids tardiness, I took her for a Boss/Employee field trip. Got lost. couldn’t find our way back. All’s well now, she’s a good kid. Don’t fire her. T. Stark.’

Laughing, Lela shakes her head at the alpha before telling him, “You’re a shithead.”

“And again with the names!” Tony huffed out like he was genuinely upset by it. Though going by the grin in his eyes and on his face, he wasn’t, “I am your boss, you know.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela nods and tucks the paper into her back pocket, she offers the three of them a two finger salute and slips away with a, “See ya boss man.”

*~*

All in all, her first day wasn’t all that bad. Aside from getting into a weird kind of argument with Mr. Owens that pretty much summed up what the old man thought of social climbers, there wasn’t much to remark about the end of her shift. She’d left without running into any familiar faces and slipped out into the city streets.

It’s only when she’s about ten or so minutes from the hotel does Lela remember the bullshit from this morning. It stops her dead in her tracks. Makes her back pedal till she’s far enough away. She’s not ready to be confronted with the bonds she’s been ignoring all day. She’s not ready to deal with whatever kind of bullshit came next. She just…wasn’t.

Spotting the first payphone she pumps her last of her money and dials for Sam. He answers on the second ring.
“Lela?”

“Uh, yeah,” Lela starts, her breath is coming out a little short on account of how fast she’d back tracked, “You got time?”

And then, because this is the first time she’s bothering to look around, she notices the way the sun hangs heavy in the sky. The way the sky is beginning to darken. It’s late, well past seven.

“I mean, it’s cool if you don’t. It’s pretty fuckin’ late actually. You know what, it’s cool, never mind, yeah? I, um, I just wanted to, fuck…”

“Hey, I got time girl.”

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela nods and says, “Meet you there.”

She hangs up before she tries to wiggle out of it again. She doesn’t bother getting her change before she rushes into the open street and onto the other side of the road. She’s got shit for bus fare, so she’s stuck walking. This time around, Lela wasn’t going to let the man wait around. She picks up the pace and pushes herself hard.

*~*

It’s dark by the time Sam rolls up. He smiles at her easy and nervous. Lela’s about to ask him why he’s got a weird look in his eyes before she feels it. Like a snap and a sting. She feels the flower in her chest unfurl it’s petals and shake itself out.

Lela nearly drops the smoke she’s got pinched between her fingers. Her eyes going wide as she tossed into the open air, “You?!”

“Ah, yeah,” Sam says, rubbing at the back of his head. He looks sheepish and awkward as he shuffled where he stood just shy of the picnic table, their table.

Pinching her lips over her smoke, Lela bites out, “This is some next level bullshit.”

“It wasn’t intentional, I swear,” Sam is quick to say, his face genuine and honest under the park lamp. The light bathes him in orange, makes him look like he’s that one greek god who wore the sun as a crown and was dressed in gold, “I mean, I don’t regret it. But, it wasn’t intentional. It kind of just happened.”

Digging her fingers into the temples of her head, Lela breathes in smoke and holds it till her lungs burn. This was not how things were supposed to go. She’d avoided the hotel suite and the silk ribbon and steel band it housed only to come running in the direction of the flower bud.

In that moment, Lela aches to know what she did in a past life to have this much shitty luck. What kind of an asshole did she used to be to get saddled with this kind of debt? Lela curses the fucker she once was and currently is with a heavy breath of toxic fumes.

“Why the fuck are we bonded?” Lela demands of the beta man. She cuts her eyes over to him and levels him with a dark glare.

Shrugging his shoulders, Sam offers her a genuine look that reeked of ‘I don’t know’. He looked like he himself was probably hunting down the answer to the question too. Like he was just as blindsided by the bond as she was.

Gritting her teeth, Lela rips her eyes away from the man and angrily pulls hungry puffs off her
smoke. She glares at the trunks of the trees unfortunate enough of being in her line of sight.

Lela’s mad, mad as all hell now. Because she’s not sure what else to feel at the moment. She’s never so much as heard about bonds forming that quick, over a handful of times of meeting someone to talk, never. She didn’t even think it was a fucking thing. But then, there it was, sitting in her chest pulsing with comfort, acceptance and a strange twirl of fear. Lela could, she knows, lay the anger at Sam’s feet. Blame him for the creation of it if only so that she can fucking have someone to blame it for.

But she can’t. One look into his brown eyes and she knows she can’t. Not when he’s only ever offered her kind words and showed her how to be a fucking human being. It wasn’t Sam’s fault.

If anyone was to blame, it was probably her. Her and her stupid fucking piece of shit dynamic.

Growling, Lela kicks at the dirt under her boots and gruffly demands of the man, “What the fuck does this even mean?”

Sam is quiet as he moves closer so he’s standing at her left shoulder. He huffs out a breath and shrugs, “I don’t know. I mean, I’ve only ever had like three other bonds. My mom and pop. And a friend of mine. Don’t have much experience with it.”

Half chewing into the filter pinched between her lips, Lela bites out, “This is fucking stupid.”

“You think so?” Sam questions, sounding as unaffected by her anger as possible. But she feels the flower curl in tight, like maybe it’s close to closing itself up tight. to protect itself against her.

“I don’t know why I got bonds in the first place. What the fuck am I supposed to do with them?” Lela growls as she kicked at an ugly rock. It goes flying before hitting a tree and falling.

“Sometimes these kinds of things just happen Lela.” Sam says smoothly as the flower unwound, “No one’s to blame. Bonds form when we want them to or when we need them to. It’s in our nature to reach out and connect with others.”

“I didn’t need them and I sure as fuck don’t want to be connected to someone,” Lela roars, feels the truth of the words ringing in her ears.

“Bullshit,” Sam tells her, his voice pitched low like Lela’s never heard it. When she looks at him she feels the way she rears back away from him. His handsome face is pulled stern and hard. Like he’s not about to back down. Like he’s ready to fight her on this if need be. His eyes set in a way that said he wasn’t hear to listen to the lies she told herself.

Snarling, Lela flicks her cig away and narrows her gaze on him, “It ain’t bullshit. I don’t need bonds, I don’t want them. Why the fuck would I?”

Turning so he was facing her, Sam planted his feet into the earth and met her toe to toe. Voice hard as steel he goes, “Because you’ve been left out in the cold long enough Lela. It’s time to come in. You don’t always gotta be alone. The bonds formed because some part of you wants to keep us close.”

Hissing like a cat being cornered by an especially large animal, Lela bares her teeth and seethes. She’s got a hell of a lot of things she could toss into Sam’s face. Vulgarities harsh enough to make any person want to recoil. A roar bubbles up, the likes of which was only ever borne of desperation and feral energy. But nothing comes out.

Because as much as she hates the words Sam’s flinging at her, they’re fucking true. They strike her
somewhere deep and keep her from flying at him all fang and curled fists. Like the valve has finally been kicked loose, Lela feels herself deflate. Dropping onto the seat of the picnic table, Lela heaves out a ragged tired breath.

Running a haggard hand down her face, Lela admits, “I’ve never had pack bonds before.”

“I figured,” Sam says as he sunk into the space next to her. Their thighs are pressed close, but Lela finds it doesn’t bother her like it should. The closeness makes the flower in her chest open like it’s ready to receive water.

“Yeah?” Lela asks, her voice sinking low and gravelly with the bone weariness she’s feeling.

Laughing, Sam nods and tells her, “I mean, I could feel it in the bond. You shut me out almost all day, but, I could kinda tell you didn’t know what to do with it.”

“I didn’t know what they were until Clint and Natasha told me. After that, I kinda just...” Lela doesn’t finish, just scrubs at her face angrily. The words grow too big for her throat and just get stuck coming out.

“You panicked,” Sam finishes for her anyway. When she says nothing he nods, and repeats his previous words, “I kinda figured.”

Silence falls onto them. It isn’t loaded like she kind of feared it would be. Instead it’s the same kind of comfortable silence she’s come to expect from the man. It settles around them, not on them, doesn’t bog her down but keeps her tethered. She sinks readily into it.

After a while, Sam is the one to break the silence with a simple, “You know, it doesn’t change anything. At least, it doesn’t change anything between us. I’m not going to force anything on to you. If all you want our bond to be is this, us talking in the park or wherever, I’m fine with it.”

Lela is struck then with the sheer magnitude that was Sam’s compassion. The way he gave to her without catches or hang ups. The way he didn’t ask her for anything she wasn’t up to. Sam, who offered her comfort when she was a stranger bawling at his side, and just kept coming back to the disaster that she was. Always with a kind smile and tender words.

Sam, who didn’t know what she was, omega and broken, accepted her with all the faults he knew of her still. Lela is flooded with guilt at the knowledge because Sam didn’t know. And Lela, well, she wasn’t about to tell him. Felt too damn afraid of what his reaction might be. Sam wasn’t the type of person to use it against her, something in her carefully whispers, but Lela was afraid.

Too fucking afraid, like the coward she was.

But Lela owes him now. She’s tethered the man to her. Sealed him in a bond he hadn’t asked for. Guilt, raw and angry, burns at her. The force of it makes her want to dry heave onto the grass right at her feet. She feels the way her stomach tightens up and her head spins with it. The least she could do was tell him. Let him know the extent of the fuckery she’s pulled him into.

But, Lela’s a fucking coward. She wasn’t going to touch that tonight.

Her eyes burn as she shifts her gaze from the man over to green grass. She feels a thick lump form in her throat as she forced out the words, “thanks.”

“I mean, I did tell you I’d be there for you for whatever you needed,” Sam laughs, as he shook his head, “You’re pack now, so that means I’m in it for the long run. You need something from me and I’m there. No questions asked. Got it?”
Scrubbing at her face, hiding the fact that she’s a breath away from crumbling down, Lela bites out, “What kind of sappy shit is this?”

Laughing, Sam clamps a hand on her shoulder and squeezes firmly, the flower on her heart pulsing warm and complete, “It isn’t sappy if it’s the truth girl.”

Lela laughs with him, if only to keep from crying.

“So Natasha and Clint huh?” Sam jostles her shoulder, shakes her a bit and then lets his hand drop.

The bond thrums with something like a whine. But it falls back and away. It’s strong roots slipping into the passage ways of her heart as easily as anything.

Shaking her head, Lela goes, “Yeah, fucking assholes.”

“I guess that makes them Pack by Proxy,” Sam announces, his face screwed up like the realization’s just hit him.

Confused, Lela turns to him and offers up an eloquent, “What?”

“Yeah, I mean, we’re” at this he waves hand at her and then himself and says, “pack, and they’re pack to you. So they’re kind of Pack by proxy, which is you.”

“Is that even a thing?” Lela questions dubiously, it didn’t sound like it was. Lela’s never heard of it. But then, Lela’s pretty clueless as to how packs even worked. Up until this point, she’d never bothered to pay attention.

Shrugging his shoulders Sam goes quiet and thoughtful. His face pulling as he mulled over his words, “I mean, yeah. There’s been reported cases of it. But not enough that the NOCDP has recognized it. So it’s pretty rare.”

The National Organized Classification of Dynamics and Packs. The literal fucking bane of Lela’s existence. They were the ones in charge of labeling everyone nice and legal. Putting into ink and paper who was what and who belonged with what pack. Documenting the intricate lines of everything, anything and everyone.

Lela hates that fucking government program more than she could put into words.

Grunting, Lela nods her head and doesn’t bother to say anything else. Just leaves it as it is. She’s not about to tackle the fuckery that was forming a pack with people who weren’t exactly bonded with each other. If she thought about it for too long, she’d be swallowed up by the hate the situation inspired.

Rubbing a hand over his head, Sam laughs out a wry strained thing and says, “Fuck, who woulda thought a kid from harlem would’ve gotten his ass in a pack with the Black Widow and Hawkeye.”

And because Lela’s just that stupid, she asks, “Who’s that?”

Wide eyed and slack jawed, Sam goes shock still as he stared down at her, “You’re joking right?”

With a raised brow, Lela simply stares at the beta until the man gets that she isn’t.

“Holy shit,” Sam huffs out half hysterical and half disbelieving. When he’s tamed the laughter that’s bubbling out of his mouth Sam says with a rough scrub to his face, “Man have I got some news for you today girl.”
Quietly, Lela absorbs the information she’s been given. Sam stares at her through worried eyes but keeps his peace. Every time he goes to say something, opens his mouth with some kind of reassurance on his lips, Lela shuts him up with a harsh look.

Clicking her tongue, Lela grips a smoke and lets up.

To say the news was surprising was putting it mildly. To find out that she’s technically friends with more than one superhero was a bit mind bending. What were the chances that she was now employed by one superhero and bonded to three others.

Both Natasha and Clint were ex-assassins turned superheroes. Sam was a retired army pilot turned superhero. Tony was a billionaire playboy turned superhero.

Lela really wants to know what kind of odds she’s beating. She wonders if she should play the lotto, just in case.

“It doesn’t change who were are, it’s just…what we do, you know?” Sam starts to say, his face pinching as if he’s having trouble believing the words he’s offering her.

The flower on her heart shakes form some unseen and unfelt wind. Uncertainty makes the flower quiver.

Quirking a brow, Lela says nothing but lets her face tell the man she doesn’t believe him. Because Lela can feel it. The way the bond between them trembles and lets her know she’s being lied to. Or at least, that she’s being given a half truth. Which Lela guesses, is pretty much the same thing, right?

“Okay,” Sam relents under her pointed stare. He holds up his hands in surrender before adding on, “What we do definitely is who we are. But that doesn’t change who we are to you, you know? I’m still the same person you met that day on the side of the street. I’ll still help you through whatever you need. We’re pack now and my momma raised me right. Pack means family. So, I’m still the same person, yeah?”

If Lela didn’t feel fucking guilty before, she certainly did now. She knew, felt it down to the marrow of her bones, that Sam was a genuinely good guy from the moment she met him. He smiled summer bright with a care that couldn’t be real. Only it was, as genuine as the man himself. His heart wide and open, care seeped into the very pads of his fingers.

Aside from saving whatever wayward soul crossed his path, Sam was a genuine hero. A man who had served his country heart and soul. A man who had sacrificed and continued to do so in the name of good. Sam, he was good and he was stuck with Lela. Forced into Packhood with someone like her.

Guilt, bone breaking and spine bending, makes her twist up. The thought of tying him to her, dirt, broken and used, makes her burn. A thousand different kinds of apologies lie at her tongue. Ready as ever to fire off and sit at the beta man’s feet. Her hindbrain slithers, twirls, breaks and cries. She feels the second nature of herself push at all the bad habits she’s engrained into her very soul. It tells her to go belly up, to go soft, to let the man know. It tells her now was the time to push herself into the water and figure out if she could swim or not.

Biting back most of the growls she’s got building up in her throat, Lela glares down at her balled up hands.

She thinks back on the only thing Sam has ever asked of her. The only thing he continues to ask for
in exchange for all that he gives. **Honesty.**

It bites at her, gnaws her deep, the indecision of it all. Anxiety clogs up her heart. Fear makes her mouth run dry. Self hatred and rage makes her blood boil.

But Lela’s a goddamn beast onto herself. She bites it all back and forces the words out of her damnable mouth:

“You wanted honesty, right?”

Sam is quiet as he takes in her harsh tone. If he can tell the harsh turn of tone she’s taken on, Lela doesn’t know. The flower remains unmoved, petals open and waiting.

“As long as you’re willing, yeah.” Sam tells her in that quiet tone of his. His voice rumbling like water over jagged rocks.

Grabbing hold of the roots that came from the flower, Lela wills herself to not be a fucking coward. She wills herself to tuck back all the nastiness she’s got burning up in her. She wills herself to give this to Sam. It was the very least that he deserved to have.

The truth.

The truth of what she was. Of who she was. Of the complete and utter mess that he had unknowingly stepped into.

A part of her—strange and small—aches for Sam to know. For him to know the truth of all that she was. For him to know it, understand, and still accept. For him to hear her and…push away the worst of her fears with a sunny bright smile.

Pulling in a ragged breath, swiping her tongue over fangs that have grown long and sharp, Lela pulls the words out vowel by vowel, “I’m…I’m an Omega.”

Heaving a breath, like it’s been punched out of him, Sam crumples in his seat and stares at her like she’s just started crying tears of blood. His whole face is the very picture of shocked. Lela can even feel it, vibrating, down the length of the bond they shared. It makes the petals shake and stir before slipping down to the roots of it.

The worst of her cowardice kicks up then. Makes it so Lela can taste the ugliness of it on her tongue. Lela’s just about to push herself up to her feet and fucking run when suddenly…she can’t.

The whole of her body is wrapped into a tight embrace. Dark arms, lined in solid muscle, engulf her. They hold her tight as they drag her over to a firm chest. Lela struggles in her confused panic. She growls and punches wildly until she hears the smooth rumbles that leave the chest she’s being pressed against.

Smooth like water over jagged rocks, that was Sam. Careful and gentle but unyielding. He holds her like he fears she might just leave far away and never return. Sam holds her like Lela isn’t being held together by anything at all. Sam holds her like…like he understands the hurdle she’s just jumped. Sam holds her as if he understands, appreciates it, and is proud of her all in one go. Lela goes still once she realizes what the man’s doing. All her struggle leaves her in one fell swoop.

Hope, fragile and glass made, breaks into a million and one little pieces. It gets crushed into dust under the force of Sam’s hold. It scatters itself into the roots of the flower on her heart, into the lining of the silk ribbon and beneath the steel band. It wafts up until Lela can feel the glass shard filled cloud cuts her up and leaves her feeling bloody.
Sam hugs her closer when he feels her grow lax. He doesn’t say a word when he feels her melt into his embrace. He keeps quiet when Lela’s hands dig into his flesh and shirt alike and pull him closer too.

Lela ignores the way her darkest instincts tells her to push away, to pull away from him, and just lets her cling to the man. She ignores it in favor for the way the flower thrums happy and content—whole and hale. Perfectly watered and sunbathed, it’s petals unfold and dip beneath their immense weight.

Quietly, Lela says the words into the material of his shirt, “I—I haven’t…I don’t tell anyone about…about that.”

“They won’t hear it from me.” Sam tells her steadfast and sure.

Swallowing down thickly, Lela nods her head and lets her fingers dig into the man’s back. She remains quiet for a good long while fighting against not letting the fucking tears that’ve built up fall. She keeps the beta man close far longer than maybe she should. Long enough that the position they find themselves in begins to grow awkward.

Lela is the first to begin pulling away. The moment she does Lela asks, “Is it gonna be a problem?”

There’s a certain kind of steel that laces Sam’s words, hidden just underneath the bottom of them as he said, “Never. It’s like I told you Lela, this shit doesn’t change anything between us. We are who we are for each other. It doesn’t have to change unless you want it to. We’re pack now, so I’m in this till you don’t want me too. We’re family now and I don’t turn my back on family. You being,” at this he pauses at the death glare Lela spears him with, “Your dynamic won’t change anything either. You’re still the same girl I first met.”

Lela stays quiet, can’t find the strength to force words out of her mouth. Instead she runs a careful hand down her face and over to the back of her neck. She glances at the man through the corner of her eye before heaving out a tired sigh. Slowly, she drops her hands into her lap and heaves out:

“You’re such a fucking sap Sammy-boy.”

Laughing, the beta man rolls his eyes and smacks her back hard enough to jostle Lela’s lungs, “I never said I wasn’t.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela forces herself up to her feet. She can feel the weight of her entire day holding her down. She feels fatigue biting at the edges of her vision. A yawn she’s been biting off is finally crawling its way out of her throat. Not bothering to hide it, Lela yawns wide enough to make her jaw click. shaking a full body shiver out of her, Lela kicks out her tired feet and shoves her hands into her jacket pockets.

Carefully, Lela shifts her weight from one foot to the other and offer’s the man, “I’ll see ya around, yeah?”

Kicking his sneakered foot against one of her boots, Sam chuckles low and gentle before saying, “Yeah, call me whenever you need me to. I’ll pick up.”

“So you keep saying,” Lela lightly jabs, kicking back at him with a reluctant smile tipping up the edges of her lips.

“Well, I mean, we’re pack now girl. That means you’re stuck with me,” Sam laughs out as he draped one of his large arms over the span of her shoulder.
For one unpleasant second, Lela thinks, it’s quite the opposite. Sam’s stuck with her. But the ugly thought is shoved away by the feel of his heavy limb, the heat it provides and the warming thrum of the flowers pulse. All of her self hatred bubbles down by the simple way that the bond thrums with something delicate and all consuming. Lela can feel the way it radiates warmth down to the very tips of her toes.

Jabbing the pointed end of her elbow into the man’s ribs Lela growls out, “I could always call in a favor. I don’t think Natasha would mind dropping you off in the middle of some nameless fucking jungle or some shit.”

Laughing from deep in his belly, Sam jostles her before bringing her tighter to his side, “Probably! I mean, Nat’s a stone cold fox, but I think she’s like a living breathing demon. The look totally fits her though, don’t get me wrong, but if anyone’s going to make a superhero disappear no questions asked, it’s fucking Nat.”

Grinning, Lela runs her tongue over her lips and leads them both out of the park, “Clint likes to think Red likes me, so don’t push me Sammy, I might call in a favor.”

Growing serious, Sam tightens his hold on her and ducks down so he could meet her eyes as he said, “Please don’t.”

This time, it’s Lela’s turn to bark out laughter that shook her from her very core and outward. She laughs and nearly forgets all that has come to happen today. Wrapped up in the warmth of Sam’s one armed embrace and the pulse of his bond on her heart, Lela forgets. It keeps her walking true and firm towards the hotel without hesitation.

If Sam notices the way she puts most of her weight on him as well as pulls the bond tighter to herself, he doesn’t say. He just readjusts his arm on the back of her shoulder and tucks her in impossibly tighter.

*~*

It takes a hell of a lot of convincing to get Sam to not walk her the whole way to the hotel. He’s all kinds of reluctant when Lela issues out a firm enough growl. His face pulled up into concern and four different shades of worry. He glances up at the hotel front and down at her face too many times for Lela to count. Sam doesn’t say he’s afraid for her and what she’ll find up in the suite room. But Lela can see it in the way he keeps trying to push his way around her.

Eventually, he relents. Backs down and away when Lela flashes fang and shuts down the thrum of the pack bond they’d kept open and warm their entire walk over here. Bonded they might be, Sam may know the truth of what she was, but Lela would be damned if she had someone thinking they had to protect her from anything. She could take care of herself just fine. She fought her own battles at least.

The Beta man leaves but only with the promise that she’d call him if she needed to talk about anything. Lela promised, swore up and down she would, and sent him on his way with a casual wave of her hand.

In hindsight, Lela guesses she should’ve just taken the man up on his offer to walk her up to her room. It’d be easier, Lela thinks, if Sam was here. In her right hand she fiddles with the key card she’d been given. A card that allowed her to come and go as she pleased. Natasha had given it to her about the same night Lela came back from one of her all day walks.

Fear keeps her from opening the door. It makes it so she just stands there staring at the white of the
door for far longer than she should. Lela wonders if Clint and Natasha are going to ambush her again the moment she walks through. If they’re going to lunge like she’s been missing for days rather than a few hours.

Pulling up every bit of her strength she’s currently running low on, she swipes her card and pushes the door in.

The suite is empty. All the lights have been turned down low.

It’s such a mind trip that Lela just stands there by the open door and stares.

For the entire time she’s been living up here, the suite was never once empty. Both wonder dicks have always been inside, at least on or the other, never empty. It takes Lela a good long while to push herself into motion. To close the door and walk further in. She calls out a simple ‘hey’ but no one answers her back. That fear she’d been housing up inside of herself seeps out in one go.

The force of it making her shoulders drop and her body feel about six times heavier.

Slowly, Lela walks through the suite. Everything feels infinitely different now that she’s here alone. The whole of the suite feels bigger far more intimidating than when the two were in here with her. That expensive shine she first encountered, when she’d first awoken, is brighter now. It reminds Lela that this isn’t where she belonged, wonder-dicks or not.

Heaving out a sigh, Lela pulls of her jacket and undoes her work shirt. She lays them both out on the cream colored couch arm and just looks around. Lela’s tired, bone tired, but she doesn’t move from where she’s standing. Just keeps on looking at all the things she’d gotten used to and wonders how that could have happened.

It wasn’t so long ago that she was holed up in a moldy, rat infested, motel. It strikes her then—hard—that she’s miles from where she used to be. It strikes her—suddenly and with the weight of a damn two ton train—that Lela isn’t the same person she was then either.

She’s sober now, for the first time in a good long while. She’s healthy, for the first time in…ever. She’s content, for the first time in, well, that’s a first time for her too.

Rubbing at her face, both to push down those thoughts and her fatigue, Lela makes her way towards the kitchen. She’s too fucking exhausted, both mentally and emotionally, to try to make anything for herself to eat, but she knows Natasha’s probably got at least two dozen different kinds of shakes pre-prepared somewhere in the fridge. She finds one made of strawberry and something else and downs it before heading out to the balcony.

Halfway into her shake—which actually isn’t all that bad—is Lela struck with the stray thought of why the wonder-dicks are gone. She wonders if it’s got anything to do with what happened this morning. She wonders if it’s got anything to do with the way she brushed them off. The way she’d pushed them out all day.

That fear Lela left at the door ratchets up to triple digit levels. Swallowing down the suddenly not so tasty smoothie in her mouth, Lela scrubs at her lips with the back of her hand. From where she leans against the balcony railing, Lela frowns down at the twinkling lights below.

Lela knows she’s got no right to feel guilty about pushing the wonder-dicks out and away from herself the way she had. Her reaction to it all—while slightly justified, in Lela’s own opinion—had been more than a tad bit…much. The two weren’t to blame for any of the shit, just like Sam hadn’t been to blame. They were just as much stuck with Lela as Sam was. After all they’d done for her,
put themselves out there for her. Picked her up when she was at her lowest. And what had Lela
done? What had she been doing since the beginning?

She’d pushed them away.

Frowning, Lela downs the last her her shake without tasting a single draw and heads back inside. As
she rinses the cup out she feels the realization of her shitty actions press in hard at her.

The two, shitty timing as per usual, had only laid out the truth at her feet and let her decide what to
do with the situation. They hadn’t pushed anything onto her. Hadn’t asked her for anything. They’d
just told her. And Lela, shitty person as she was, had popped off harder than she should’ve.

Her hindbrain slithers, all second nature bullshit, that makes her ache to reach out to the bonds she
shares with them. Something in her wants to grab them, call them to her, make sure she hasn’t been
tossed to the curb for her asshole moves. But she doesn’t. Lela doesn’t think it’d be…fair.

To use them only when she wanted to. To find comfort in them only when she found them
convenient. So she leaves them where they are, curled up around her chest and on her wrist. She
doesn’t bother them because…well, they didn’t deserve that either.

A growl, aimed entirely at herself, Lela dumps the cup into the drying rack and heads for the
bedroom. If she had any Lela would burn everything she’s feeling under the drags of cigarette
smoke. But seeing as she smoked her last one on her walk with Sam, Lela was shit out of luck.

It isn’t until she’s showered, dressed in something soft and comfortable, expensive and decidedly not
hers, that she hears the from door open up. She’s laying on the couch, splayed out like a damn
starfish, watching some kind of episode on flipping houses. Lifting up her head she spots Clint first
and then Natasha.

Grinning, hesitant and half hopeful, Clint waves a plastic bag in her face before saying, “Hey babe,
you hungry?”

And, of course those are the first words out of Clint’s mouth. Lela could be in the middle of actually
eating something and Clint will still walk in and ask if she’s got a craving for something else.
Something soft and candle warm pulses through the silk ribbon and into her chest. She feels the way
it seeps down into her bones and pushes away all the other ugly thoughts she’s got stewing in the
corners of her mind.

Rolling her eyes, Lela smothers the grin that’s working it’s way over her lips with a somewhat
irritated growl. She rolls over, pointedly facing the tv screen and asks, “Where’ve you assholes
been?”

Lela’s not sure she’s ever asked, but, tonight seemed like the start of a great many firsts.

“Out, kicking ass and taking names,” Clint cheerfully tells her as he dropped into the open space by
her feet. Without effort and with casual ease, he picks up her bare feet and settles them on his lap.

Lela doesn’t bother to kick his hands away. She just lets him. The silk ribbon practically sings for it.

“Really?” Lela sarcastically drawls.

“Hey,” Clint starts out, sounding affronted, “Outside of all this cherry charming persona I got, I’m a
regular badass, you know.”

Lela doesn’t doubt it, that both of them are forces to be reckoned with, but, she’s in the mood to keep
shit as light as possible.

Arching a brow, Lela sends him a questioning stare before asking the red head now settled on the arm of the couch by her head, “That true, Red?”

“Depends on who you ask,” Natasha easily states. Sounding half serious and half like she was just trying to keep the peace.

As soon as Natasha’s settled she begins to run careful fingers through Lela’s damp hair. She untangles every knot Lela hadn’t bothered to comb out. Lela finds the action does little to rile her and actually does the exact opposite. It soothes her far more than she’s familiar with.

“So, how was work?” Natasha calmly asks after a while.

And it’s not so much as the question as it is the way it’s delivered. Something about it makes Lela squirm. The fact that Natasha, and Clint, are both easily ready to disregard the shit they dropped on her—probably for Lela’s own sake—makes guilt ring up in her. Gritting her teeth, Lela decides to hell with keeping shit light and says more than she asks:

“So we’re just gonna glide right past the whole bonded shit?”

“So you…” Clint starts only to fail as his fingers worked smooth circles into the heels of her feet, “So you want to talk about it?”

“No really,” Lela admits, because she doesn’t. Not at all. Not when she’s got skilled long fingers in her hair and massaging her feet. But she guess she has to and she says as much with, “But we gotta, right? I mean, we’re bonded. Shit like that’s gotta be addressed.”

“We aren’t forcing you to, if you need time then—“ Natasha begins to say, only stops when Lela pushes up into a sitting position, away from both sets of hands.

Grabbing the remote, Lela angrily flips through the channels and ignores looking into the faces of either one. As she’s channel surfing, she bites out, “Sam say’s this makes us pack, you and me.”

“It does,” Clint agrees without hesitation.

Pursing her lips, Lela nods, because she already knew, “That gonna change anything between us? You guys knowing what I am and shit.”

“Never,” Natasha states in a tone that was as hard and as unyielding as the steel band Lela now carried.

Biting back all the anger she was raised with, all the things she was told she shouldn’t have, couldn’t have, Lela nods again. She keeps it all to herself. Every little thought she’s got running through her mind, telling her this was a bad idea gets shut right down. Because Sam was right, some part of her wants this. Wants to keep them two close to herself. She wants them around, she wants to wake up every morning and deal with the bullshit they threw at her. She wants to eat take out with Clint. She wants to sit through some boring ass documentary with Natasha while eating ugly ass kale chips. She wants to sit and watch them both bicker over nonsense. Some part of her aches to be a part of it too.

Clicking the tv off, Lela pulls herself to her feet and heads for the bedroom. She’s just passing the threshold when she tosses over her shoulder, “You assholes coming or not?”

Lela won’t ever put into words that she’s inviting them to share the bed again. She won’t, she’d rather take a dirty shive to the goddamn stomach again than do that. But she is.
Lela won’t ever admit out loud that she’s okay with what they are. She won’t, even under pain of death. But she is. Or at least, she’s getting there.

By the time she’s sliding into the center of the bed, underneath the fluffy sheets, Clint’s already bouncing on the bed. He’s wearing this wide mega-watt smile as he kicked off his shoes and burrowed in deep. Natasha is silent as she pulls off her jacket and hangs it over the dresser. Her green eyes glow though when she finally settles in beside Lela.

Like they’ve been doing it for years, they settle into a comfortable position—all tangled limbs and softness—and drop off into sleep. Before Lela closes her eyes, she takes careful stock of the bonds she’s got in her. She watches as they unfurl—silk ribbon, steel band and flower petals—against one another without effort. She feels the way they all three bonds take a collective breath of relief and relax.

Lela would rather eat a million different gross protein shakes than admit she’s already coming to terms with a pack she’s found herself surrounded with.

*~*

**Sometime Later**

Work turns out to be pretty normal, all things considered. Lela finds her rhythm in it pretty easily. Aside from constantly getting the shitiest shifts, it ain’t all bad. It’s grunt work Lela finds herself comfortable with. She finds some kind of place pushing around a broom stick.

For whatever reason, Lela is given clearance into higher levels than the rest of the crew she’s been assigned to. This allows her to see Pepper and Bruce on a regular basis. She gets to swing by their office at least every three days. In that time, Lela is subjected to the weirdest set of mothering she’s ever gotten.

Bruce is all warm smiles and awkward social cues. Every time Lela comes by to clean his lab, he fumbles out of her way and gets up to help her. He’s always got some excuse on his lips as he explained away the hundreds of coffee cups he’s got littered about. Lela’s tried waving him off, even tried growling at him, but Bruce was a determined fucker when he wanted to be. He cleaned even if it meant getting a face full of dark glowers and alpha growls.

Lela was quickly finding herself growing fond of the man. She liked the rose tea he always held out for her and the way he asked her about her day in his quiet little way.

Pepper, too, was all heartwarming smiles and pleasant small talk. Every time Lela comes by her office, Pepper sits her down and basically doesn’t let Lela do a single thing. Instead, her assistant/secretary Joseph, is forced to bring Lela some kind of sweetened pastry or drink. Lela’s tried growling at Pepper too, but Pepper wouldn’t budge. She’d just wave away Lela’s growls with an ease Lela was starting to admire.

So work is good, all things considered. That is, if you didn’t take into account how much time she actually spent working and not being subjected to the insanity that was working for Tony.

“I said no,” Lela forced herself to sound firm despite having the urge to laugh.

“C’mon it’ll be fun! I mean, We can take my chopper! You haven’t lived until you’ve seen the sunrise off of the Spaniard coast!” Tony declared in that casually arrogant way of his. He was bright and happy today, manic in his mood almost.

Gritting her teeth, Lela counts to four in her head before growling out, “I’m not fucking going to
Spain dickhead. I got shit to do.”

Scoffing, Tony continues to follow her as he said to her back, “Like what?”

“Like work asshole.” she told him as she stopped her cart somewhere in building D, sector 4.

Lela was given this specific building—because of fucking course Tony’s whole operation had multiple buildings to it, a whole fucking compound—because Mr. Owens was determined to keep her far out of Tony’s way.

Mr. Owens turned out to be her biggest hater in all of it. The man just plain didn’t like Lela. He was hell bent on keeping her poverty riddled hands away from Mr. Starks shiny coat tails.

It was only by the grace of Peppers specially ordered palm sized gadget that Lela didn’t get lost on a daily. She kept that little shiny shit firmly in her pocket whenever she was working.

“We got vacation days for a reason kid,” Tony brushes off her very valid reason like it’s an especially flimsy excuse.

“You gotta be at least six months in to request a vacation,” Lela informs her boss. Though, she feels like she shouldn’t have to. But then, there’s a lot she feels she shouldn’t have to tell the alpha.

Like, no, you couldn’t actually buy a tiny little hamburger joint just because they both happened to like their mushroom slider. Like, no, you couldn’t just go around flying up to hotel balcony’s—in his fucking Iron Man suit—offering people piggy back rides to work.

Lela’s pretty certain shit like that didn’t need to be explained. And yet, she found herself constantly trying to bite it into the Alpha’s skin.

“That doesn’t sound right,” Tony mumbles like he’s maybe thinking of changing the policy because it just didn’t fit his current mood.

Lela’s only known Tony for about three weeks now, worked for him just as long, but even she knew he was about to do something stupid. Like call up whoever ran HR and pitch a hissy fit about the vacation policy.

Issuing a tired growl, Lela stops pushing her cart and turns to the man, “Don’t you got work to do, somewhere?”

“Kinda, not really. I mean, there’s a meeting I’m supposed to be running but I’m pretty sure Pepper can handle it. It’s small fries.” Tony announces with a casual shrug of his shoulders and a wide grin.

Gritting her teeth, Lela slams on the circle embedded into the wall. It lights up an electric blue hue as a voice goes on, “Yes ma’am?”

The first time Lela found out there was, like, a living entity pulsing through every one of Tony’s buildings, she’d been reasonably paranoid. Her every move, every word, being watched by a program that was almost as sarcastic as Tony? It had put her off more than it had comforted her. Like what kind of futuristic shit was that? A real life artificial intelligence just ready to do as was needed. Lela felt more than sketchy about it when Tony had announced she could just call out to it and ask for anything.

The first time she’d used it was for directions. And then she just never stopped because it was actually pretty fun shooting the shit with strange magic. The man—because it definitely sounded like a man, albeit a swanky british fucker if ever there was one—was a goddamn sweetheart.
“Jarvis, my main man,” Lela starts off, because she’s just that much of a fan, “Can you put Pepper on?”

“Of course,” Jarvis smoothly replied.

It only takes a total of four seconds for Pepper to fill the noise of the otherwise silent hall, “Lela? What’s wrong?”

Lela actually has to repress an aggravated growl at Pepper’s immediate worry. She waits a second, keeping her eyes firmly on the man in front of her she says, “You missing anybody up there?”

“Wha—you mean Tony?” Pepper immediately puts two and two together as she bites out, “Tony you said you were on Official Avengers business.”

“I am!” Tony shouts out, affronted. His face pulled into betrayal as he looked at Lela, “Or I was. Got side tracked. Hey, did you know Lela’s never been to europe? I was thinking about maybe putting together a little trip and maybe—”

“Tony, you have exactly twenty minutes to get your ass up here or I’m going down there to get you myself. This is the fourth meeting you’ve blown off this week! Stop harassing Lela or I swear to god, I will force you to sit through every damn red letter file that comes my way. I’ll do it Tony, don’t tempt me.” Pepper growled out, her beta bark infused into every word she issued.

And then, in a much softer tone, Pepper calls out to Lela, sounding impossibly soft and fond, she says, “Lela, you page me if he hasn’t left in the next six minutes, kay?”

“Will do Jefa,” Lela calls out with a smirk lining her lips.

Jarvis ends the call without so much as a noise. Leaving both Lela and Tony in the quiet once more. Tony’s face is screwed up with his displeasure as he crossed his arms and pinned her with a grumpy glare.

“Snitch,” Tony accuses her with.

There was a time Lela would have snapped her teeth at Tony for so much as daring to glare in her direction. But these days, Lela finds she’s never actually in that much of a fucking mood. She feels lighter now. Like she’s less like a lit dynamite stick and more like she’s an unlit stick. She’s got all the potential of blowing the fuck up on someone and less of an urge to want to.

Sam tells her it’s the bonds. That it’s the pack. Clint tells her because she’s happy now. Natasha tells her it’s because she’s found stability.

Lela blames it on the fact that she’s not whoring herself out anymore, that she’s got the right meds now and she’s fucking sober.

But even she knows that bullshit. she doesn’t need Sam to call her out on it.

Lela’s happier now, even if she won’t admit it out loud. She’s quicker to laugh now, to smile and joke than she’s ever been. Lela knows it’s got everything to do with the bonds that flutter around in her chest. she just hasn’t gotten around to being anything else than the coward she is now.

Shrugging her shoulders, her smirk growing wider, Lela huffs out a laugh and throws back, “Pussy.”

“Kid, you’d be too if you knew the kind of tyrant Pepper can be when she’s in the mood,” Tony defends himself with a genuinely horrified expression as he did a full body shiver, “They don’t call
her the *Ice Queen* for nothing, you know.”

Snorting, Lela starts pushing at her cart again while calling out over her shoulder, “See ya around boss man.”

From where she’s left him standing, Tony calls out, “Think about it kid! Let me know!”

Lela flips him the bird before laughing. She continues on her way towards her assigned section for the day. Glancing at her little gadget, she ends up at some kind of mechanic shop. It’s loaded with cars and golf cart looking things all baring the Stark logo. All of them are in various different states of disrepair. Some are being held up on jacks and missing tires. But everywhere on the floor is trash from just about everything.

Lips pursed, Lela sends a wayward curse at Mr. Owens under her breath. Gritting her teeth, she pulls off her wide broom and sets to work. Only after she’s pretty certain she’s alone, Lela calls out to her favorite Stark Employee:

“Yo, Jarvis?”

“Yes ma’am?”

“What do you got for me today?” she asks, as she swept up random pieces of trash.

“That depends, ma’am. What are you in the mood for?” the smooth accent rolls out.

Grinning down at her working hands Lela shrugs her shoulders and laughs out, “How about, pretty fucking tired but pretty fucking bored too. You got anything for that?”

“I have several, in fact. Are you partial to any era of music?”

“Ha, never been the picky type babe. Put whatever you got on.” Lela informs the man with a smile.

Without further ado, something slow and sinful kicks up. Lela immediately recognizes it as The Weeknd. Issuing a pleased groan, Lela lets her head tilt back as she smiled up at the ceiling of the large room, “Anyone ever tell you, you got the best fucking taste Jarvis.”

“Not often, no. I take it you approve?” Jarvis asks, sounding every bit like he’s pleased he’s hit the nail on the head.

Laughing, Lela nods before telling him, “Yes I fucking approve. This shit right here, this is my fucking shit.”

And with that, Lela begins, in earnest, to clean.

The first time Lela figured out she could ask the man in the sky for some kind of entertainment, Lela hadn’t bothered to moderate herself. She’d picked it up and never looked back. Tony had yet to tell her not to and Jarvis never seemed to mind. so she figured it wasn’t exactly not allowed.

Lela was a complete fucking fan for Jarvis.

Grabbing an empty bottle of engine oil, Lela tosses it across the room and watches as it slips in without effort. There’s a small pep to her step as she sings along with the words playing overhead. Her body moving to the rhythm without effort. So lost is she in the music that she completely misses the fact that she’s sweeping past two sets of boots.

She’s at least four verses in when she knocks her broom into them. She’s keeping up with Ed
Sheeran’s part on Dark Times when the person the boots are connected to slips out from underneath a large semi looking truck.

Startled, Lela rears back, a surprised scream lodged in her throat as she snarled on basic principle.

“What the fuck?!” the words are ripped out of Lela’s mouth instinctively.

Face built to break fucking kingdoms greets her. All dark beauty and heart breaking eyes. A gruff looking man with long brown hair stares up at her. His face pulled into something like confusion and apprehension. Dressed in something like mechanic overalls covered in engine grease, the man says nothing. His pinky pouty lips pulled down into a delicate little frown.

He’s gorgeous, Lela can’t help but think. Built to inspire lust riddled fever dreams. Lela gapes at him because she’s never actually seen someone that beautiful in real life.

“Sorry,” the man grumbles out, his dark brows pinched over his gray glittering eyes, “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

The man’s voice is all dark and rumbling sin. It slips past his lips in nothing but smooth baritones. It makes the worst part of what she is writhe. Her already rapidly pumping heart kicks it up at least ten different notches. Makes it so that she has to pull in a ragged breath and force out a growl. A growl both aimed at herself and the beautifully rugged man.

“You didn’t scare me, asshole,” Lela growls out, eyes glaring holes into his gorgeous scruffy face, “Didn’t fucking see you down there.”

The man says nothing. Simply stares at her like he doesn’t really know what to make of her. It unnerves Lela on the mere fact that her second nature is doing all kinds of stupid flips.

Running her tongue over her bottom lip, ignoring the clear way the man tracks the movement—like a goddamn cat—Lela gruffly demands, “Gotta clean this place. You mind the music?”

It takes the man a beat longer than necessary to answer her. Eventually he frowns and tells her simply, “No.”

Gripping her broom handle tight, Lela nods and spits out, “Good.”

She sets herself back to work this time with a little less enthusiasm as when she’d begun. The music overhead changes seamlessly to something Lela doesn’t know but isn’t opposed to. It runs in the same vein as the one previous, so Lela doesn’t mind. She keeps her eyes firmly on her job and refuses to glance back up to the man.

Not because she doesn’t want to but because every inch of her definitely does.

Without turning her back to him, she keeps picking up whatever bit of trash she can and makes her careful way around the room. She’s at least six songs in when she slips and glances up to eye the stranger. He’s no longer on that little roll out cart, but standing hunched over the engine of the truck he’s working on.

Not once does he turn to acknowledge her, but Lela can read the tension in his shoulders clear enough. He might not be looking at her but he definitely knew she was looking. Gritting her teeth, Lela heads over to the large trash bin and drags it to the large pile she’s swept up.

It’s as she’s dumping the larger pieces into it, by hand, that the man speaks, “You new around here?”
His voice, made of satin and something infinitely darker, makes a strange wave of shivers run down her spine. Lela’s toes curl in her boots at the sound of it.

Forcing herself to sound as unaffected as physically possible, she gruffly says, “Pretty much.”

The man doesn’t say anything else on the matter. He leaves the engine and walks over to a tool box on wheels and fishes out an especially long handled wrench from it. Only when he’s back at the engine, back aimed at her, does he speak again:

“When’d you start?”

Silently, Lela picks up at least four separate cans of something and tosses them into the quickly filling can. In the time it takes her to do that, Lela scrambles for every bit of nonchalance she’s got. She’s no stranger to pointless small talk. Even back before she started working here, Lela often found herself filling the time out on the street corner talking it up with the girls around her. Talking shit about the John’s they’d gotten or the fucking bullshit that was life.

Lela’s no stranger to it.

What Lela is a stranger to is having to make smart talk with what looked like an actual fallen fucking angel. Seriously, did beauty like that exist in living men? Lela doubted it.

“‘bout three weeks ago,” Lela tells him, runs her tongue over her bottom lip before forcing out, “You?”

“Five months,” the man states easily but doesn’t follow it up with anything else.

If Lela’s supposed to say anything else, well, she doesn’t fucking know. The conversation, if one could even call it that, was silted all to hell.

So she does the only thing she can and fucking ignores it. Sets herself back to work and tries to finish as fast as she can while trying to look like she’s doing just that. Only, the silence lasts all of about three different songs before Lela dares to break it with an awkward:

“I’m Lela.”

The man pauses in his work, glances over his broad—like fucking mountains—shoulder and stares at her. Something like confusion sits in his slate gray eyes as he looks at her. He’s got this look on his face like he’s not entirely sure what to make of the information. It riles Lela more than it ought to. Makes her heart lurch in her chest uncomfortably. Makes her blood run hotter and a certain kind of wildness to seep into her very body.

“This is the part where you say your name too dick,” Lela spits at him as she roughly dropped her scooper onto the floor.

Taking his time to brush his long locks out of his face, big large paws pushing away smooth dark brown silk, the man frowns and offers her a simple, “James.”

Picking up her shit, ignoring the way her hearts thumping, Lela settles it all on her cart and begins to roll it out of the room. She tosses over her shoulder, “It’s been real James.”

Lela leaves with silence following after her. She completely forgets to call of the music Jarvis is pumping out for her and instead books it. She forgets on account of how much concentration she’s putting into not looking back at that devastatingly handsome face. She forgets because she’s forcing the slithering darkness of attraction deep into her chest where it can’t be touched.
She forgets because, try as she might, she can’t get those soulful eyes out of her head. She forgets because, try as she fucking might, Lela can’t stop that rumbling gravelly voice from shaking her very core.

Lela forgets because that resounding ‘James’ is thumping madly in her head. Bouncing off the walls of her brain until all she can think of is that fucking name.

Half running, Lela pushes her cart out of building D and back into the safety of the tower. Because yeah, she’s lighter these days, ready to take on most of the bullshit sent her way, but Lela wasn’t ready for something like James.

Not yet anyway.

Her hindbrain growls, mad like it’s been poked and prodded with electricity, hissing like a cat being doused in water. It spits at her from behind it’s carefully constructed cage that Lela was nothing but a fucking coward. Lela doesn’t want to agree with it, but the evidence is pretty much stacked against her these days. So she swallows it down and rushes to the outside doors where she can burn it away with the smoke of a cig.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, first and foremos, YOU GUYS THIS WAS A HELL OF A THING TO WRITE.
I finally had to make the move for work, so I'm in new mexico now, working about ten hour shifts on top of being a full time mother. Sorry it took so long to update. I put these pieces together on the road, when we stopped at a motel room and the wifi caught. So I hope it doesn't feel fucking whacked out. I hope it's got a pretty enough flow.
Second, I know I promised you guys meeting at least one of the super babes, I rushed it at the end, I hate it. But I got a new chapter running right now. In a certain someone's POV. I hope I can pull it off.

Please tell me what y'all thought! I'm at work, looking at watermelons passing me by and thinking about you guys!

(P.S. I work for a harvesting company so we work on several different produce. Right now we're running watermelon, pumpkin and onion. Y'all head on down to the store and pick one up and just know I helped pick that out of a field, cleaned it at a warehouse and then packaged it up nice and pretty for you!!!!!)

(Seriously though guys, I'm working real hard to get us to the romance. I'm almost there. I swear!!! Don't give up on me!!!!!)

I love all of you guys!!!
Comment down below and tell me how bad this all was!!!!
Different kinds of Alphas

Chapter Summary

His words still Lela right in place.

Now, really, Lela’s fucking trying to be the better person Sam, Clint and Natasha are convinced she can be. She hasn’t snapped at anyone with the intensity she would’ve not too long ago. But bad habits, engrained into her very soul, are hard as all fuck to break. Maybe it’s the fact that he’s an Alpha, and that he’s pushing it around like it fucking means everything, that makes the worst part of her rear up like a starved animal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes her exactly four weeks to figure out that building D, and all it’s fucking hanger wide car ports, have become hers by some unspoken rule. Every day that she goes in to pick up her assigned sector, Mr. Owens tells her Building D without offering even a simple main building lobby clean up once. He doesn’t even bother to hide the fucking smirk he wears as he tells her.

Lela’s got no issue cleaning up after the mechanics and the maintenance workers, they all seem like pretty chill crowds, it’s just…well, she’s pretty far away from Pepper and Bruce. She doesn’t get to see them as much as she kinda hopes she can. Lela even finds herself missing Tony. Not being around them so often makes the otherwise simple days feel longer and a little emptier.

Though, Lela knows, they didn’t actually do much except exchange weird pleasantries. Tony was a different matter though. Lela actually found she pretty much looked forward to meeting the mans sarcasm with equally snarky comments.

So yeah, she’s a bit in a ugly mood when she finally makes it to the last hanger on her shift. She’s covered in about a full days worth of dirt and grime, she’s hungry on account of missing her lunch to cover fucking Claire’s abrupt doctors appointment, and utterly tired from the longest week of her life. It’s then, as she manages to swipe open the door and push the cart through the threshold, that the wheels underneath her least favorite cart just give up on her.

All but one wheel twists, snaps and goes skittering away as the whole cart went sideways. Every cleaner, spray bottle, roll of sanitizing napkins, broom, mop, mop bucket, goes spilling out onto the glazed over cement floor.

Growling out all kinds of obscenities, she finds herself fucking drenched to the bone with weary born anger. She growls out, dark and deadly as she kicks at the cart before her. Her boots—though not steel toe—manage to dent in the handle of the cart well enough. It makes satisfaction bloom in her chest and encourages her to kick at least three more times.
“Fuckin’ piece of shit plastic *f*uck! You got one fucking job to do, you no good fuckin’ bastard! Wheel around the fuckin’ place! I got two hours before I gotta clock out and you do this shit *now*?!” Lela roars at her upturned cart. Hisses at it through fangs and a face pulled into unadulterated fury.

“I’m pretty sure it didn’t do it on purpose,” comes a familiar mess of silky smooth baritones and rumbles.

In a flash, Lela’s head goes flying up. Her eyes growing wide as surprise doused her burning flames. It’s as she takes in that familiar devastatingly gorgeous face that Lela remembers why she’d been putting off sector 4 completely. For there it was, in the flesh, endless muscle and bone, a man built to lead pure hearts astray.

*James.*

Today, he’s dressed as he had been that first time she’d met him: in a simple mechanic issued overall. Only this time, he’s pulled the top part down, tied the long arms around his waist and is clad in only a flimsy dirty muscle shirt. It leaves his broad—so very fucking broad—shoulders completely on display. It makes his thick—thicker than the widest part of her thighs—arms out for all to bear witness to the majesty that was pure strength. His long brown hair, all soft volumous straight strands, were left loose to hang inches past his shoulders. A wry kind of grin sits on his rosy pink lips as his slate gray eyes glimmered in soft amusement.

Wildly, Lela’s heart crashes against the bones of her ribs. He’s gorgeous, Lela helplessly thinks, when he smiled. Whatever sadness seemed to be etched into his face—craved into his very being—was pushed aside when he smiled. Made him seem younger, lighter, prettier.

Met with the sight of…all of him, Lela finds herself gaping unabashed. It takes her far longer than she’s willing to admit to shut her mouth with an audible clack. She says nothing to the man as she turns her eyes back down at the mess she’s made bigger with her little fucking tantrum. His words slowly trickle into her scattered mind eventually. They make her glare harder at the plastic because, yeah, no, she gets it.

Her cart’s not actually living and breathing. It isn’t trying to actively make her life harder. But Lela’s pretty sure it’s a cursed fucking object at this point. Ever since she got assigned cart 38, she’s gotten all kinds of bullshit cropping up for her. Just this morning she had to deal with the worst kind of backed up toilet she’s ever been forced to deal with. So yeah, Lela wouldn’t even be surprised if it turned out her cart was in cahoots with Mr. fucking Owen.

“It’s still a piece of shit,” Lela grumbled as she kicked at an empty stray spritz bottle.

chuckling, dark and sinful, James drops whatever kind of tool he’d been holding onto something metallic and began walking up to her. Lela can see his boots enter the edge of her vision slowly but surely. When he’s close enough to not be halfway across the large garage, but still far enough away to not be anywhere up in her personal space, he stills.

It takes him a good long while before he speaks, “You need any help with this?”

Harshly rubbing at her face, Lela growls low in her throat—feels the rumbles scratch up her throat in the way they often did after a long day—and bites out, “Not really.”

Now, don’t get her wrong, Lela could probably use the help. Shit, she should probably take it, but she can’t. Not because she’s above someone helping her stack back up her cart but because it’s fucking James offering. Lela’s never been in a situation where a drop dead gorgeous motherfucker just offered a helping hand. So she brushes it off because, well, she’s just that type of awkward.
Because Lela fears, the heat she’s got climbing up her neck and onto her face, might actually show
despite her brown complexion. Because, Lela fears, she might do something stupid and reach out
and touch the dark black scruff lining his rugged face. Because, Lela fears, she hungers for the man
like a starved bitch in heat.

Gripping her cart tight, Lela attempts to set it upright and watches as the cart wobbles and teeters
dangerously to the opposite side. Despite being pretty fucking strong for her size, Lela’s also pretty
fucking short. She’s only got so much leeway before it starts to slip out under her.

Without a word, a large paw shaped hand grips the carts other end and keeps it steady. He doesn’t
laugh, but there’s laughter in his voice as he says, “I can put the wheels back on, or you can keep
kicking it till it gets up and tries to high tail it out of here.”

Pursing her lips up, Lela sends the man a dark glower and spits at him, “Trust me, it deserves it.”

This time around, James does laugh. It comes bubbling out of him like thunder rumbling through
storming dark skies. It booms across the whole of the hanger until it drops down and rattles Lela’s
very bones. The sound, rich and sinfully heavenly, makes her squirm in her boots.

It shakes to life her hindbrain that had been, up until right this second, blessedly quiet. Stirring to life,
her hindbrain arches it’s knobby spine and reaches out to chase that sound. Lela doesn’t even bother
to squish down that feeling because every part of her wants to taste that laugh on her tongue.

Grinning at her—far wider, far prettier—than he had been previously, James says, “I don’t doubt it.”

Without bothering to give her a heads up, James grips the cart and lifts it up into the air and almost
takes Lela with him. It’s only by some very quick reflexes that she manages to let go and not go
swinging up into the air too. Carrying the cart, James walks over to a work bench and lays it out over
the top on it’s side. He doesn’t bother to say anything as he searches through drawers upon drawers
of shiny odds and ends with his back to her. It isn’t until he turns that Lela’s able to make out a
couple of wheels in his hands.

“Shit, you were serious?” Lela grumbled as she dropped down to at least stand her cleaning products
upright. When James sends her a pinched confused expression she goes on to clarify, “About fixing
it it.”

“Yeah, I…if you don’t want me to, I won’t,” James immediately tells her. His shoulders going tight
as he stilled with the wheels in his big hands.

Looking every bit like he was a deer caught in the headlights of an especially gnarly looking semi,
James looked about ready to chuck the fucking wheels and leave the cart. His brows grow tight and
the softness of those pink lips grows terse. Lela’s pretty sure, if she makes even one wrong move,
James will revert back to the awkward stilted conversation she’d first been greeted with.

So call her a fucking masochist, but Lela forces herself to go smooth and careful. She pulls away the
suspicion she’s got running in her and leaves it out of her voice. She’s nowhere near not being
hostile, but, she’s not exactly angling for a fight either.

Shrugging, Lela merely tells him, “Shit, knock yourself out dude. I was just gonna call Tony and tell
him I trashed the fuckin’ thing. Figure he’s got enough to replace the stupid shit, right?”

“So…you don’t mind then? Me, uh, fixing it?” James asks, a delicate kind of expression falling
across his brow.

And as much as James was a rugged fucking beast of himself, all hard lines and muscle bound
strength, there was a delicate air to him. The look he’s got in his eye as he looks at her, waiting for her to push him away, is all kinds of vulnerable. It makes a lump form in her throat, makes her belly go tight and a strange kind of squirm in her second nature. She’s flooded, then, with this insane need to reach out and smooth that wrinkle on his brow out. To settle whatever kind of shit was eating at the man.

Her hindbrain screams for her to get up close and personal with the man. To taste his scent on her tongue. To figure out what laid beneath all that muscle and the overalls he’s got on.

But Lela forces back her stupid fucking instincts and keeps herself in place perched on the heels of her boots. Swallowing drily, Lela forces her eyes away from his heart breaking face.

“Nah man, like I said, fucking knock yourself out,” Lela tells him as she stood up with a broom in her hand.

Trying to ignore the thump in her chest Lela sets out to at least finish up her assigned shift before the day was out. She works silently, eyes dragging back over to James at least every thirty seconds. If James notices, he doesn’t fucking let it show even a little bit. He just works smoothly in the deafening silence around them.

It takes a while, but eventually, the silence starts to wear away at her. It’s making her shoulder grow tight with tension as she flattened cardboard box after cardboard box. She’s working on a new one, has her box cutter in one hand, when she finally snaps.

With a growl in her voice, she asks the man, “Yo, what’s with the fucking graveyard silence?”

Head snapping up, James looks at her with surprise—like he’s forgotten she was there at all—and then confusion at her words. It takes a little while before he grumbles out, “I…I like it quiet. Helps me concentrate. Do you…not like it?”

Slicing into the thick—at least four layered—box in her hands, Lela tells him as honestly as she can, “Not gonna lie dude, it’s kinda putting me on edge, ya know? Like, this is like next levels kind of quiet.”

James looks at her, thoughtful, as he seemingly picked apart her words. He’s got this look on his face like he’s trying to soak up every syllable she’s issued. Like he’s trying to understand everything there was about her by that simple statement alone. It’s weird, makes Lela grow impossibly hot around the collar of her shirt, but Lela doesn’t want to acknowledge why.

“You can put something on,” James eventually tells her, idly fiddling with the screws in his left hand. When he looks back down at his work he tosses at her, “If you want.”

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela snatches up the opportunity before it can go up in smoke. There was actually very few places that Lela could actually ask Jarvis to fill up with music. About the only redeeming quality about building D was that it was one of the places where she could. Big garage like storage rooms filled with some kind of vehicle or office supplies, it was all so blessedly void of humans. No one to bitch about her music at all.

Calling out for Jarvis, the man answers with a smooth, “What can I do for you today ma’am?”

Grinning at her working hands, Lela laughs and tells the man in the sky, “Jarvis, babe’s, I’m pretty sure we’re on first name basis now.”

“Right, forgive me. What can I do for you today Ms. Lela?”
Groaning, but taking it for the step in the right direction it was, Lela tells the man, “You got anything to fill the silence?”

“I have a great many things. What did you have in mind?”

Glancing up at the gorgeous fucker in the room with her, Lela figures she should at least do the man the courtesy of at least asking, “What kinda shit you into James?”

“I don’t really have a…preference,” James admits, his eyes barely lifting up off his work and over to her. His voice is all muted acceptance like he’s expecting some kind of ugly wild shit to come blaring over the speakers.

Frowning, Lela plays it safe and simply tells Jarvis, “Hey J, play me some slow jams. Nothing too pop.”

Without another word, Childish Gambino starts playing. The intro to Redbone plays soft and slow. Grinning, Lela calls up to the ceiling, “You’re a fucking god J.”

“I do my very best.”

Laughing, Lela sets back to work and lets the rhythm of the music carry her away. Her lips run with the words of the song till she’s completely pulled away. The boxes are all eventually flattened away and wen that’s done, she carries them over to the recycle bin set up at the very end of the hanger. She dumps them in and heads back for her broom.

Lela is careful when she passes by James and waywardly asks with an expectant expression, “This alright?”

Looking every bit like he was surprised she’d bother to even ask, the man simply shrugs his shoulders and says, “It’s alright.”

Face screwing up in mild displeasure, Lela throws at him, “This shit is good. You don’t know what you’re fucking talking about James.”

“Probably,” James admits with a small smile, “Better than some of the things Tony plays.”

And Lela, well she can’t really agree, because she kind of liked the classics Tony tried to jam down her throat. Because really, who didn’t like ACDC, Zeppelin and Def Leppard? But, hey, people were entitled to their own opinions. Even if Lela thought they were pretty fucking wrong.

“Not a classic rock fan, huh?” Lela stills, leaning up against her broom as she eyed the man.

“Not really, too loud for me,” James tells her with a small smile. Something like displeasure lining just the ends of his lips. Like he couldn’t understand how someone could be into it at all.

Brows pinched, Lela nods like she understands and goes back to sweeping up. She’s got a pretty decent pile going when something starts overhead that sounds all kinds of wrong. So without glancing up, she shouts, “Shit.”

The song changes effortlessly. When she encounters another song she just doesn’t like the feel of, she says again, “Shit.” and again it changes.

It isn’t until after Lela’s done cursing at seemingly nothing that she looks up to find James’ confused and suspicious expression. Brows pinched, he looked like an especially sad angel. The kind just begging for a lick of sin.
“If you, uh, don’t like anything, you can like *veto* it or something,” Lela awkwardly fumbles to explain motioning with her head up at the ceiling, “I usually just tell Jarvis it’s shit and he files it away under a running list of what not to play around me.”

“Oh, I…I thought….” James struggles to find his words as he pinned his storming gray eyes on her. Framed by thick curled lashes, those eyes were a fucking danger to Lela’s goddamn heart. Eventually he tells her, “Okay.”

And like that they fall into a companionable silence where both of them break it with the occasional ‘*shit*’ thrown out into the air. Lela finds herself pretty much in a better mood every time she hears the man mumble out a stiff *shit* under his breath.

When he does it to at least four times in a row, Lela stops her sweeping. She sends the man a wry glance before smirking and calling out, “Hey J, put some soul on. Maybe that’ll fit Mr. ‘Doesn’t Have a Preference’.”

Issuing a rumbling chuckle, James grins down at his hands before saying, “I don’t.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela leans against her broom handle and spits out with a smirk, “Piss on my leg all you want James, but, you’ve vetoed anything that wasn’t bluesy or soulful.”

Shrugging those impossibly broad shoulders, James offers a small frown as he said, “They sound good is all.”

“So then say that dude, I don’t fucking mind finding some kind of common ground, shit,” Lela heaved out with a click of her tongue, “It is your fucking space I’m crashing.”

Before anything else can be said, Lela turns back to her work and lets the sad songs over head lull her into something like peace.

It doesn’t take long for James to finish up fixing the wheels of the cart. He brings it over to where the pile of cleaners sits and deposits it like it doesn’t weigh at least forty fucking pounds on a good day. Without prompting, he starts loading everything back up onto it’s assigned places. Lela watches as she dumps the last of the dirt into the trash can.

Slowly, Lela walks over to him and offers a simple, “Thanks.”

She can’t begin to explain why she feels comfortable around him in less than forty five minutes tops. But she does. Lela thinks its got everything to do with the soft sounds of the music and James’ pretty sad eyes. Either way, it lets her get closer than she would’ve not so very long ago. She isn’t exactly near him—at least an arms breadth away, far enough that she can’t even scent him if she tried—but it’s closer than she ever would’ve gotten before.

It’s one of those milestones Sam always talks about. Lela’s pretty sure if she told him about it, he’d want to take her out for a celebratory meal. All wide sunny smiles and rumbling laughter.

The bond they share—all flower petals and roots—shakes like it’s already pleased.

“No problem,” James tells her, as he kept his eyes on his working hands.

When the cart is righted completely they stand in an awkward kind of silence. One where Lela doesn’t know what she’s supposed to say or do. So she stands there like the dumb shit she is gripping her broom handle tight.

That’s right around the time Damn Your Eyes starts playing. Low and dangerous, angry and
sorrowful, far more rock than blues. Lela’s got a sneaky suspicion that Jarvis was just as much a shithead as his creator/dad. Still, Lela feels like the song pretty much summed up what Lela was feeling looking up into those storming gray eyes.

Couldn’t help but feel like she was falling into them. Like all she wanted was to spend the rest of her days staring up into them. Lela’s never felt anything like that before. So, she does just about the only thing she knows how to do, and stuffs it away in a tiny little box in the corner of her mind. A thing to be dealt with on a later day, if ever.

Because, yeah, James was other worldly beautiful, and yes she was fucking lusting after him, but what the fuck good was any of that? It’s not like someone like him—all delicate vulnerability and dripping in good looks—would ever want to so much as touch her.

Offering her a smile that was all kinds of delicate, James points up at the ceiling and announces, “This isn’t so bad.”

Licking her suddenly dry lips, Lela huffs out a small laugh before nodding, “Yeah, it’s pretty good.”

Smiling in earnest James looks at her, his lips part like he’s about to say something—like he’s trying to work up the nerve to ask her something—when the hanger door opens with a mechanical swish. The sound of an engine fills the space and drowns out the music playing overhead. A large truck drives in with a screech and clang. The engine eventually sputters out as a laughing voice spilled out of the driver’s side window.

“Hey, anybody here?” a man calls out, his voice thick with his Alpha barks and laughter.

The sound instantly makes Lela snarl. Face closing up, like all that softness was rain on dry ground, James turns away from her and heads towards the truck now sitting in his garage.

“Yeah?” James asks, his voice pitched low and careful.

Tossing open the driver’s side door, a man slips down, a grin spread wide over his face as he shouted, “I don’t know what you did, but, this shit isn’t working like you said it would.”

James doesn’t say anything as he goes to the shut engine and popped it open. He’s leaning over the hot engine with his shoulders set tight as he went to work. Spine ramrod straight like he isn’t the least bit happy that this new person is in his space right now. Like James would like to do everything in his will power to get the man to leave as abruptly as he had arrived.

Feeling her welcome run right out, Lela goes to leave but is stopped by the low wolf whistle that the stranger has issued. With a lewd fucking laugh, the man goes:

“I didn’t interrupt anything, did I? I mean, I can always come back.”

His words still Lela right in place.

Now, really, Lela’s fucking trying to be the better person Sam, Clint and Natasha are convinced she can be. She hasn’t snapped at anyone with the intensity she would’ve not too long ago. But bad habits, engrained into her very soul, are hard as all fuck to break. Maybe it’s the fact that he’s an Alpha, and that he’s pushing it around like it fucking means everything, that makes the worst part of her rear up like a starved animal.

Turning slow and careful, Lela sends the man a dark glare as she growled out, “The fuck is that supposed to mean?”
Grinning, the dark haired Alpha leers as his blue eyes slide from Lela to James’ back. Running his tongue like a goddamn perv, he shrugs and directs his words to James’ tightly coiled back, “Didn’t think you had it in you, Barnes. Figured you batted for the other team, the way you don’t even got that much of an Alpha musk. Here I find you holed up with the towers resident door mat.”

Mind reeling with the fact that she’s just figuring out that James’ himself is a goddamn Alpha too, Lela feels her jaw grow tight and her shoulders grow tense. She ignores that for the simple fact that her hindbrain is suddenly deeply invested in her growing ire. Every inch of her is spitting fucking mad about the way this stranger is insulting both of them.

It isn’t news to Lela that she’s constantly being insulted behind her back. The moment she’d hissed out those fucking words at Claire, well, the whole of the tower had gone up in flames. Everyone was fucking convinced she was fucking her way to the top. It didn’t help that Tony didn’t bother to hide his clear favoritism on his side. After all, new hires didn’t get to clean up Tony’s personal sections on a fucking whim. And yet, Lela was practically given free reign to go where she pleased where Tony was concerned.

And then that rumor had kicked up. The one that came from whatever stupid fucks had been friends with that one security officer prick. The one that had tasered her all that time ago. Friends that said Lela was some kind of pet project. A charity case. A little stray cat that had been plucked off the side of a red light street and was being house trained. A little pet for Stark to fuck when the need so arose.

No one’s actually said anything anywhere near Lela, but they all seem to have pegged her for what she was—or used to be.

But Lela’s never heard anyone tell her that to her face. Everyone was content to make sneering faces when she entered a room or snide comments at her back as went.

Lips pulled into a snarl, Lela tosses her broom down and stomps her way over to the nameless Alpha. He grins at her, completely unconcerned with her anger, as he leaned against the open door of the truck. Every bit of strength that came from living the life she has burns in her as she kicked—with everything in her—at the door and sent it flying shut. It slams, ugly and violent, and nearly takes the Alpha’s fucking arm off in the process. Lela briefly thinks she might’ve dented the stupid thing.

“Wanna run that by me again?” Lela growled, wild and angry. Her fangs are bared as she snapped her teeth in his direction.

Shock makes the Alpha stumble back as he attempts to right himself back up. But that shock quickly bleeds to his own version of anger. It’s an anger that is laced in white hot embarrassment at having been pushed back as he has. An Alpha pushed back by the Alpha growl Lela’s got stored up in her for moments like these. His face—average at best—twists as he flashed his fangs and charged towards her.

“You fuckin’ bitch, just cause you suck Stark’s dick doesn’t mean I won’t fucking teach you some manners,” he roared down at her.

Feet planted, shoulders squared and jaw jutted out, Lela sneers up at that snarling face and taunted in a voice twisted with her wrathful snarls, “Fuckin’ try it asshole.”

Hand flashing out, like he’s probably going to snatch a handful of her hair, the man reaches for her. He only makes it so far before Lela’s flashing forward too.

The familiar pulse of a fight makes her head grow quiet. All thoughts bleed right out of her as her
heart rings with excitement. Fist clenched tight, Lela rears it back and lets it fucking fly. It lands dead center at his throat. The man issues a choked out cry. He goes stumbling back, his hands clutching at his throat like he can’t pull a breath in. And judging from personal experience, Lela knows he probably can’t. His feet tangle up which leads to him falling down on his ass.

Lips pulled tight over her fangs, Lela drops to her haunches over the man and darkly purrs out, “What was that? Couldn’t quiet make that out?”

Wheezing, the alpha scrambles back until his back is leaning against the front tire. He glares like a drowned fucking cat, and spits out, “You fucking bitch…”

Clicking her tongue, Lela mumbles as sweetly as she can, “Is this you teaching me some manners? Cause, I gotta tell you baby, you’re going about it all wrong.”

“Y-You fucking hit me! I’m going to report your ass!” the alpha flings at her as he scrambled to get back up.

Frowning, Lela stands, puts herself back into a proper fighting stance and shrugs her shoulders as much devil may care attitude as she can possibly summon, “Go for it, Alpha. You tell’em you got your pansy ass knocked out by a little cocksucker.”

Face twisting in fury, the Alpha lets out an ear splitting roar. One drenched in his anger and humiliation. It makes every instinct hard wired into her—all second dynamic bullshit—want to curl up tight into a smaller target. But Lela’s got her bad habits out and running. She beats it back with a well trained hand. Forces herself to meet that roar head on with a snarl of her own. The bonds in her chest twist like someones stuck a knife in and jerked it around full circle.

And for as much as Lela is fast on her fucking toes, she fucking misses the way the Alpha’s suddenly wielding something in his hand. A tire iron of some kind comes whizzing through the air. And yeah, Lela figures, flinching back is a good as fuck action to take when a fist fights suddenly got weapons. She jumps back, her arms going up to block the blow that was headed for her mother fucking face.

Her bonds writhe like snacks that have been tossed onto an electric fence when fear rushes icy cold into her veins.

Bracing for the blow Lela feels her body go impossibly tight.

But the blow never lands.

It’s stopped by the sudden hand that strikes out—viper fast and just as smooth. Suddenly, James isn’t standing over the engine of the truck but square between Lela and an infuriated Alpha. His left hand is wrapped tight over the Alpha’s wrist and keeping it suspended in the air.

Without offering a single word, James puts to end a fight that had suddenly cropped up. He stands stock still, body made of mountain stone, cut of hard rock and chiseled into muscle. His face is impossibly empty as he glared at the stranger and squeezed his fingers tighter until the Alpha cried out and dropped the tire iron he wielded. Taking a step forward, forcing the stranger to take a step back, James pushes the man back away from Lela and towards the open hanger door.

In a voice that was all hard ice and black death, James says, “You should go.”

It isn’t a suggestion. It’s a goddamn command. One that spelled out some kind of pain if the alpha prick even tired to do anything but leave. Releasing his hand, James stands like a great big lumbering bear over the cowering Alpha.
“This is bullshit!” the Alpha screamed as he clutched his hand to his chest, “I think you broke my fucking hand!”

“Leave,” James tells the man in that empty tone of his.

Gone is the softness that Lela had seen him not minutes before. Gone is the delicate lines of vulnerability on his face.

What stood before Lela was an Alpha, through and through. One that didn’t even need to growl or roar to assert his impossible to deny dominance. An Alpha that could force another to do as was told by simply saying it with death in his eyes.

And Lela’s got every reason in the world to be terrified by the simple fact that he is an Alpha alone, but she isn’t. Not at all. Something entirely stupid and fucking instinctual twirls up out of her hindbrain and forces her to look on in fucking wonder. The lust Lela’s already got for the muscled mountain of a man amplifies then. Makes it so her fear filled body burns up with it. Lela blames her fucking second nature for it.

For the way she’s got some kind of bullshit assed cry building in her throat. The way her neck just wants to drop and offer submission James isn’t asking of her. Medicated or not, Lela’s Omega instincts flare to life and ache—fucking ache—for the man like nothing she’s ever felt before. It leaves her feeling breathless as she watched on, silent.

Half falling, the Alpha sprints out of the hanger. Curses falling off his lips as he went.

It takes a total of at least five minutes for James to finally turn around and face her. His face is still as devoid as emotion as it had been when he’d been facing the Alpha, but his eyes are storming. Lela wouldn’t be surprised if actual lightning flashed out of them and fried her where she stood.

“Are you hurt?” James asks in a voice that was all dark grumbles.

Running her tongue over her suddenly dry lips, Lela forces herself to shake her head in the negative. It takes a hell of a lot of will power to not move from where she’s standing and say, “Thanks, you—uh, you didn’t need to step in like that.”

“You would’ve gotten hurt,” James says like that pretty much settled it.

If he hadn’t stepped in, Lela probably would’ve had to pick her teeth up from the floor. So, yeah, maybe she would’ve.

Still, indignation makes her snarl out, “Wouldn’t’ve been the first time dude.”

Her words seem to knock something loose in the man as he cocked his head to the side and stared at her. His storming eyes suddenly take on a calculating gleam. For a wild second, Lela thinks, that that stare was piercing through all that she was and saw to the very heart of her.

It’s unnerving as much as it makes heat bloom bright and ugly across her face.

Pursing her lips, Lela tightens her hands up into fists and jams them into her pockets before walking backward to where she’d left her shit. Only when she’s got her broom back into her cart she tosses over at the man:

“If…if he makes, like, some kind of report, don’t worry about it. I’ll take the heat.”

It’s the least she could do, Lela figures. Since the dude pretty much stepped into a fight she’d started.
If someone was going to get stuck with the consequences, Lela figures it ought to be her.

James doesn’t say anything, just watches her with those damnable eyes. Keeps looking at her like he’s trying to make sense of all the bullshit that was locked away in Lela’s head. Forcing her cart into motion, Lela fucking bails before she does something stupid and bares her fucking neck to an Alpha of James’ caliber.

Lela’s stupid, she knows she’s the type to repeat the worst of her mistakes. And while James was as hot as sin, Lela wasn’t looking forward to walking down that path again. Not after all she’s learned. So she leaves because she figures she’s got enough scars on her to last a lifetime.

*~*

It takes less than exactly thirty minutes for all three of her bonded Pack mates to hunt her down. She’s just coming out of the Stark Tower. Lela’s got her jacket slipped over her dark maroon long sleeve, her Stark uniform shirt tossed over her left shoulder, and a cig on her lips when a car comes screeching up to the side walk, jumps the curb, and misses her by at least a foot.

Tumbling out of the passenger side door, Clint rushes at her. His eyes reeking of worry and his face twisted like he’s readying himself to face a firing squad.

“Lela!” is the first thing he shouts as he pulled up close to her. His hands shoot out and map her face before running down her shoulders and the entire length of her arms, “What’s wrong?”

“Wha—nothing,” Lela tells him over the end of her smoke. She doesn’t bother pushing away his wandering hands because at this point they’re all well past having personal boundaries.

It’s one of the first things that flew out the window when Lela started letting them crash in her bed. There are a few times she’s sad to have seen it go. Other times, more often than not, she isn’t.

Some nameless part of herself always finds itself settled when Clint worms his way into her side and attacks her with cuddles on Movie night. It settles even further when Natasha does that magic with her fingers and gives her scalp a strange kind of massage.

Close as Clint is—practically on top of Lela—she can make out the way his strawberry scent has gone sour. Like a batch of rotted berries.

“What happened,” Natasha demands as soon as she’s standing at Lela’s back. Her green eyes are shifting every which way like she’s trying to make out targets in the shadows, “We felt your bond ring with fear.”

Oh, Lela thinks and says. For all that she was aware that Lela could somewhat make out what her pack bonds were feeling, Lela hadn’t yet put together that they might feel the same from her. As casually as she can manage to brush Clint’s wandering hands away from herself, she shrugs and tells them, “Nothing, some Alpha fuck tried to hit me over the head with some tire iron.”

“What!” Clint barks out, incensed at the same time Natasha coldly demands, “Where is he?”

Natasha smells like someones come up to her and set that nutmeg root on fire.

“Don’t worry about it,” Lela immediately says as she made her way to the car. She’s pretty sure if Natasha doesn’t move the thing, a cop is likely to come by and give her a ticket. If she’s using that as an excuse to not deal with this conversation, no one but her’s gotta know.

“What do you mean, don’t worry about it?!” Clint screeched out in outrage as he followed her,
“Someone just tried to attack you! What happened?!”

“Nothing man,” Lela says as she slipped into the passenger side seat. She’s pulling on her seat belt right around the time Natasha’s slipping in behind the wheel, “Fucker tried to start some shit about me being Tony’s personal cock warmer and I tagged him in the throat for it. I guess he’s not the kind to take a hit and let it go, I guess.”

“So he tried to hit you with a tire iron?!” Clint screams from the back seat.

Offering them a wry kind of laugh, Lela nods and runs a hand through her now loose waves, “Crazy huh, fucking asshole Alpha.”

“What’s his name?” Natasha asks of her in that dangerous way of hers that’s all cool death and bloody revenge.

“Fuck if I know, never seen him before till today. Why?” Lela questions off handedly as she rummaged through the middle console for one of Clint’s hidden stash of jolly ranchers. She finds them and pops into her mouth two watermelon flavored pieces.

“What happened after he came at you with a weapon?” Clint asks, but Lela figures he means to say, ‘How are you not bloody?’.

Licking her lips, Lela feels her belly do something weird and squirmy as the image of James sparked up in her mind. The way he’d stood, like an avenging fucking angel, gripping that fuckers wrist until the tire iron clambered to the floor. Lust sparks up wild and unbidden until Lela has to stuff it down with a vicious kind of denial.

“James helped me out,” Lela mumbles as she stared out the side window.

“Who’s James?” Natasha questions like her band isn’t constricting tight. Like she doesn’t want to shake the answers out of Lela’s vague answers.

Pursing her lips, shoving the candy into one cheek, Lela merely states, “Some dude at work.”

‘Some dude’, if there were ever less than qualifying words to describe all that was James it was those.

Seriously, Lela thought, whole fucking songs had to be put together to describe the beauty that sat in his sad face. Or at least for the impossibly tight ass he sported. Either way, some dude, just didn’t do it justice.

But Lela’s never been the poetic type. Doesn’t think she’s smart enough for that. So some dude was as far as she was going to get.

“Did you report this Alpha?” Clint spits out the word like he’s spitting out the worst type of insult.

“What, why? I mean, if I did, I’m pretty sure I’m the one that’s gonna get my ass canned. I hit him first,” Lela turns in her seat to look at Clint’s murderous expression. Clint’s got that killer glare on his face again. The one that only came up when he was gearing up for a fight.

The one he’d sported in that alleyway so long ago.

Brows pinching, Lela grabs a grape flavored jolly rancher and tosses it at the man. Clint catches it effortlessly and pops it into his mouth with a mulish expression in his eyes.
“Do you want us to take care of it?” Natasha lightly settles into the tension filled silence.

For a good long while, Lela thinks the redhead means if Lela wanted them two to talk with Tony about it. To keep her job despite whatever consequences cropped up.

But when Lela turns to look at Natasha’s side profile, looks at the tension on the bow of her lips and sitting on her shoulders, Lela knows that’s not at all what the redhead meant. Lela can see the violence waiting to be unleashed in the way the woman grips the steering wheel.

Immediately Lela knows exactly what Natasha is asking. Glancing back into the backseat, Lela looks into Clint’s face and sees the unspoken agreement that sits in his darkened green eyes. Like he was ready to roll at the first sign of a green light.

Half choking on her hard candy, Lela spits out, “Like fucking kill him?”

“If that’s what you want,” Natasha smoothly tells her, glancing away from the road so she met Lela’s eyes without trouble. There wasn’t an ounce of hesitation in her emerald glittering eyes. There was a dark promise sitting in them like she was a—fucking—okay with offing a dude that tried to hit Lela.

“Oh, no,” Lela spits out, feels the bonds do something weird and complicated as they went from being cold and distant to their usual shapes, “Like, he’s a stupid fucker, but I don’t want you to fucking kill him.”

“We don’t have to kill him, we can just make it hard for him to walk for a month or so,” Clint tries as he leaned between the two front seats. He’s got this dark kind of hopeful expression in his eyes that makes Lela feel like he’s kind of a loaded gun.

Lela’s not sure she should feel any kind of way except fucking horrified when someone was asking to kill someone on her behalf. But there it is, a bubble growing bigger and bigger in her chest, forcing a laugh out of her as she shook her head and asked them both in general.

“Is this what pack does? Fucking murder anybody who gives one of us shit?”

Running his tongue over his lips, Clint shrugs before swiping the bag in her lap to himself, “I don’t know about other packs, but ours pretty much runs like that.”

“That’s fucking psychotic,” Lela accuses despite the fact that she’s smiling and warmth is spreading fast from the middle of her chest down to the very tips of her toes and fingers.

“You think so?” Natasha questions as she clicked her blinker and made a turn.

Shrugging, Lela figures, probably. But then, she’s not sure what she expected when she found herself accidentally bonded to two assassins turned super-fucking-heroes. So yeah, maybe it’s not the norm of the world but it definitely would be here, with them. She never gets to answer though on account of how they wind up at the hotel and have to get out of the car.

They’re about three steps into the lobby when suddenly another figure is barreling right into her. Lela’s got a weird case of deja vu as she has to sit through yet another round of wandering hands. She doesn’t fight these either on account of the scent. All lilacs, honey and oak wood. Lela doesn’t even need to look up to know exactly who it is. But she does and she’s confronted with the worry twisted face of Sam. His dark face is pulled as worry filled beta whines slip out of his mouth.

“What happened!”
Pursing her lips Lela grips his big hands and yanks them down with a tired, “Nothing happened. Ran into a little trouble at work.”

And like the fucking snitch that he was, Clint spills from somewhere behind her, “Someone tried to assault her with a *tire iron*.”

Turning to spear the fucker with a glare, Lela bites out, “Shut up Chuckles.”

“Where is he?” Sam questions, his voice going hard as his big hands incased hers in warm safety.

And there it is, in the roots of the suddenly spiky flower, that hardness Lela has only seen the very glimpse of. A hardness that seemed to make that white lily flower as unyielding as steel. A hardness, a rigidity, that made up the very core of the beta man in front of her. A toughness that was as admirable as the rest of the man.

“Don’t worry about it Sammy,” Lela yanks on his hands to get his attention before dropping one and pulling him along as she headed for the elevator doors.

“Wha—Lela! Someone tried to hurt you!” Sam bites out, his words shaking with the beta growls he’s got going.

Shrugging, Lela hits the suite level and waits for the car to start moving before answering, “Yeah, but nothing happened, so no need to fucking spaz out.”

“I’m worried,” Sam corrects tersely which contradicted the way his body went smooth and soft at her side, “I’m not spazing out, jerk.”

“No, you’re right,” Lela laughs as she knocked her shoulder into his side, “You’re totally bitching out.”

“That’s worse!” Sam spit out as he wrapped his arm over her shoulder and pulled her into a too tight squeeze.

Laughter ringing in her throat, Lela turns to eye Clint and Natasha where they stand just at her back and tells them all, “I’m fine you guys, seriously. It was no biggie.”

Natasha looks no way comforted by her words but takes a resigned breath through her tightly clenched teeth. Clint purses his lips up like he’s being presented a spinach lined pizza but gruffly grunts out some kind of agreement that the matter would be let go.

When the elevator doors open, Lela’s the first off. Her steps are followed by both betas and one gamma. Kicking open door, Lela waves into the hotel room while announcing, “C’mon in Sammy-Baby, *mi casa su casa*.”

Stepping through the threshold, Sam glances back at Natasha while he said, “I, uh, I didn’t mean to just, uh, crash you guy’s night. I felt the pull in the bond and I ran here as fast as I could. If you need me to go, I’m fine with it.”

Before Lela can say anything to that, Natasha makes a stopping motion with her hand. With all the ease of a reigning queen, Natasha goes:

“It’s fine Sam, we’re happy to have you.”

“Yeah,” Clint smiles as he dropped sideways onto the couch, a sly kind of smile spreading over his lips as he continued on with, “You know what they say about birds of a feather and all.”
“Oh my god,” Lela groaned whilst rolling her eyes. Wrapping her hand onto Sam’s forearm she drags the beta man over to the living room so that he can have a seat, “Clint shut up!”

Laughing, Clint digs himself deeper into the couch cushions as he said, “I’m serious birds who nest together stay together.”

“I’m begging you man,” Sam groaned as he sat himself down on the edge of the couch. Lela herself was snug tight between him and Clint, “Stop with the fucking bird jokes. It’s embarrassing for everyone involved.”

Laughing, Lela looks over at Natasha as she asked, “Your night to choose Red, what’s it gonna be?”

“What’s she choosing?” Sam asks low and careful in her ear as he placed his arm over the back of her head.

Settling her head snug on Clint’s shoulder, Lela stretches her legs out until Natasha can comfortably settle into the space between her legs. Natasha leans her weight against Lela’s right leg as she too got herself comfortable on the carpet underneath her.

“Nat’s in charge of what we watch tonight,” Lela tells Sam as she dug underneath her for the remote. Once it’s in her hand, Lela hands it over to Natasha before asking the beta man, “You got any suggestions?”

“Nah, I’m good with whatever,” Sam mumbled as he fit snugger against Lela.

And despite being dead tired, probably smelly as all hell from work, still dressed in her work uniform, Lela doesn’t even bother to get her ass back up. She lets all of her weight sink down as the bonds in her tumbled out wild and free. A strange kind of pressure builds in her chest as she rubs her cheek into Clint’s shoulder.

Contentment and something like peace seep out of the bonds till Lela’s practically purring at the feel of it. Letting the awfulness of the day bleed right out of her Lela settles down next to her pack and waits for whatever shitty black and white film Natasha put on this night.

*~*

By the time Jarvis gives her the heads up that HR is looking for her, Lela’s completely forgotten about the whole shit that went down in James garage. But then, the moment Jarvis cuts off, Lela’s flooded with a dreadful feeling. Dropping off her cart in one of the halls storage closets, she heads off for the correct floor.

Instead of taking the elevator she takes one of the stairs. She figures, if she can’t smoke her nerves away, she might as well walk some of them off. By the time she reaches the floor where HR is located, she’s out of fucking breath and panting like she’s just run a ten mile marathon.

To say Lela’s out of shape would be putting it entirely too mildly. Lela has the wildest fucking thought then and there that maybe she should take up Natasha’s none to gentle offers to get fit. Or at least to go on one of those long walks Sam keeps trying to talk her into. Because, seriously, there was no way she was giving up smoking the way Clint wanted her to.

After catching her breath, Lela heads into the offices that belong to the human resources department. Carefully making her way to the front desk she lets them know she’s been asked to come in. She gives her name while also signing in her full name and employee id number. when she’s done with that, she takes a seat and waits to be called to her assigned case worker.
A ball of tight nerves, Lela doesn’t even think about the way she reaches for comfort in the bonds she now houses. She takes a tight grip of silk ribbon, steel band and flower roots. Keeps them close and bathes herself in the acceptance, assurance and care she feels pulsing out of them. The nerves she’s got settle to a manageable level after that. They let her breath just a little easier until she isn’t as tense in her seat as she had been seconds before.

And it’s just about that time that her name is called out. Jerking up to her feet, Lela follows a woman that’s all round hips and faded brown hair. The woman, Mrs. Harp she delicately informs Lela, is all stern brown eyes and placid smiles. She smells of peppermint and something like stale coffee grounds. She’s a Gamma, Lela easily figures out, by the way she dips her head when a fellow Alpha female coworker passes her by.

“Sorry to pull you away from your duties,” Mrs. Harp announces as soon as she’s behind her neatly organized desk. Her pale pink shirt makes her golden tanned skin and dotted freckles appear copper like, “But there was no contact phone numbers listed on your employee file.”

“I, uh, I don’t have a phone,” Lela starts after she too is seated across the desk in a black and uncomfortable chair.

Too thin dark brows pinch together as Mrs. Harp stared at her with something like mild surprise, “At all?”

Shaking her head, Lela leaves it at that and doesn’t bother to offer the older woman an excuse or reason.

“Oh, okay. Well, when you do get one, you can come by and update your information. I’m also seeing you don’t have an address listed, is that because you, um,” the woman fumbles, her mouth opening and closing as she delicately tried to wade through the question she was working up the nerve to ask, “Is that because…”

Feeling like she’s got to at least try to make this go as smoothly as possible, for the sake of her fucking job, Lela cuts in with a simple, “I don’t have a permanent place of, uh, residence. Not at the moment. But, I’m hoping to get that squared away as soon as possible. I’ll, uh, I’ll come by and update that too, yeah?”

“Oh, okay, that’d be great!” Mrs. Harp says with a forced smile as she eyed Lela with eyes that were trying to figure out if the rumors running around the building were true or not.

When the silence stretches for a bit longer than Lela can stomach she presses on, “Is there a reason you called me down, or…”

“Of course!” Mrs. Harp exclaims before promptly fiddling with the file laid out on her desk. Shuffling a few papers around she unearthed a crisp official looking envelope and held it out for Lela to take.

It’s only when Lela’s holding it in her hand does she realize its some kind of letter. The Stark emblem printed on the upper left hand corner. In the small plastic window sits her name in rigid looking black blocky letters.

“Seeing as to how we had no address, we couldn’t exactly mail out your check. So it’s been sitting up here for you.” Mrs. Harp tells her with a pleasant smile.

Feeling her nerves just flush right out of her, Lela nods dumbly and holds the check in her hands with a grip better fit for glass. She’d forgotten about her check for a good long while. Hadn’t needed
the cash on account of how both wonder-twins were looking after her every need even if she told them they didn’t need to. Even Sam was running up to the hotel room bringing in all manner of groceries. He was determined to get her to eat healthier as much as Natasha was. Lela thinks, it was quite literally killing Clint the way their food was looking greener and greener every day.

“I’m pretty sure they covered it in orientation, but, your first check is kept back. We here at Stark industries issue paychecks on a bi-weekly status so that’s why the amount is the amount it is. If you have any questions about that Payroll department is just down the hall. I can schedule you in with Marcia, she’s a lovely woman. She wouldn’t mind going it over with you at anytime,” Mrs. Harp breezes through the whole conversation like she hasn’t tipped Lela’s world on it’s axis.

For there it sat, in Lela’s dirty little hands, the first bit of money she’s ever earned the right and legal way. Money hadn’t had to degrade herself for. Money she had earned by simply working and not the other way.

Lela feels like she might throw up.

Equal parts confused and shocked, Lela forces out the words in a gruff manner, “That it?”

“Uh, yes, I do believe it is. Did you have any questions for me?” Mrs. Harp asked as a crooked kind of smile spread across her fuchsia painted lips.

Shaking her head in the negative, Lela rises to her feet and nods at the woman goodbye. Rushing out of the floor she’s in, she heads for the stairs again. On account of it being empty, Lela figures its a good enough place to really look at the thing in her hands.

Her hands don’t tremble but its a near damn thing. Breaking the glued seal of the envelope Lela pulls out the silver backed check and reads out her name like it’s the first time she’s ever done so. Something delicate like pride prickles in her chest as her eyes slide over to the amount paid out.

That delicate feeling bubbles up until it pops.

For there it sat, all her hard work summed up in an amount Lela couldn’t really say out loud if forced. She’s never been all that smart but even she knows when too much is too much. She knows there’s no way in hell she worked two weeks and came out with a check with four digits and a comma.

Fury mixes with her indignation as she gripped it tight in her hand. Throwing open the stair door she heads for the elevator. Slamming on the correct button, she rides it up fuming in her wrath. Crashing through the doors, Lela lands on Pepper’s floor and watches as Joe—Pepper’s secretary/assistant—scrambled back and away from her.

Mouth full of fangs, Lela bites at him, “She here?”

“Y-Yeah, I mean, do you have an appointment?” he stutters out as his pale face flushed pink with his worry filled flush.

Snarling at him, Lela marches towards Pepper’s office door and practically kicks it down. From behind her desk, Pepper jumps. Her blonde head flashes up in surprise. Her beautiful face splits into a happy smile as she spotted Lela. That immediately morphs into concern when Pepper see’s the anger Lela’s wearing.

“--the fuck is this shit?!” Lela demands as she tossed Pepper her check.

Brows pulled together, frown tipping down her pink lips, Pepper picks up the crumbled paper and
lets her baby blue eyes roam over it. With confusion tipping her voice down, Pepper goes, “It’s your check?”

“Why the fuck is it so much?!” Lela growled out as her fists curled tight like she was ready to bash them into something, “I told you I didn’t want your fucking charity.”

“What?” Pepper sputters out, confused for all of two seconds before her eyes widened and her lips twisted into a deeper frown, “Lela I swear I didn’t just add money onto your check. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Then why the fuck is it so much,” Lela half roars as she stepped closer to Pepper and ripped the piece of paper out of her hand and slammed it onto the desk top, “I’m not good with numbers but I’m pretty sure I didn’t make two grand in two weeks, Pepper.”

“Lela,” Pepper starts out careful and cool, her beta scent leaking out all kinds of comforting notes as she held out her hands, “I know this looks bad, but I need you to hear me out okay?”

Biting back the growl that’s working up her throat Lela goes quiet as she glared at the blonde woman. Forcing herself to stay in place and to not tear into the beta woman, Lela waits for the explanation that seems to sit in her eyes.

“He doesn’t mean it in a bad way. He’s just shit at expressing his feelings through words. It’s easier to just give things away than it is to try to talk anything out. He’s just...dense like that. But he never means for it to be an insult,” Pepper is quick to say.

It takes Lela all of five seconds after Pepper’s done talking for her brain to click. The growl that leaves her throat is savage and wild as she balled up the check and stormed out of the office. She’s already out the door and in an elevator as she listens to Pepper call after her. Punching the close door button on the panel, Lela calls up to the air:

“Hey J?”

“Yes ma’am?”

“You know where Starks ass is?”

“Currently with him in his personal labs.”

Seething, Lela bites out, “Take me there.”

“Yes ma’am.”

With a smooth lurch, the car starts moving. In about three minutes, Lela is able to track down the Alpha on smell alone. The moment the elevator doors open Lela is hit with his scent thick in the air. All orchid and jasmine. It’s so space heavy that Lela figures no one but the Alpha has been in here for a good long while. Grinding her elongated fangs together, Lela tracks him down to the furthest part of the lab.

Hidden behind a long table filled with wires, pieces of disassembled high tech shit, there he sits in a ratty old Dio shirt. His hair is all manner of greasy and unkempt. His face lined in concentration as he gripped some kind of screw driver between his teeth.

Without looking up Tony goes, “I ate this morning Bruce, I’m still not hungry.”

“You could eat dog shit for all I care dick head,” Lela spits at him as she marched up to the long
work table.

Whipping his head up, Tony catches her eyes in happy surprise. He doesn’t even register her anger as he smiled and crowed, “Kid! What’re you doing up here?”

Tossing him the balled up check Lela growls out, “You wanna tell me what the fuck this is?!”

Fumbling to catch the piece of paper and not drop whatever shit he was working with, Tony awkwardly managed. Unraveling the check Tony frowns as he told her as casual as fucking anything, “Your check, I think. Are you…short? Cause I got a whole department for things like this.”

Issuing a low growl Lela kicks at one of the tables legs and watches as nuts and bolts spilled onto the ground, “I know what the fuck it is asshole. I’m not here to fucking ask you why I’m short. I’m here to fucking ask you why it’s so fuckin’ much.”

“Wait,” Tony’s face screws up with bone deep confusion as his hazelnut brown eyes bore into hers, “Are you complaining about getting paid too much?”

“I didn’t take this job to get fucking handouts,” Lela spit out with a roar.

“Handouts, kid what the hell are you talking about?” Tony threw back at her as he rose to his impressive height, “I paid you what I feel you deserved in a job I’ve seen you put more than a decent enough effort. You know how many people I got on payroll who just half ass their duty’s because they think they’ve got a free ride here? I’ve seen how you handle yourself and I’m paying you accordingly.”

“What?” Lela mumbles as she felt her fangs snap back into her head. Tony’s words serve to take the wind right out of Lela’s damn sails. Lela rears back like she’s just been slapped. Shock lines her face and swirls in her chest.

Scowling at the check, Tony straightens out every wrinkle as he spoke, “I mean, seriously kid, I’m trying to get you to like me. Bribing you is the worst way to go about this.”

“Why the hell do you want me to like you?” Lela eventually says, isn’t about to touch the other thing because it’ll probably make her feel even guiltier than she did right now.

All that righteous anger that had her flying down here doesn’t feel so justified now that Tony’s explained himself. Just makes her look like a big dick. So she lets it go, if only to keep from fighting with him.

Because despite herself, she really did like Tony. The man had an uncanny ability to make Lela laugh even when she as in the shittiest moods ever. There was just something about him that made Lela feel…comfortable. She didn’t mind when he followed her around and basically pestered her like a child. Half the time, Lela found herself wanting to pinch the man by the sleeve of his shirt and force him to follow her.

It was weird.

Laughing, Tony continues to force every wrinkle out of the paper and flashes those big brown eyes at her. They twinkle and light up with his smile as he shrugged and said, “You’re funny kid, I like that.”

Refusing to acknowledge the heat that blooms across the bridge of her nose Lela tightly pulls her lips into a frown. Letting her body bleed out it’s tension, Lela leans her belly against the table and tells
him with a side eye, “How many times I gotta tell you Boss-man, you’re not my type.”

“And like I keep telling you, I’ll grow on you,” Tony proudly informs her with a self satisfied smirk.

Rolling her eyes Lela lets a laugh fall from her lips.

“Hey,” Tony starts, eyes flashing down to the check he’s refusing to let up on, “Why do you got a check? I mean, I thought there was like a direct deposit thing that payroll does?”

“I don’t got a bank account,” Lela says easily as she eyed one of Tony’s many robots finally slip out from underneath the table.

The poor thing is all awkward limbs and big tires. It’s covered in some kind of splattered pink and white paint and immediately Lela wishes she could’ve come up with some kind of rag. It was in desperate need of a good wash down.

“What, seriously?” Tony mumbles from where he’s at, “Why?”

Idly fishing around for a rag, Lela finds one hidden under a mountain of wires and complicated little ends. She grabs it and motions for the little creature to come her way. It comes to her with little bird like chirps and mechanical whizzes. Smiling down at the thing she begins wiping away most of the paint. Where she thinks it’s eyes might be. Half of it comes off with an easy passing. The rest, Lela has to really put some effort into it.

“I don’t know, never saw much of a point, ya’know?” Lela tells him with a shrug of her shoulders.

What Lela doesn’t say is that she’s always been afraid of going into official places like a bank. She’s got no ID, no registration card, nothing. She didn’t even know her own social, so yeah.

Grabbing another rag, Lela spots another tiny dark blue robot—all antenna’s and strange designs—lining up behind the one she’s working on. He too is covered in paint, blue and green. He makes complicated little beeps like he’s wondering if he too can get cleaned up.

Despite herself, Lela feels her smile go soft as she waved him over too.

“So how do you save away your money?” Tony questions, his tone sounding like he’s already disapproving of whatever answer Lela’s about to give him.

Frowning, Lela glances over to him and then back down to the little beeping creature about a foot shorter than her. Heaving a sigh, Lela mumbles, “I used to put it in a plastic bag and then duct tape it to the inside of air vents. It worked out pretty good for me.”

Issuing a soft whine that better fit pups, Tony states, “That’s not…Lela you can’t do that.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Lela lies, feels her shoulder grow tense as she snapped it out.

She was just going to stuff it in the bottom of her duffle bag where she kept her socks. She’s pretty sure if she left so much as a dollar there, it’d be safe on account of the wonder-dicks.

Going silent, Tony keeps his peace for about five or so minutes. Long enough that Lela finishes with the robot she’s got her hands on and for another, larger and covered in something like grease, to show up.

This one, though bigger, was far less fancy. He was, for a lack of a better word, primarily a large robotic three fingered claw. He’s got big awkward tires that have him half crashing into things rather
than steer him clear of it.

“Jesus fuck,” Lela grumbled as she sent Tony a dark glower, “do you ever wash your fucking toys?”

“They need to learn,” Tony waved away her scowl with a careless hand.

“Asshole,” Lela threw at him as she pulled herself up onto the lab table to better reach the creatures face.

This one’s got some kind of letters printed across his left side, D.U.M.-E. the creature pops and issues hydraulic hisses at her as he bent himself as low as he could. Patting his head, like an especially dirty street dog, Lela sets herself to work with the paint covered rag in her hands. But she’s making more of a mess than anything else.

“Here,” Tony huffs out in exasperation, turning Lela takes in the rag he’s holding with a long suffering expression, “If you’re going to ruin the whole lesson, might as well go full stop.”

Snatching the rag from the mans hands Lela snaps at him, “Asshole, it doesn’t hurt to clean them.”

“Why? They get dirty five minutes after you get them clean. Waste of time, kid,” Tony tells her back.

Tsking her tongue, Lela picks up her self assigned task and finds that whatever Tony’s put on the rag is making the grease just slide right off. She’s done far sooner than she figured she might be. But she’s wearing half of everything she’s taken off of them.

“There you go,” Lela cooes at the robot, smiling as she wiped the last of something black and greasy off what Lela assumed was his face, “Ready to break hearts.”

And because its a creature born from the mad scientist depths of Tony’s place, the robot looks at her and garbles out, “Th-Thank-Thank.”

Surprised, Lela’s mouth drops open as she gaped at the creature. Awkwardly, she pats the creatures long neck and tells him, “No worries, big guy.”

“It’s ‘thank you’ dumb-dumb,” Tony snipes from where he’s been left unattended.

Head spinning after Lela’s removed her hand, the robot twirls excitedly and garbles out, “Thank-Thank!”

With that he races off on his four wheels with the rest of the freshly clean creatures at his tail. Smiling at the oddity that was visiting Tony’s private labs, Lela turns so she’s sitting on the table but looking at the Alpha she came to beat the shit out of.

Feeling about ten pounds lighter, Lela tosses the man the rag he’d handed her and tells him as casually as she can manage, “Sorry, about blowing up on you like I did.”

Frowning and offering her a one shoulder shrug, the Alpha doesn’t look up from where he’s fiddling with something high-tech looking, “No harm no foul. I mean, I’m not sporting a broken nose so, all’s well that ends well. Right?”

“I didn’t break your fucking nose dickhead,” Lela laughs as she pulled one of her leg entirely onto the table. Bending it so she can rest her elbow onto her knee she pins him with a smirk and taunts, “But if you’re that hard up on it, I could break it.”

Stilling in his work, Tony looks at her and quickly threatens her with, “I’ll call Pepper.”
At that, Lela throws her head back and laughs. She’s too busy laughing she almost misses the return of Tony’s little robot minions. Still bubbling with laughter, Lela turns and watches as they all begin depositing armfuls of random tools beside her on the table. D.U.M.-E is the only one that shoves something in Lela’s chest.

Lela doesn’t even need to look down to know it’s a rose plant she’s being handed. But it helps because she’s a hell of a lot confused as to why she’s being handed a potted plant.

“Thank-Thank!” D.U.M.-E exclaims, all happy static pops and hisses.

“Uh, Tony?” Lela calls out as she took the pot into her hands, “What’s up with your kids?”

“My kids?” Tony repeats the words like he doesn’t understand what the hell they mean.

Whizzing faster than Lela’s eyes can catch, the robot creatures continue finding random odds and ends and piling them at Lela’s feet until a decent pile starts forming. Lela’s carrying the potted plant and some kind of half formed robot arm when someone dares to give her an explanation.

“Ms. Lela, I believe they wish to show their gratitude. For cleaning them.” Jarvis smooth voice slips overhead.

Confused, Lela runs her tongue over her lips before reaching a hand out and patting D.U.M.-E on the head again. The two others excitedly chirp as they awaited their turn. A smile forces it’s way over her lips as she patted all three on the head and said as genuinely as she could manage, “Uh, thanks.”

Lela’s got no doubt that the robots—all happy that they’re being petted—are about to pick up anything close to them and shove at her, if not for the shout Tony gives.

“Hey! Those aren’t yours to give!”

Running around his table, Tony shoo’s them all away with waving hands and irritated growls. The two smaller ones go whirring away on their little wheels. But DUM-E refuses to budge. He sticks close by Lela and cowers like he doesn’t want to go at all. It’s all very dog like that immediately, Lela snaps her teeth at Tony and places her hand on the robots head.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Lela growls out, makes the Alpha still in his steps, “They’re just messing around.”

“But they need to learn!” Tony defends himself with in exasperated expression, pointing to something in Lela’s pile he says, “Do you know what they’re giving you? Pieces of the new suit I’m working on! Those aren’t little…trinkets!”

Pursing her lips up into a dissatisfied frown, Lela drums her fingers on the robot she’s got glued to her side and says, “Then maybe you should explain it to them dude. How the hell are they gonna learn if you don’t tell them shit.”

Tony goes to open his mouth, some kind of retort already ready to fire off when suddenly Jarvis chimes in, smooth as glass:

“She has a point Sir.”

“You!” Tony points a damning finger into the sky, “You stay out of this! You’re the one in charge of showing them the ropes, you’ve been slipping!”
“They are obstinate sir.” Jarvis defends himself easily without ever raising a single octave above his normal speech pattern.

Smirking, Lela goes, “Really Tony, you’re like pawning them off and you still got the fucking balls to complain about their up-bringing?”

“What? I’m not pawning them off, I’ve been...busy,” Tony lamely tells her as he ducked back behind his table.

“Isn’t that like a classic dead-beat dad excuse?” Lela barbs, smirking all the while.

“They aren’t my kids, they’re my prototypes,” Tony smoothly deflects as he picked up another screwdriver.

Lela laughs at that because Tony’s got that signature pout on his lips that said he was arguing only for the sake of arguing. Tony’s dark brows are pinched together like he doesn’t like what Lela’s saying but can’t refute it much.

Easing up on the man, because she does like him—somewhat—Lela pats DUM-E’s head and sends him off. He goes with those static hisses and pops and one last ‘Thank-Thank’. Lela waves at him as he goes. It feels, oddly like sending a child out back into the jungle gym to get dirty some more.

Settling the plant in her lap a little more comfortably, Lela asks the alpha, “Hey, boss man?”

“Yeah?” Tony mumbles over the tool he’s got clenched between his pearly white teeth.

Steading her resolve, Lela figures if there was ever a person to ask about being money savvy, it was the actual billionaire. So she girdles her courage and bites the bullet, “Do you...how would I go about setting up a bank account?”

Lela’s got her eyes on the rose bud in front of her, she’s thumbing the harsh little thorns on the stems, so she misses it when something clangs hard onto the table. Flashing her head around in surprise, Lela watches as Tony abandons whatever he’s working on and rushes off to some different part of the Lab. He’s gone all of twenty seconds before he comes flying past her in a clean navy blue v neck and freshly combed hair.

“Do you know which bank you’re interested in?” Tony asked as he pulled on some kind of red jacket with black pin stripes down the length of the arms.

Face screwed up in her confusion Lela says, “Uh, no. Wouldn’t even know where to start to be honest.”

Nodding his head like he isn’t a whirl wind of confusion and erratic mania, Tony pulls his phone out of his pocket and says, “C’mon, we if we leave right now, we can catch the bank before they close.”

Surprised, Lela gapes and mutters, “W-What, are you gonna like take me there?”

“Well obviously kid, what if they try to pressure you into a loan or something? Can’t have that,” Tony shakes his head as his thumbs flew over the screen of his phone.

Lela knows she can refuse. Tony may not look like the type that knew the meaning to the word no, but he did. If Lela put her foot down even a fraction of the way Tony would respect it and back off.

So, yeah, Lela could say no. But she figures she shouldn’t. She liked Tony well enough to go on yet another mad adventure.
Rolling her eyes, suppressing a tired growl, Lela slides down to her feet and goes to follow after him. The elevator doors are just about to shut when Tony spots the potted plant in her hands.

“That’s mine,” he tells her tersely, like he’s about to snatch it out of her hands, “I worked really hard to get that stupid thing to bloom.”

“With all that loving encouragement, I’m surprised it didn’t fucking shoot right up,” Lela drawled as she hugged the plant closer to herself. She’s got her chin jutted out like she’s challenging the man to take it from her.

“Sir?” Jarvis sounds out over head, careful and delicate, like he isn’t sure his next words are going to be well-met, “I do believe it was given to her as a gift.”

At Tony’s outraged betrayal ridden expression, Lela grins sharp and unforgiving as she purred out, “Yeah boss-man, it was a gift.”

*~*

By the time Lela makes it back to the hotel room she’s bone tired. She hadn’t gone back to work after she’d left to go to the bank with Tony. Hadn’t really felt up to it. So when the man said he’d drive her back, Lela hadn’t kicked up a fuss.

The only time she had was when they passed a McDonalds and her hunger got the best of her. Tony, the asshole he was, bought one of everything and they both pigged out in his car. For trying to snatch Lela’s quarter pounder off the dash, Tony spilled his entire chocolate flavored shake into the middle console. Of course, he’d blamed Lela and of course Lela had blamed him.

In the end, Tony didn’t seem to bothered with it at all and just laughed every time he had to switch gears and the gear stick made a squelching noise. They parted ways with Tony screaming out his driver window that it was well past her bedtime and Lela flipping him the bird until he sped off.

When Lela kicks open the front door she’s not the least bit surprised to find Clint and Natasha waiting for her in the living room. They’re both sprawled out lazy and comfortable as some kind of soccer game played on tv. Lela is surprised, at least mildly, when she spots Sam on Natasha’s usual spot with his sock covered feet up on the coffee table.

“How was work?” Natasha asked as she swiped her pinky toe with a deep rogue colored nail paint brush.

“Hey Lela!” Sam brightly chirped out as he brought his feet down and leaned on his elbow. His dark handsome face split into a warm smile.

All her bonds flare brighter into life now that she’s so close to them. They unfurl with all this soft warmth that Lela feels herself go woozy from it.

“Work was work,” Lela stated as she waved at them all before shrugging out of her jacket. When she’s kicked off her boots she lazily makes her way to the living room and glances around for a place to sit the fuck down. About the only available space is the coffee table so that’s where she drops down. She sits herself down in an angle so she can look at them all with ease. It’s there that she settles her gifted rose plant.

“Are you hungry?” Clint immediately asks almost on fucking cue.
“I can make something,” Sam offers at the heels of Clint’s question, he’s already half out of his seat before Lela waves him down.

“Nah,” Lela grumbles as she undid the buttons of her work shirt. When it’s hanging open over Natasha’s stolen black tight long sleeve she tells them, “Tony bought me food before he dropped me off.”

“Tony gave you a ride?” Natasha asks, her hand stilling as she dipped her brush back into the polish container.

And Lela’s no idiot, she knows that despite the fact that they’ve made their peace over Lela working for the Alpha, the wonder-twins aren’t entirely okay with it. Whatever bad blood they had was still very much alive. Festering under their skin the longer Lela worked there, probably.

She’s got no idea what it’s about, blames it on superhero shit, but Lela finds she doesn’t particularly like it. Tony’s an alright kind of dude. Lela likes shooting the shit with the man. Something swirls uncomfortable in her chest as she grits her teeth at Natasha’s tone.

“Yeah, he took me to the bank to set up an account so I don’t have to go down to HR to pick up my check every time it comes out.” Lela says, feels a little like she’s got to defend the stupid Alpha against her own stupid pack, “We stopped for McDonalds on the way here.”

Carefully, like he’s navigating through a landmine, Sam goes, “Oh, that was pretty cool of him.”

Nodding, Lela pulls the tie out of her hair and lets her hair fall down, “Yeah, he’s pretty chill. I mean, he’s the biggest diva I know, but like, he’s pretty cool.”

Silence falls for a beat. One where the sound of the TV blares loud despite the soft volume it’s been placed at. Lela feels her shoulders grow tight with it. She doesn’t want to argue over spending time with Tony, but, she feels like she will if pushed.

“Kay, well, as long as you’re comfortable,” Clint off handedly states, his eyes honey warm, “Just let us know if he steps outta line, yeah?”

“What are you gonna do? Kick his ass?” Lela snarks, as she leaned her weight on her elbows and onto her knees, “I’m pretty sure we’ve covered this, I can take care of myself Clint.”

“Not saying you can’t babe, but…” Clint starts only to be cut off by the glare Lela sends him.

Feeling the bonds she’s got between them flare up with worry and over protectiveness, Lela growls low in her throat and says, “I like Tony, he’s… funny.”

Laughing, Sam says, “Yeah, he does have that.”

Uncapping her nail polish again, Natasha goes back to painting her toes as she quietly stated, “Okay.”

And like they weren’t on the verge of arguing, the tension bleeds out of the bonds and the air between them. It makes Lela’s shoulders slump down and her weariness spike back up. Lela can feel her fatigue down to the very ends of her toes.

Dealing with all the shit at work on top of the trip to the bank had wiped her out. Lela didn’t know how fucking complicated opening an account could be when she lacked all the necessary items. It was only by the grace of Tony’s name and money that they were able to cut through all the red tape. Sitting in her usually empty wallet now sat a temporary card that belonged to her. A card that sat
with two grand waiting to be used for whatever Lela wanted to do with it.

Lela’s got no clue what she’s going to do with that much cash, she doesn’t think she even needs anything at the moment. She wonders if she should maybe pick up groceries or some shit. Pick up something for Natasha, Clint or Sam. to pull her weight for them the way do with her.

But all those thoughts only make her feel even more tired. They weigh her down and make a maddening pulse break out behind her lids.

Kicking his foot against Lela’s thigh, Clint tells her:

“You should go take a shower, we’ll be out here when you get out.”

Sending the Gamma a tired smile, Lela asks, “Whose night is it?”

“Mine,” Sam announces happy and excited as he rummaged through a bag by his feet. When he straightens up he’s got four different DVD boxes fanned out. Every last one of them is bright and leaning to the comedic side.

Groaning, Clint complains, “Why did we give him a day.”

“It’s only fair,” Natasha stated as she blow on her painted toes, “You made us watch all those terrible rom-coms.”

“You can’t sit there and tell me How to Lose a Man in 10 Day’s didn’t make you laugh!” Clint accused as he propped his head up.

“Can we take away his night?” Lela asked the redhead as she pulled herself up to stand.

Smirking like maybe she was thinking of it, Natasha goes, “Now isn’t that a grand idea.”

Laughing, Lela walked off to the bathroom to wash off the day. As she leaves, she hears the beginning of Clint’s pre-prepared speech about all the virtues of Rom-Coms. Defending his own right to picking the movies like Natasha was seriously going to take it from him.

Grabbing her change of clothes off the bed, Lela shouts out, “It was a shit movie Clint!”

Whatever else is said is lost to Lela as she closed her door and hid behind it. She laughs to herself as she felt her bonds twirl around one another and settled hot and bright in her chest.

*~*

It takes Lela all of ten minutes to work up the nerve to push the door open. She’s pulling one fortifying breath after the other, willing her heart to steady. It’s just a dude, she thinks, just one drop dead ass gorgeous fucking dude. There was absolutely no reason for Lela to feel any type of way about it, or him. Getting her teeth she wills herself to not be a fucking Omega about it and just get on with it.

By the time it swings on it’s hinges she feels like maybe she needs more time. Almost immediately, Lela is greeted with the sight of a man that has been religiously stalking her every dream.

He turns to her, hair pulled up into a lazy bun at the back of his head, and offers her the smallest of smiles. It’s so soft and delicate that Lela almost whimpers for it alone.

And oh, Lela realizes, she might have it bad for the man.
Lela’s hindbrain swirls and cries at the sight of him. It aches for Lela to drop her head to the side and whimper long and loud. For her to go soft and let those hands wander over every inch of her. To feel the scruff of his face burn against her flesh. Lela’s hindbrain wants Lela to present like a damn bitch in heat.

If Lela wasn’t made of tougher shit, she might’ve. She can feel the way her neck grows loose. The way a cry builds in her chest and begs to be released.

Gritting her teeth tight, Lela offers the man a jerky nod and walks in pulling her cart behind her. For all that Lela’s used to dealing with Alpha’s on the street, she’s never met anyone quite like James. She’s never known an Alpha with a scent that could hardly be picked up. She didn’t know Alphas could force others back and away by a simple word. Lela knows that’s dangerous on it’s own, James’ being an Alpha on top of all the other shit.

But that hadn’t stopped her from dreaming of his lips. Of the way he smiled. Of the broadness of his damnable shoulders. That hadn’t stopped Lela’s dirty fucking thoughts from wondering if James’ was the type to fuck like an animal or what?

To say Lela was square out of her depths was putting it too fucking mild.

Lela knows it’s her damnable dynamic that’s getting her all hot and bothered for the Alpha. Knows it with a vicious kind of knowledge that her second nature wants him for what she is and what he is. But Lela knows it’s also got a hell of a lot to do with the fucking man’s delicate smiles and storming gray eyes.

But, attraction was attraction. She feels it down to her very bones, Lela wants James. Wants to get him close to pull his elusive fucking scent till she’s choking on it. And she fucking hates herself for it but yeah, like she said, she’s got it bad.

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, Lela calls out to the man, “Hey James.”

“Lela,” James calls out her name. His thick, dark voice, dragging it low like he was tasting it on his tongue.

Lust makes shivers run down Lela’s spine as she pointedly refused to look up from where she was sliding her broom out of it’s spot. Forcing herself to not be a fucking bitch, Lela turns and asks, “Hows it going?”

James is silent as he pulled his attention off the odd looking equipment in his hands and over to her. He stares at her for a lot longer than the question needs and finally tells her, “Can’t complain. You?”

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela watches as his eyes drop down to watch. Heat blooms ugly and scorching across her cheeks and nose. She feels a mixture of shame and attraction swirl and mix with one another. She can feel the way her belly tightens even more. Gripping her tight and forcing her to look at James’ gorgeous face.

“But…” Lela’s tongue feels tied up, awkward and fumbling as she began to push her broom around, “Not bad. I mean, pretty much the same.”

After that, they settle into silence that is as awkward as the first time they crossed paths. This time, Lela doesn’t bother to try to break it. She lets it sit right where its at and leaves it the hell alone. For all that James was a beautiful angel on earth, Lela wasn’t that brave. She’ll sit in the silence for as long as possible and hurry up with what she’s here to do.
If they’re silent then Lela won’t run the chance of saying something stupid…right?

It isn’t until it becomes apparent that Lela isn’t about to say anything more that James asks in that impossibly soft rumbling voice of his, “Are you going to put anything on?”

“Uh,” Lela dumbly starts, stilling mid sweep, she makes the stupid mistake to look up into those damn eyes. Like a moth to a flame, Lela burns from them, “What?”

“Your music,” James says, slow and careful, like he isn’t sure he should be talking at all, “Are you going to put something on?”

Gripping her broom handle tight, Lela licks her lips again and asks, “Did you, uh…did you want me to?”

For a second James looks like he’s confused by the question before he offers her a one shoulder shrug and tells her, “Only if you want to, I don’t mind.”

Rolling her lips between her teeth, Lela nods and calls out for Jarvis. Seeing as to how she’s not exactly all too eager to slip anywhere near the man. She asks the man in the sky for something less bluesy and far more energy filled. Immediately, Run the Jewels comes on. It’s half angry, half blood pumping. It instantly sucks away the fragile air in the garage. It forces away every bit of softness Lela’s got holed up in her at the moment.

Lela figures it’s nothing like what was playing the other night. Nothing like what she figured James would like. But that’s half the point. Because Lela shouldn’t be going out of her way to make an Alpha feel settled. She shouldn’t care.

Even if James soft smiles were something she found herself dreaming about.

Gripping her broom handle tight, Lela goes back to work. If James has an issue with the tone of the music, he doesn’t say. He lets the music go uninterrupted by a single ‘shit’ called out. Lela’s all done sweeping up when she spots all the cardboard boxes stacked neatly on top of one another. She sets to work on them with her box cutter and feels the heavy beats fall over her. She’s halfway into forgetting why she was so damn nervous about coming in because Lela’s always been good about ignoring the biggest issues in her life. Especially, she thinks, when bomb ass music was playing.

It’s somewhere around the time Tyler the Creator’s: Goblin, starts playing that James calls out stern and half angry, “Shit.”

Head pulling up, Lela pins him with a look and raises a single brow at him.

Frowning, James tells her simply, “I don’t like it.”

Feeling the very ends of her lips twitch up into a smile, Lela nods and lets it be without touching it. Because…well, she just wasn’t. When something else pulls up James calls out ‘Shit’ again. He does it for at least six songs straight before Lela’s full on grinning down at her hands. Clearly, James was not a hip-hop/rap fan. Like, at all.

But when a familiar song comes on, by Post Malone: Rockstar, Lela fucking puts her foot down and warns the Alpha from where she’s at across the garage, “Don’t you dare.”

“It’s shit,” James informs her easily meeting her glaring eyes.

“You’re fucking psychotic, this is a good ass song,” Lela throws back at him, as the intro pulled in.
Ignoring the Alpha, Lela starts to sing along under her breath. When James pins her with something like stern disapproval, Lela grins wide and unrepentant and sings louder. She’s just hitting the hook when suddenly James loses that frown and begins to smile. Fond and half indulgent.

_Beautiful_, Lela’s fucking mind screams.

The sight of it makes Lela’s heart thump uncomfortably in her chest. Her breath hitches in her throat and makes her lose her place in the song and fall silent. That smile makes heat spread like a wildfire across her face and down to her neck. With a clack, Lela’s jaw snaps shut and she forces herself to go back to work. Because if she didn’t, Lela knows she’d somehow wind up doing something incredibly stupid.

When something comes on that she knows, without a doubt, James wouldn’t be into, Lela calls out to Jarvis and tells him to switch over to a specific band. One she was shown and had gotten into easily by Sam. Lela figures, James might like it too. Monophonics starts playing easily. All old school funk, bluesy thrums and sad guitar rifts.

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela asks, “Better?”

Eyes catching hers, feeling far heavier than maybe they should, James nods and says, “Better.”

Something like excitement curls up in Lela’s belly that she got it right. It makes her smile like a fucking idiot before she knows she’s doing it. Bringing her hand up to her mouth, Lela issues a cough to hide it and turns back to her work.

By the time she’s finished cleaning the garage, Lela has fallen into a comfortable silence with James. One where neither one of them say a word just meet each others eyes whenever Lela looked happened to look up. And while it should be weird—would be weird if it came from anyone else—Lela doesn’t seem to mind so much when it came from him. Alpha or not, there was never anything challenging in his gaze. Nothing that implied he was about to push Lela back and down. Ease sat on the lines of his shoulders. Open acceptance hung on the bow of his pink lips.

Lela almost jumps two feet in the air when Jarvis voice calls out her name and lets her know she’s due her lunch break. Forcing her heart back to reasonable levels, Lela thanks the man and drops the last of the trash she was scooping up into the trash bin on her cart. She’s just about sliding into it’s place when she glances over to James and spots him looking clear at her. He doesn’t even bother to look like he isn’t just staring at her.

Feeling like maybe she should get going, but feeling like she wants to do the exact opposite, Lela calls out to the man, “Hey James?”

“Yes?” the man easily answers her, eyes boring holes straight through Lela’s head.

Cocking her head to the side, Lela motions to the big hanger door and asks, “You mind opening that shit up?”

Pulling himself to his deadly impressive height, James walks over to large doors and presses on the button to open it up. He waits for her there without a word. Finding it a little weird that the man didn’t even ask why, Lela eventually follows after him. She’s digging through her uniform shirts front breast pocket until her pack is out and a smoke lines he mouth. Only when she’s at the open threshold does she strike her newly bought black zippo and lets the cigarette catch fire. She stands on the opposite side of the man, he the left and her the right. Far enough away that Lela still can’t scent him at all.
Only when Lela’s pulled in a deep lungful of smoke does James speak:

“Those aren’t good for you.”

Quirking a brow, Lela tilts her head until she meets James frowning expression. He’s got this look in his eye that says he’s contemplating snatching the cig from her fingers and stomp on it. Like he’s dead set on eradicating the fucking thing on principle alone. The expression makes him look older, far more harder than his previously soft expressions.

It’s not a bad look, Lela thinks. Any and all faces he made were still drop dead gorgeous. James was just blessed like that. And maybe it’s on account of how pretty he could look even while looking like he was about to argue with her, that Lela doesn’t feel annoyance build up in her.

Because she’s heard that line enough times that she thinks if she had a nickel for them, she’d be well and fucking set. Lela’s been smoking since she was fifteen. Since she presented and her mother shoved them at her and told her the smoke would hide her scent. Since Lela figured it was better to wind up dead from them than to live on as what she was. She’s heard all the cautionary tales from all manner of people. All of them looking down their nose at her and her bad habit. But Lela finds she isn’t even half annoyed by James saying it as she had been with those previous to him. She’s somewhat amused by it.

James says it like he’s just making a passing comment, like he’s just letting her know, but isn’t about to take it from her at all. Like he’s willing to put up with the smell even if he didn’t like it.

From around the butt of her smoke, Lela goes, “I kinda figured, people are always going on and on about it.”

They go quiet after that, Monophonics filling up the silence behind them. Around the time Lela’s working on her third smoke, James speaks:

“How long have you been here, in New York?”

“A while,” Lela says easily as she leaned up against her side of the hanger’s railing, “You?”

“I was born here.” James tells her, his lips working like he wants to add on to it.

Feeling a little like compassionate, Lela shoves her own awkward ass self to the side and simply states, “It’s nice here.”

“Yeah,” James agrees, his eyes falling off the side of her face to look out into the indigo and violet colored sky overhead, “It is.”

He looks so damn gorgeous, Lela helplessly thinks. The way some of his hair fas fallen to frame his scruffy face. Lela’s hindbrain slithers and writhes. It bites from behind it’s bars for Lela to step closer to him. To run her tongue down the thick neck he’s got and fucking drink him down.

“Winter’s a bitch though,” Lela says as she ashed her cig, trying to stuff her thoughts as far down as they could go, “Fucking hate it.”

“Not used to it?” James asks though it sounds like he kind of already knows the answer to his own question.

“It never got so cold back home,” Lela tells him as she kicked at a stray rock by her boot, “Coldest it got was an easy 75 degrees. And that pretty much lasted about two weeks if we were lucky.”
Leaning his own body against the railing on his side, James asks her, “Where’s that for you, home?”

Around a cloud full of smoke, Lela says, “South Texas. What part of New York are you from? Y’all are like really hard up on what boroughs y’all come from.”

Lela once knew a beta man that nearly took her head off for thinking he was from Queens when he was from somewhere up in the Bronx. Lela doesn’t even pretend to understand the difference. It’s different than what she’s used to. Back home, the RGV meant everyone. They all banded together along the border wall and called them selves the one and the same.

There was a certain kind of pride to that, Lela guesses. None she had ever personally felt, but a pride she knows some of the people in her old town could recount. There was enough people with the numbers, 956, tattooed on various parts of their bodies.

“Brooklyn,” James informs her, a little short, like he doesn’t really want to talk about but is willing to if Lela pushed even a little bit.

And call her a bitch, Lela does, “Never been there before, is it nice?”

“Its… It was home,” James says like that pretty much summed up what he thought of it, “I don’t go out there much anymore.”

“Oh?” Lela prompts because she feels a little like she wants to sink her teeth into any soft part James is willing to display to her greedy eyes.

Shrugging his right shoulder, James merely says, “It hasn’t been home to me for a while.”

Lela gets that, far more than she’s willing to say aloud. So she grumbles out a simple noise and leaves it alone. She’s just about smoked her cig down to the filter when James suddenly asks:

“Aren’t you going to eat? It’s your lunch break.”

Flicking the filter out and away, Lela offers a simple shrug and truthfully tells him, “I forgot to bring lunch in. And I don’t got a ride to take me to go pick up something.”

The closest food place to the tower was at least a full twenty-five minute walk. By the time Lela was able to push through the lunch crowd it’d leave her stuffing her face as she fucking sprinted back. The two hour lunch Tony had given her—refused to let up on, on account of how long Lela usually worked a day—sometimes ran a lot shorter than it actually was.

“I can…” James starts, his rumbling dark voice starting and then stalling as Lela looked over at him. When she’s looking at him, James settles his shoulders into a hard line and continues on, “I got a ride, if you’re up for it.”

And Lela’s got all the fucking reasons in the world to tell him no. To make it impossible for the man to ever think about asking her out to lunch all casual like and shit. To make him regret so much as asking. To snarl and act like the worst kind of human being. But she doesn’t.

A weird kind of tingling sensation prickles at the back of her mind till her hearts hammering up again. Caught in those damnable storming gray eyes, Lela finds herself nodding before she knows what she’s doing.

Smiling bright and happy, James kicks off the wall he’s leaning up against and makes his way out of the open hanger door. He’s out in the sunlight—looking like a fallen fucking god, all broody and bathed in blue and soft lilac—he’s a heart stopping sight. and before her mind can catch up to what
she’s doing, Lela’s following after him. Helplessly her feet carry her over to him as they walk to wherever the fuck it was James was leading her.

She’s got a lone stray thought jumping around in her head telling her this was a bad idea. But Lela’s always been a bit of a dumbass, right? The moment that smile, all bathed in violets, indigos and pale pink sunlight, shines, Lela’s ready to make the worst kinds of mistakes again. Her stomach is all knotted up with anticipation and excitement. Her brain is running on a lust filled fog but she can’t seem to stop herself.

Because, Lela knows, she’s got it bad.

*~*

Very belatedly, once she’s in James old school mustang—a soft matte black color—that Lela thinks: this might be considered a date. Right?

Like, it could be.

Maybe.

If Lela was the type to fucking gush, she might’ve. But she isn’t, she keeps telling herself. Every time James glances over to her, as he switches gear, Lela reminds herself that she isn’t. Because she isn’t the type of girl people take on dates. She’s the type people fucked and paid her poorly for it.

Regardless of her thoughts, Lela’s got a weird nervous twist in her belly. One that makes her feel like she’s twelve years old, all knobby kneed and seated at by this girl she’d been in love with since she was in the fourth grade. Lela knows for a damn fact if she catches a hint of Nescafe she remembers Carmen and how many times their knees bumped.

Lela feels like that now. Like she’s a kid forced into the same general area of a kid she’s got a crush on.

And, oh, how that pulls Lela up short. Because how long has it been since she’s felt any type of way for someone. The last time she willingly touched a person was back when she was still drifting. She’d been holed up in some flop house with a beta who had shared every little bit he owned. He’d been kind to her, where Lela was quickly growing to understand a lot of people weren’t. Lela had seen beauty in his freckled face and wrapped her legs around him to feel a little like she was her own to give.

Not a thing to be owned.

She was still her’s then. Before she started handing out pieces of herself for dollar bills. Fresh out of a mate bond she hadn’t wanted. Lela had felt herself come alive under that beta man’s hands. His pale green eyes had glittered under the full moon light. His smile seemed sad as he held her close and she fought off tears that had come to her unbidden.

Lela hasn’t wanted anyone since…well, since she started whoring herself out. Hasn’t stopped long enough to so much as think of anyone that way.

But here she was. Sitting in a old school late 60’s mustang lusting after the very definition of Alpha physique.

“Do you…is there somewhere you wanted to go?” James asks her once they make it to the compounds gate.
Shrugging, trying to act like she wasn’t internally freaking out about the fact that she’d just followed a strange Alpha man out of the tower, Lela goes, “I’m not picky.”

“How long’s your lunch?” James questions once the metal poles on the outer gate open up for them.

Drumming nervous fingers on her right knee, Lela grumbles out while pointedly looking out the front window, “‘bout two hours.”

If James has anything thoughts about that—like the rest of Lela’s stupid fucking coworkers—he doesn’t say anything about it. He just nods and asks with a low rumbling voice, “You a beef or poultry fan?”

“Honestly,” Lela starts as she pulled the tie out of her head and ran her fingers over her strained scalp, “I don’t really care. Foods food James. Pick whatever.”

“Alright then,” James eventually says as he turned the corner and headed to the general direction of central park.

They pull over just outside one of the many entrances to central park and slide out of the seat. At least a block down—in Lela’s clear line of sight—she spots a food truck down the ways. It’s got a steady line to it but not enough that Lela thinks they might spend more time waiting to order than actually eating their shit. Only when James is done feeding quarters into the meter, they take off side by side to the truck.

Quietly they go. Neither one of them seeming to mind the silence sitting on their shoulders. Both content to simply keep to themselves as they navigated whatever it was that was in their mind. Lela’s thankful for the easy peace that seems to ooze out of James smoothly. She needs a moment to stuff away her twirling thoughts and all the second nature bullshit she’s got raging around in her.

Because it’s raging, her second nature. It wants her to cry, to present herself, to got belly up and let the alpha stake a fucking claim. Lela bites it back with such a savageness that even her bonds twirl into themselves and withdraw away from her.

If there was one thing her bond-mates learned early on, was that if Lela ever found herself in a mood it was better to withdraw than to flood her with whatever they wanted. Lela appreciated the shit out of the sentiment, but, to be honest, it felt to her a little like a different kind of leash. So she’d asked them—as nicely and as civilly as she could manage—for them to give her space to work her shit out when she needed to. If she needed, or wanted their help, she’d ask them in person. Lela wasn’t about to abuse the bonds in anyway shape or form.

About the only person who actually respected that was Natasha. Clint and Sam were a whole different matter altogether. It was like they physically couldn’t help themselves from reaching out to Lela. To flood their individual bonds with reassurance, peace, care and warmth.

Those things, Lela didn’t mind that much, it was sometimes the intensity that Lela was flooded with it.

Just the other day, Lela was pissed all to hell because someone had broken into her work locker and filled it full of shaving cream, and Sam and Clint must’ve felt it. The bonds just blared—thumped intensely—with concern until Lela’s head was practically swimming. Lela was almost knocked on her ass the way the silk ribbon went piano wire tight around her chest and the roots to the flower on her heart turned thorny and twisted. Natasha’s band pinged in question but it was nothing compared to the other two.
Lela never pegged herself to be a person with considerable restraint, but apparently she had it in spades where those two were concerned.

So yeah, Lela knows right now—tied up into knots as she was—she could very well reach out to the bonds she’s got. She knows if she did, reached out and asked for anything, the three hellions wouldn’t bat a damn eye. But Lela doesn’t really want to. Not right now.

There’s a part of her that’s half eager to see what she’ll do all on her own without the support of the wonder dicks and the adonis in her back pocket.

“Hey Jimmy!” someone at the front window calls out, booming loud and happy, “Haven’t seen you in a while! Where the hell you’ve been, huh?”

“How’s it going Marv?” James says with a reluctant smile stretching out across his scruffy face. Taking the two steps up to the window, James practically towers over the large truck with his massive height and girth.

Lela’s hindbrain does a weird little summersault as she watched James’ shoulders move up and down from underneath the stretched out material of his faded red henley. right before they’d gotten into his car, James had kicked off his dirty overalls and strutted around in his civilian clothes underneath.

The sight of which was probably heart attack inducing. The red henley he’s got on looks practically painted on. He’s got dark washed denim jeans that do nothing to hide the damn tight ass the man sports. It’s too much, Lela thinks, and not enough.

“Pretty good! Can’t complain, business kicked up after you fixed up my engine!” the man in the window shouts out as he leaned his meaty arm against the railing and half hung out. His salt and pepper hair is wild about his head. His pale face is splotchy red like he might be cooking alongside the food he’s serving.

“That’s good to hear,” James issues a soft laugh that’s all rumbling thunder and causes shivers to run down the length of Lela’s spine, “I, uh, I brought a friend.”

James motions over to Lela and Lela, well, she just awkwardly stands there, hands shoved in her pockets like she’s not about to fucking bolt back to the tower. Lela merely tips her head in a nod and keeps quiet.

“Ah! Look at you, out socializing! Eric’ll be four different shades a surprised when I tell’im.” the man—Marv shouts out. Grin spread wide over his aging face he calls out to her, “So what’ll it be little lady?”

Sparing a glance at the menu printed alongside the van Lela spots something she figures she might like and calls out, “I’ll take a…let me get a jalapeño stuffed burger, no onions.”

“You sure about that?” Marv questions, his face all kinds of dubious.

Brows pinched together, Lela goes, “Yeah, why?”

“It’s pretty big, I don’t think you could handle it much girl,” Marv tells her with this kind of knowledge that said he very much doubt Lela could or would.

Laughing, Lela cocks a brow and tells the man through a dark smirk, “The times I’ve heard someone say that and it be true are wide and few in between man.”

Lela’s not even joking.
Marv’s face falls as he stares at her before he’s barking out in laughter. His splotchy red face growing crimson as he tossed his head back and laughed. Once it dies down into scattered chuckles he looks at James and says, “I like her.”

James for his part only smiles that impossibly soft thing of his and says nothing. Lela tries not to feel like a damn child in the way she ducks down to pretend to read the rest of the menu.

“Alright, what about you big man? The usual?” Lela hears Marv ask James.

James must nod because he says nothing.

“Drinks?” Marv asks of them both as he scribbled onto some kind of note pad.

“Coke.” Lela says at the same time James says “Water.”

And like that, they step off to the side and await their food. It only takes about ten or so minutes before their order is being called out. James goes to gather the things and Lela is left where they both stood listening to Marv pointedly refuse in taking James money. Though, James does stuff a handful of money into the tip jar as he leaves, so it settles that. Eventually James returns carrying two separate plastic bags and leads Lela back to where they parked the car underneath the shade of a tree.

“We can look for a table somewhere…if you want?” James says, his eyes set on her like he’s trying to come up with several different solutions to their current dilemma.

Shrugging, Lela leans against the hood of the car and tells him, “I don’t mind eating it here man. I mean, if it’s cool with you?”

A car as fucking mint as this one here, Lela was almost sure James was the type of men that treasured like a shining jewel. the kind that would rather carry it on their backs over a mud puddle than drive through it.

But, as it turns out, James isn’t like that at all. Placing the bags on the food of his vintage muscle car, James nods and slides over what she assumes is her enclosed burger. And without a single word, he sits that perky ass on the hood causing the tires to actually dip a little. Lela digs through the plastic bag and pulls out a styrofoam lidded plate. Popping it open she’s met with a burger as wide as her face and almost as thick as her palm is wide. There’s a decent side of fries next to it too and some ketchup and mustard packets shoved in too.

Leaving the plate on the hood, Lela picks up the burger and begins to eat. She’s at least halfway into the thing when she glances up and catches James looking at her. Stilling mid-chew, Lela asks around a mouthful of jalapeño and meat, “What?”

Smirk on his lips, James shakes his head and asks, “It’s not too spicy?”

“Fuck no man,” Lela tells him only after she’s swallowed her mouthful, “I’m Mexican-American dude, I was raised on salsa hot enough to put you into the hospital.”

Offering her a small breathless laugh, James pulls out at least one burger and four different chili cheese dogs. Lela raises her brows at the amount he keeps pulling out when James stills and says offhandedly, “I’m hungry.”

“I can see that,” Lela laughs before stuffing some fries into her empty mouth.

And like that they both grow quiet as they worked through their separate meals. It isn’t until Lela’s well past her burger and finishing off her fries does an old memory flicker up in her mind.
Brows pinched, Lela takes a sip of her drink and asks the man, “Hey James, whatever happened to that Alpha fucker from the garage?”

Crumbling the last of his hotdog slip, James tells her, “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Lela starts as she gathered up her empty containers and shoved them bag into her plastic bag, “I never got called in, did you?”

Frowning, James pins his gaze forward away from Lela as he said, “No.”

Pulling her pack out of her pockets, Lela sparks up another smoke and steadies whatever kind of courage she’s got as she asked, “It true what he said about you?”

“Which part?” James starts off with, dark slate colored eyes sliding over to her.

Shrugging, Lela lets smoke spill from her lips as she said simply, “That you’re an alpha but that you don’t got a scent, or some shit like that.”

Unwrapping his burger, James takes a massive bite of it and works through it. Even while he’s eating, Lela thought he was fucking gorgeous, “I got a scent. Just not as strong as people think it should be.”

“Why?” Lela ashes her cig and thumbs the end. Lela feels like maybe she shouldn’t be asking, not with the way tension is starting to fill out the lines of James shoulders, but there’s an ugly need burning up in her. One that wants to both pull James closer to her and another that wants to kick him away.

Plus, she’s never heard of an Alpha that had a weak scent. Shit like that was reserved for Gammas. Never Alphas. Unless they were well on their years and ready to kick the bucket. But even then, even old folks had some kind of scent to let others know what they had once been. James is nowhere near the age to start losing his scent. So Lela’s curious as all shit.

Shrugging, James simply tells her, “It’s complicated.”

Taking that for what it was, Lela leaves it be and picks up with, “But you are an Alpha though, right?”

Pinning his eyes on her, James nods and says, “I am.”

And that’s pretty much as good as any kind of evidence Lela might need to walk the fuck away. But she finds herself solidly glued to the hood of the car. Every inch of her wants to slide closer when her mind is telling her to get up and go.

There was no need to be getting tangled up—in any kind of way—to an Alpha.

But those eyes, dark and storming, swimming like mercury, keep her in place. They trap her like they weigh two tons and she was nothing more than a feather. And Lela’s never met a stare that could make her feel so small and yet...like she was the sole center of someones attention.

It’s terrifying as much as Lela’s hindbrain finds it exhilarating.

Because those eyes, Lela’s no fucking fool, she knows those eyes see far more than anyone would ever know.

Some small vulnerable part of her makes her think he can see down to the very core of who she is.
Past all the bullshit. All the ugly side of her. James can see the dumb scared girl she is. And that’s frightening. It scares Lela down to her very bones. Makes her reach out without thought to the bonds she’s got in her chest and on her wrist.

They pulse like living breathing things and fill her with reassurance. They remind her she’s whole and hale and however strong James’ gaze was, it wasn’t superhuman.

And yeah, maybe Lela was starting to abuse the bonds, but she figures right now she kind of needs that reassurance. Feels like maybe she’ll fall to pieces without out, caught in James’ stare.

Leaning back on her left elbow, Lela places her smoke to her lips and mumbles around it, “Good to know.”

“Is that…a lot of people seem to have a problem with…it,” James awkwardly fumbles through his words as he looked down at his burger filled hand.

Brows pinched, Lela pulls in a deep drag and grumbled, “Tha’s fuckin’ stupid. Like what the fuck is it to other people if you’ve got an Alpha scent or not. Fuckin’ dumbasses.”

“I think it’s the fact that it kind of implies I’m, you know, not exactly deserving of my Alpha status,” James tells her as he downed at least half of his bottle of water.

“What, seriously?” Lela spit out as she stared wide eyed at the man beside her.

The mere fucking notion that James—fucking James with all his goddamn hard muscles, six foot and six feet of pure fucking danger—was undeserving of his dynamic was just…ridiculous. One look at him and a person felt it down to their bones, an Alpha worth fucking panting after. Lela feels like a damn idiot thinking back on it now. Not knowing what he was when it so obviously sat in front of her face.

Still, Lela would like to meet the fucking idiot who met James, knew what he was and still thought he didn’t deserve the emboldened A on his registration card.

Feeling like maybe she’s got to say something, anything, to run over the strange air hanging over them, Lela extends a hand and says, “D’you know why that fucker in the garage said what he said? ’bout me being a door mat or some shit.”

James eyes do this funny little thing where they grow gloomy and dark as his lips twitched down into a hard frown. His face is face is doing that stony expression again.

Taking his silence as the non answer it was, Lela thumbs off the growing ash off her smoke and pulls in a weighted drag off it till her lungs ache. As the smoke comes slipping through her lips Lela tells him, “People up in the tower don’t like me. They think I’m like—I don’t know, they think I’m riding Tony’s dick to the top. ”

“Are you?” James questions, everything about his face says he doesn’t care either way. Like he’s just trying to keep her from shutting him out or something. Like he just wants to keep her here, talking to him.

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela feels a dark cold smile spread across her lips, as she told him, “No. But they give me shit for it like I am. Just cause that asshole likes to come around and bother me while I work.”

“Have you told Stark?” James asks her, his eyes going stoney like he’s about to take up the issue himself.
“Nah,” Lela mumbled as she asked her smoke, “Never been much of a snitch.”

James doesn’t say anything to that, just starts working on the last of his hot dogs.

“Plus,” Lela adds on as she pinched her smoke between grinning lips, “I take care of my own problems well enough.”

Smiling around his mouthful, James swallows and tells her with a wide grin, “I saw that. You got fire.”

Lela does her damnedest not to fucking blush, but hell if she feels oven warm heat spread across her face. Her heart thumps ugh and mean while her belly twists up nice and tight.

They lapse back into silence, sitting alongside one another as James practically inhaled his burger. The man goes to gather up their trash when Lela easily knocks his hands away and snatches it up. She tells him she’s got it and slides off the hood before making her way to a trash can near to the food truck.

It’s as she dumps the trash that Marv catches sight of her and shouts out, “What’s the verdict?”

And because Lela’s feeling kind of like a shit head as she walked away she calls out, “Seen bigger!”

The man’s laughter follows her wake as she walked back over to James car. When she gets there James is smiling again, like he caught the words. Smiling at her James goes, “Ready?”

Snatching the drink he holds out to her, ignoring the way their fingers brush against one another, Lela nods her head breathlessly and heads to the passenger side door. She’s fighting her jack rabbit heart the whole way that she settles into her seat. If Lela steals more glances at the side of the Alpha’s face that’s no ones business but hers.

The ride back to the compound is just shy of twenty five minutes. This time around, James drives his car right up to his garage. He parks his sweet ass ride in the large empty space effortlessly. Only when the engines dead does Lela slip right out and head for her cart. Her eyes trail back after the Alpha as he goes to close his door and makes his way around the front end.

Pushing her cart towards the door Lela’s hit with the strangest of feelings. She doesn’t know if she’s supposed to say goodbye, or what. Only that she’s got this ugly little feeling bubbling up in her tell her she’s got to say something. She’s got her hand on the knob when she turns to look over at James. The beautiful man in question is leaning against the open hood of another Stark truck. He’s looking at her like he’s got a hell of a lot of things he wants to say too and no way of forcing them out of his lips.

Running a tongue over her lips—catching the last of her sugary drink on them—she says, “Next ones on me, yeah?”

Lela has no idea why she’s saying what she’s saying, only that she is. Everything in her is telling her not to just go, not to leave just yet, to drag it out as much as she can. Because Lela’s only down here at least once a week. She doesn’t get to see that face for six long ass fucking days. So she throws that out there because…well, because she’s the type of girl whose dumb ass all shit.

Grinning, soft and delicate, some kind of happiness parts the dark clouds in his eyes as James goes, “Alright, it’s a date.”

Now there’s a hell of a lot of things she can say to stuff those damnable words back into that sinfully pretty mouth. But she doesn’t refute his words. Doesn’t tell him it isn’t a fucking date. That she isn’t
the kind of girl he should want to take out on dates if he knew where she’s been. She doesn’t tell him she’s broken, damaged, and on factory fucking recall. She doesn’t say anything like that because her face is burning up and she’s got a dreadful type of hope growing thick in her throat.

Her dark eyes grow wide and her face fucking burns. With her tail tucked between her lips, Lela flees feeling her heart crash hard against the bones of her ribs. She can hear the way the crack as she half sprints away.

It’s not a promise of a date, not at all.

But Lela kind of likes the sound of it anyway.

Because, fuck, Lela had it worse than bad. She was crushing on dangerous levels.

And it’s not safe, being what she is, James being what he was, but fuck if she wasn’t riding a heady goddamn high the whole way towards the tower.

Chapter End Notes

I know I promised you guys a POV through James but honestly guys, I wrote out like ten pages of him and I just made it so sad. I don't want a sad Bucky. I want a socially awkward soft as sin Bucky. One who's got healing hands and not a broken heart. So I hope I didn't disappoint anyone. I just don't want to bog this down with anymore fucking angst. I WANT ROMANCE!!!!!!

And, I know, it's short and it got us literally nowhere I posted this because it's just sitting on my computer and I'm running low on energy but I don't want you guys to feel like I abandoned it.

I'll try to put together something a little longer and with a hell of a lot more movement soon.

Works just kinda hella busy right now.

I hope my Bucky came off okay. I'm feeling a little insecure about it. Let me know what you guys think.

As always, thank you so much for reading!

Drop a comment down below, I love interacting with y'all. any and all opinions welcomed.

-Ani
Trying

Chapter Summary

Because she’s dirty. Because, she’s a fucking mongrel stray dog that’s been given a loose bath in the rain. Because, she’s got enough scars lining her body to make the toughest men blanch. Because, the only time anyone touched her willingly, was because they had no other choice and they were paying for it already. Because, she’s used her body in ways most people wouldn’t dream of ever doing. Because…because she’s that fucking dynamic and people didn’t take omegas out on dates. They just staked claims over them and pushed them down until they got what they wanted.

Lela’s got a whole list on why. She can feel them fill up her mouth like stomach bile. Burning up her throat and stinging at her tongue. But when she opens her mouth not a single word actually comes forth. She’s standing there, staring up at seven long feet of muscled marvelous beauty and gaping.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A vicious kind of growl lines her throat as she pinches tight her eyes and the bridge of her nose.

Lela’s been working at Stark Industries for the better part of two months now. She knows, for the most part, exactly what she needs to do. Or at least what it is she’s supposed to get done. Lela knows for a damn fact that she didn’t sign up to look after a mess of a human being. And yet, here she was attempting to rouse the worlds smartest man to look after himself. Which, Lela knows, is all kinds of fucked up since she wasn’t any good at looking after herself on most days.

“Tony, for the last fucking time,” Lela bites out carefully slow, “What the actual fuck?”

“Leave me,” the man dramatically announces from where he’s laid up on one of his work tables. He’s got on the same pair of raggedy jeans and shirt since the week started. His hair is a messy, greasy, tangle on his head.

“Dude, you’re a goddamn mess,” Lela announces once she’s done pinching her face up.

“I know!” Tony moans all pain filled and sorrowful.

“When’s the last time you fucking showered?” Lela bites out as she leaves her cart abandoned at the entrance of his personal lab.

Slowly she makes her way over to the laid up man to inspect the horror show he’s made for himself. Up close, Tony looks way worse. He’s got deep purple bags under his eyes like he’s never heard of
the concept of rest or fucking sleep. His clothes is all stained to hell with shit Lela’s not even sure she
can ever name. The closer she gets, the sharper the smell of his filthy state hits her nose.

His alpha musk is rank. Sharp and sour with both old sweat and new. Added onto the fact that he
also smells like a goddamn misery soup. It makes Lela scrunch up her nose. Makes her belly clench
up and her hindbrain slither. Her second nature twirls itself up and offers up a bullshit whine over it.
Something in her aches to reach out and soothe. Worry settles itself deep and heavy in her belly
because Lela actually likes the douchebag.

But Lela bites that back and gruffly issues a growl low in her throat.

“Don’t you got like twelve houses you can fucking go to, to shower and sleep?” Lela sarcastically
asks when she’s about a hand away from his prone body.

“No, just five. Twelve is excessive,” Tony mumbles through dry and chapped lips. His eyes are half
lidded as he stared up at the ceiling.

Pursing her lips, because of course he fucking did, and of course he fucking would say some bullshit
like that, Lela kicks at the leg of the table and watches the movement harshly jar his body.

“That why haven’t you fucking gone to one of them?” Lela questions, because like it or not, she
was growing mildly concerned for the man’s well being.

Tony was funny. He made her laugh even on days Lela was closer to biting than she was to smiling.
Tony’s scent—Orchids, Jasmine and Aged Leather—makes some nameless thing in Lela grow soft.
Lela figures it’s everything to do with the man and only a little to do with the fact that he’s an alpha
at all. Because Tony, as much as he was what he was, never really acted like it.

He never growled at Lela. Never kicked up a challenge when Lela pulled herself up to make one.
Tony just took all the aggression, smiled at it, made some sarcastic remark and carried on his way
like it was a personality quirk of hers.

Lela liked that about him. She liked that when she was all sharp edges, he met her with his own and
they both sort of seemed to cancel each other out. Both of them seeming to understand it had a hell of
a lot to do with the sadness in each others gazes. There was a lot, Lela was coming to find out, to like
about Tony. From the way he seemed to be painfully spastic to the way he could pull a joke out of
thin air and defuse a situation entirely.

So yeah, she’s a little worried about his state of being at the moment. What with the way it kind of
looks like he’s riding a low after a full month bender.

“You look like shit,” Lela informs him as she plopped her ass down on the stool he usually sat in.
She hooks the small heels of her boots to the railing on the bottom of it to keep her legs from
swinging like a damn child.

“I feel like shit,” Tony grumbles as he rolled himself over to stare at her. His big brown eyes look
ragged and worn.

Running her tongue over her lips, feeling the insane urge to smoke climb up and bite at her, Lela
clicks her tongue and scathingly tells him, “Then go home fuck-face. What the fuck are you doing up
here like this?”

Tony, for his part, says nothing to her at first. He gets this faraway look in his eyes. The kind that
says he’s a million and one miles from where he’s at now. The kind that shows he needs some kind
of sleep soon before he starts leaking his brain out of his damn ears.
Lela’s just about worried he might’ve fallen asleep with his eyes open when suddenly he opens his mouth and speaks. In a voice so low and rumbling, Tony stares at her boots as he announces, “Home is empty. Home is always empty now.”

For a full minute, Lela doesn’t get it. She’s about to spit out some kind of shit about telling Pepper or Bruce to follow him home. Like, weren’t they fucking pack to him. Lela’s pretty new to the whole shit, but she’s pretty sure, if she called up any of her dumb ass three musketeers, they’d fly in pick her ass up in less than five minutes.

From what she understands when Sam had laid it out for her—nice and simple, summarized over a hot meal of cajun style ribs—it was kind of the whole purpose of pack. If one member was down, then they all scrambled to pick that one back up. When one of us hurts, Sam had told her all soft and careful, we all hurt.

So, Lela’s about to open her fucking mouth and say some real dumb shit when she remembers. The day at the restaurant. The lunch where Tony had shared with her the fact that he was harboring broken bonds. That he’d fucked up, broken up his pack on a mistake that was of his own making.

And shit, if there was a less qualified person in the goddamn world to handle a situation like now it was fucking Lela.

Fighting the urge to fucking book it, Lela roughly runs her fingers through her hair and gruffly asks, “Bonds got you all fucked up, huh?”

A dry staggered kind of laugh slips out past Tony’s perfect pearly whites. A strained smile tips his lips up before it sputters out as he mumbled, “Pretty much kid.”

“How you…” Lela starts, feels the words slip away from her in the same way water slipped between her fingers, “Have you, like, fucking talked to them about it?”

“Don’t wanna guilt them,” Tony tells her as his eyes slipped down and closed, “Pepper’ll probably feel obligated to take care of me and Bruce... Bruce’ll probably freak out and turn green over it.”

Turn green, it’d been a hell of shock to find out mild mannered fucking Bruce Banner was the green beast everyone had dubbed the hulk. Tony had been the one to tell Lela in the first place. He told her in that smooth devil may care attitude of his. His eyes shining with pride even if he tried to work a stern and firm expression on his face.

Huffing out a breath, Lela kicks the table again and says, “You should talk to them asshole. You’re like, fucking wasting away.”

There’s a fear, wriggling in the back of her mind. It burns up with worry. Slithers like a viper about to strike. That fear makes something cold and unsettling lodge itself up in the highest part of her throat.

Lela remembers, with startling clarity, the last time she ever saw her own mother. The way her body had just...wasted. They way she’d looked, lying twisted and unnaturally still on the floor of their living room. The way she’d become both a solid and a liquid combined. The way her skin had looked both waxy and slimy. Lela remembers the stench. The god awful fucking smell of rot that had leveled her the moment she’d walked into her old home. Lela remembers the image of official looking people, in hazmats coming in to lift her mothers body piece by fucking piece.

The thought of something remotely like that happening to Tony—with his wide shit eating grins and snarky humor—makes Lela’s heart race. The thought of that makes Lela feel like vomiting. Tony
didn’t deserve to waste away like that. Lela doesn’t want to say her mother deserved an end like that, because she didn’t, not really. But some part of her—black born and twisted into creation by her mothers own hands—says maybe the ending seemed fitting. Lela knows, she hadn’t thought so then. Not when she was staring at her mothers dead body.

But not Tony, Lela thinks, he didn’t deserve to go out like that. There’s an aching need inside of her, all second natured and damnable dynamic, that has her veins laced in desperation. It makes her feel 15 again. Standing on her porch talking to sheriffs with pity in their scent and sad resignation in their eyes.

Head full of shit memories and bad thoughts, Lela growls and kicks her foot against the underside of the table. It jars the man laid on top of it hard enough to almost drop him onto the floor below.

Through a mouth full of fangs Lela growls down at the man and demands of him, “Get up.”

“Why?” Tony asks with this thoroughly bewildered expression on his handsomely haggard face.

“Get up,” Lela repeats harshly as she slipped down to stand on her own two feet.

Slowly, Tony pulls himself up to a sitting position that looks a lot harder than it ought to be. It takes him a long while for him to get vertical but eventually he manages. With his head hung low and his shoulders drooping, the damn insufferable alpha asks again, “Why?”

Something vicious, dark and burning, strikes up in Lela’s chest as she stared at Tony’s listless face. The fact that she can almost smell his pain makes her feel all kinds of different ways. For the most part, Lela hates it. Hates seeing anything but a smile be etched so deeply onto his lips. She hates the way sadness and heartache bleed from his eyes. There’s a part of her that wants to brush away all of that with…something.

There’s a desperate thrum in her that twists up the bonds she’s got in her chest till they coiled in tight. She can taste something foul in the back of her throat as it ran itself dry.

Running her tongue over her fangs, Lela gruffly states with as much casual calm as she can summon up, “I’m taking your dumbass home.”

Trying at a smirk and failing utterly at it, Tony drawls with a crooked grin, “Thought I wasn’t your type kid?”

And it’s such a Tony-like response Lela almost laughs at it. Because, leave it to the goddamn idiot, to try to make light of a situation where he was basically a fucking zombie. But Lela doesn’t laugh because she’s staring right into Tony’s eyes. And those eyes, they’re twisting up her stomach in a way Lela’s never felt before.

Lela feels that twist sharper than a knife. It goes down deep, past flesh and muscle and seeps into the very marrow of her bone. It leaves Lela gasping for breath like she’s just been punched square in her chest. Her bonds go squirrelly like she’s doused them in gasoline and was itching to set them on fire. Lela has to physically sink her fangs into the insides of her mouth to keep them at bay.

But she doesn’t say any of that. That she’s scared, that she’s scared for him. She just bites it back and huffs out a swear as she balled his shirt up in one hand and yanked him clear off the table.

Instead of an alpha growl, Tony merely whines at her rough treatment. He goes all jelly boned and Falls forward till he’s swaying on his feet. He doesn’t even put up a fight when Lela starts dragging his ass towards the door. He’s as malleable as a four year old with a bad fever. And Lela doesn’t doubt, at all, that he’s got the same attitude built up in him to boot.
Which in turn only makes Lela grow a little angry. She’s got half a mind to run up the elevator and
drag down Pepper or Bruce. So that they could see what bullshit they were leaving on the wayside.
But, Lela keeps that tightly wound within herself.

“We walking or you got a car around?” Lela asks once she’s pressed a button down.

Sneering, Tony growls out, “We are not walking. I have a car in the lot.”

And without further ado, he speaks to Jarvis and gets them rerouted to whatever level Tony kept his
car stowed away on. Lela says nothing as she leans on the opposite wall Tony is using to keep
himself upright. Through narrowed eyes she watches as Tony’s eyes dip lower and lower. The way
his face goes from about to rest to twinged up in pain.

Something like sympathy and pity swirl in Lela’s stomach at the sight. Something, entirely other,
makes Lela want to step closer to offer herself as support. Something completely not her but entirely
herself, makes Lela feel twisted up at the pitiful sight he makes.

When the doors open, Tony makes no intention of stepping out of them. It’s only because of her
growl and Lela actually pushing him does he go. As they step deeper into the carport, Lela glances
around at all the shiny brand new name brand cars that sit pristinely parked.

With frustration lining her words, Lela gruffly demands, “Which ones yours dickhead?”

Mild confusion laces Tony’s face as he rested his long lithe frame on the nearest car, “All of them.”

Scoffing, Lela merely mutters under her breath, “Figures.”

Pulling open the door of a purple speedster, Tony goes for the drivers side and tells her through a
groggy voice, “C’mon.”

Gritting her teeth, Lela steps up to him and roughly shoves him away. Growls lining her voice, she
tells him, “You ain’t driving asshole.”

“I can drive myself, thank you very much,” Tony snappishly spit at her with his face pulled up into
mild agitation.

“Tas pendejo,” Lela spits back at him as she gripped his shirt and shoved him into the passenger side
seat. On a good day, the fucker couldn’t drive worth shit. Lela wasn’t about to wind up a splattered
fucking mess on the floor over his fucking bullheaded ass. Only after she’s shoved him into the seat
and buckled him in, Lela tells him firmly, “I’m driving.”

Sliding into the drivers side, Lela slams shut the door and goes about readjusting the seat till it’s just
at the right spot. Only when she’s done all that does Tony dubiously ask from where he’s seated,
“Can you even drive stick?”

Pushing the fancy little start button Lela watches as the whole pretty inside lights up. With a smooth
purr, the car comes to life. One hand on the wheel and another on the gear stick, Lela bites out at
him, “Course I can asshole.”

And with that, Lela pulls out of the car port and starts driving. She’s halfway out of the tower
parking when she turns to the alpha beside her and demands, “Which one of your five houses we
going to?”

“Does it matter?” Tony grumbles out as he leaned his head against the glass beside him, “They’re all
empty.”
Huffing out a breath, gripping the steering wheel tight, Lela growls low in her throat. On a good day, Lela’s not entirely sure how to deal with her own emotions least of all other peoples. So to say she’s out of her fucking comfort zone is putting it fucking mildly. Biting back the urge to snap at the emotional garbage bin beside her, Lela breathes in deep and continues driving like she has a real destination in mind.

She doesn’t really know what she’s supposed to say to that. She doesn’t know what kind of words to use to make the alpha feel better or how to go about offering comforting words. She’s not like Sam, who wore his heart on his sleeves. She wasn’t like Clint who could take everything with a warm smile and put worries to ease with a simple well placed light word. Lela wasn’t even like Natasha that could end a fucking pity-fest with a cool word.

Lela was…fuck, well, she was a garbage bin of ugly emotions just like Tony.

When the silence starts to stretch, making Lela feel somewhat like she’s gotta squirm, she breaks it with an offhand:

“Wanna know how I learned how to drive stick?”

“Your dad showed you?” Tony finally guesses from where he’s marinating in his own bad vibes.

Laughing, Lela shakes her head and switches gears with ease. Shaking her head she tells him, “Fuck no. That fucker split long before I ever learned how to walk. Couldn’t fucking spot him in a crowd if you paid me.” Frowning Lela offers a one shoulder shrug as she add on as an afterthought, “Don’t think I wanna meet the fucker.”

Shifting in his seat so that he was looking at her instead of what passed them by, Tony asks, “So how’d you learn?”

“I boosted cars when I was a kid,” Lela tells him easily with a wide grin as she turned to eye him. Tony wears some kind of shock on his face before a wide grin spread on his dry lips, “Yeah?”

Shrugging, Lela turns her attention back onto the road and makes a random turn, “Yeah, I mean, I had to learn how to drive manual if I wanted to get paid.”

“How’d you…How does that even work? Like, who paid you for the cars you…stole?” Tony asks, curiosity shinning in his eyes and excitement coloring his words.

“Usually we just drove them over the border. Mafioso’s always want american bougie shit. Like cadillacs, benz’s and shit. They’ll pay for it the moment you roll right up,” Lela tells him with a small laugh.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Tony questions as he snuggled deeper into his seat.

“Shit yeah,” Lela tells him honestly with a laugh as she pulled her tie out of her hair. Her inky strands tumble down around her head as she shook out the lazy waves, “I mean, one out of three cars we took that way ended up getting stolen from us. We were 16 or 17, fucking kids. They pulled out guns and we fuckin’ bailed.”

“So, did’you do it a lot?” Tony mumbles as he rested his chin on the shoulder of the seat.

“We did it anytime any one of us needed cash, which was like, every other week.”

Laughing, Tony shakes his head and tells her with a smile, “So you’re like a full on criminal?”
“Nah, I’ve just always been shit at making decisions,” Lela tells him with a too sharp grin.

After that, the air around them isn’t so heavy. Tony looks more like himself when he calls out to Jarvis to display the directions on the screen he has on the dash. Lela’s not even half surprised when Jarvis starts telling her how to get to one of Tony’s houses. She just turns when he says so and gets them there.

When they roll up to the large house, Lela doesn’t bother to hide the surprise in her face as she takes in the long drive way covered in elegantly trimmed trees. Tony’s house wasn’t a fucking house. It was a goddamn mansion. It was seated on a little hill with sprawling acres surrounding it.

When she parks the car at the front door and kills the engine she turns to lay into the man about his pretentious home when she spots the sleeping figure beside her.

Sleeping, Tony looks a lot younger than the lines on his face paint him as. He looks…softer like that. His pink lips parted and snoring lightly. For a second, Lela takes in the sight of him. She takes in the small differences of his face as well as everything else. Something slithers in her hindbrain for her to leave him be. The man clearly needed rest if the bags under his eyes were anything to go by. But Lela knows she can’t just leave him in here to sleep. Not when they were parked outside of his house and there was probably a billionaire styled bed to put him up on.

So as delicately as she can force herself to be, Lela calls out to him that they’re here. But it does nothing to rouse the man. When she reaches out to roughly shake him, all it does is make his head fall forward. Gritting her teeth, Lela kills the engine and steps out.

It takes a hell of a lot of effort on her part to pull the man out of the car. He only goes when Lela stops trying to be nice about it. Tony is all puppy dog whines and whimpers as he tries to bat away her hands. He doesn’t even bother with putting on a token alpha growl at her when she grips his ear and pulls on it.

“C’mon dickhead, we’re here,” Lela growls as she pulled on his upper arm and half dragged his ass out. When they’re at the front door, Tony full on using her as a damn crutch, his arm on her shoulder and all his weight settled on her, Lela angrily demands of him, “Unlock the door jackass.”

Pawing his hand out to the knob, Tony opens the clearly unlocked door with utter ease.

“You don’t lock your fancy ass house?” Lela gruffly bites as she pulled the man through the threshold.

“House is hooked up with the best alarm system ever created,” Tony mumbled as he dropped his face onto the crown of Lela’s head.

“Thank you for the compliment sir.” Jarvis announces overhead.

Snorting, Lela ignores the fact that Tony is full on nuzzling her head as she called out a simple ‘Hey J’. When they get past the large sprawl of the entry way, Lela heads for where she thinks a living room might be. She finds it on her second try. It’s about that time that she notices Tony is sniffing at her hair.

“You smell funny,” Tony grumbled as rubbed his scruffy face against the crown of her head.

Phantom anxiety climbs up Lela’s spine as she works to keep them both upright. She has to remind herself she’s on decent blockers to keep from shoving the man away from herself. That her true scent is being killed off by them and the insane amount of cigarettes she kills on a daily basis. Hiking the mans left arm further across her shoulders, Lela merely grunts out, “And you smell like dog shit.”
“No, I mean…you smell like…smoke,” Tony tells her as a couch becomes visible.

Gritting her teeth, Lela digs her fingers into the surprisingly meaty hip Tony’s got while she casually stated, “I smoke a lot.”

“No, you smell like a bonfire, that’s…that’s not normal,” Tony mumbled as he rested his face upon her head, “Never met someone with a scent like that.”

And as much as Lela’s wondered what it is she smells like to other people, she’s not about to touch that with a ten foot fucking pole. Not right now and not with Tony of all fucking people. So the moment a couch comes into view, she heads straight for it. With a rough swing, she tosses Tony’s body into it and watches all his long lean limbs tangle themselves up.

Heaving from the exertion of having hauled around a hundred plus pounds of dead weight, Lela gruffly announces, “There.”

“Ow, be gentle,” Tony grumbles from where his mouth is pressed into the cushion of the forest green couch he’s got.

Rolling her eyes, Lela runs her hands through her disheveled hair and tells him, “You need to shower and go to sleep.”

“I don’t wanna,” the alpha whines low in his throat. The sound half muffled by the way he keeps pressing his face deeper into the fabric.

“Tony, you smell like actual shit,” Lela bit out as she stuffed her hands into her pant pockets.

“What’s the point?” Tony moaned out like he was being told he was going to have to get his hair shaved completely off, “What’s the point in anything?”

“Seriously wey?” Lela feels the words fall from her lips in disbelief.

Because, sure, she liked Tony, but this was a bit much. She didn’t sign up to look after an emotionally constipated male version of herself. And Lela’s about two seconds away from telling him he could fuck right off. If he didn’t want to shower and go to bed it sounded an awful lot like a personal problem.

But then Lela catches the horrible stench that comes rolling out of the man.

Like sorrow, pain filled and heart shattering something.

It makes Lela’s hindbrain cry out from where she’s stuffed it away. It makes it twist itself up into horrible knots with something she can’t begin to name. Her second nature goes soft and stupid at the smell of it. Makes her want to reach out and card her fingers through his brown greasy hair. To soothe that smell until it was gone completely.

Twisting her neck so that she popped out every tight kink there with audible cracks, Lela growls deep in her chest.

“‘ira cabron, I’m not going to tell you again.” Lela starts off with, voice hard as steel as she suppressed all the whines her damnable dynamic wishes for her to make, “You need to shower and fucking sleep. I didn’t fucking drag your ass here for you to wallow in your shit like you were doing in your fucking lab. Get. Up.”

Carefully slow, Tony lifts his head from where he’s stuffed it. His big brown eyes spot her with ease.
They narrow on her for the tiniest second. Something like defiance shines in them as his pink dry lips turned down at the end. But when Lela’s lips twitch up into a lip curl to showcase her fangs, that defiance dies away. A piercing whine hits Lela’s ears and makes her toes curl up tight in her boots.

“You’re so mean!” Tony cried as he pulled his body up and off the couch. He’s staggering his ass out of the living room when suddenly he stills and turns to eye her once more. Something frail and dangerously soft sits in his eyes as he slowly worked his mouth to ask, “You’re not... are you leaving?”

And Lela should be. She didn’t exactly let anyone know she was leaving when she did. Mr. Owens will probably tag her with yet another pink slip over the whole thing.

But one look into those big brown sad eyes and Lela knows she’s not going anywhere. She likes Tony, far more than she should, and so she’s sticking around despite having no clue how to deal with the fucking situation. Lela’s going to stay because how the hell do you say you’re leaving to eyes that fucking sad?

Lela was a bitch, but she wasn’t exactly heartless. Or at least, she wasn’t since the wonder-dicks and Sammy got her heart pumping again.

Huffing out a breath, Lela kicks her right boot onto the carpet at her feet and begrudgingly tells the man, “I’ll be here dickhead, go shower.”

It takes Tony more than a half minute to believe Lela before he groggily nods his head and carries on his wayward way. As she watches his retreating form, Lela thinks, that this is, yet another, shitty decision on her part.

*~*

“For the last fucking time Tony,” Lela growled as she shoved his shoulder hard enough to bruise, “Get the fuck off of me.”

“But I’m cold,” the alpha man whined as he batted his ridiculously long dark lashes at her.

“Then get a fucking blanket douchebag,” Lela bit out as she continued to shove him away from herself. And then as an after thought, as she’s struggling to get his head off her shoulder, “And maybe put some warmer fucking clothes on.”

Because of course, billionaire fucking asshole that he was, Tony had come out of a shower dressed in only a flimsy white cotton v neck and some flannel bottoms. Lela could clearly make out the soft shimmering blue of his electronic heart. Something she’d only ever read in magazines and knew helped keep the man alive.

Which Lela thinks, was a complete and utter mind fuck.

Growling in complete defeat, Tony flops to the other side and lets himself settle on the opposite end of the couch. Grabbing the remote firmly in her left hand, Lela aims towards the tv and continues her channel surfing.

Now, considering she’s never had to take care of another human being, Lela’s not entirely sure how she’s supposed to go about it. As she sits on some kind of trashy b-rated horror film, Lela thinks what her three musketeers would do. She knows for a damn fact Clint would try to fed whoever was down. Sam would smother the person in cuddles while they binge watched shitty assed rom-coms. She knows Natasha would offer some sage advice and go on with the day expecting the other to just pick up and run with their wounds—trusting in the other persons inner strength to just find their way.
Lela pulls on her bonds for strength and feels them blossom in her chest. They grow oven warm at the attention she gives them.

Huffing out a breath, Lela asks, as she ran her hand through he loose waves, “You hungry?”

“No,” Tony says mulishly as he curled into a tight ball and jammed his bare feet beneath Lela’s ass. And Lela doesn’t even need to be looking to know he’s wearing that damnable pout on his lips again. Lela doesn’t think she knows Tony all that well at all. Like, shit, not enough to be laid up on a couch together right now. But she does know enough out of him to know he’s lying because he’s a shithead and trying to be difficult about the whole thing.

Suppressing the urge to growl, Lela leaves the shitty horror film on and pulls herself out of her seat. As she passes the alpha man, she drops the remote by his head and tells him, “Be right back.”

It takes a hell of a lot more effort than it should for Lela to find the fucking kitchen in Tony’s dumb ass house. It was stupidly big. Once she finds the kitchen she pops open Tony’s fridge which is utterly over stocked. She’s in the process of debating what to make when she hears Tony’s bare feet slapping on the tiled floor.

“What’re you doing?” Tony grumbles as he threw himself over his kitchen counter.

Side eyeing the man, Lela offers her shoulder, “Cooking.”

If Tony is surprised, he doesn’t say. He keeps quiet as he made himself comfortable. And with that she pulls out chicken breasts and sets them beside the man. She asks for rice, potatoes, carrots, a single lemon, garlic and onion. Tony merely points with a lazy wave of his hand. Pulling a large pot off its hanger, Lela puts water to boil.

She’s in the process of cutting up the chicken when she says, “I’m making you a caldo, that good?”

“Wha’s that?” Tony mumbled as he spoke through closed eyes.

“It’s like a chicken soup,” Lela tells him as she dumped the diced pieces into the pot. When she’s back on the counter she goes about slicing up the vegetables too.

“Is it good?” Tony asked as he popped open a single eye, his gaze questioning and dubious.

Pursing her lips, Lela breaks a garlic clove and tosses it into the water along with the onion. She’s just about squirting the lemon into the water when she tells him with a shrug of her shoulder, “I don’t know, haven’t made it in a while. My mom used to make it whenever I got sick after a…” Lela’s words die on her tongue as she realized what she was going to say.

The only time her mother cooked the broth was when Lela was fresh out of heat. It was about the only thing Lela could manage to keep down. Now, whenever she got especially sick, Lela felt a craving for it.

Tightening her lips, Lela goes back to her task at hand. When the chicken has at least been cooked halfway, she dumps the rest of the ingredients in and stirs it all around. Grabbing the proper lid for it, she closes it up and lowers the heat down to a simmer and leaves it be. After that she heads for the sink at Tony’s right side and washes her hands.

When she glances up she’s meet with brown eyes that aren’t so bogged down with fatigue anymore. They shine now, sharp as a knife, as they stare at her face. Like a fire has been lit up in his mind, there’s a strange type of hungry gleam to them. Immediately, the sight of them puts her on edge.
“Your mom cook for you a lot?” Tony asks like he genuinely wants to know. Like, he can’t phantom the mere thought of home cooked meals.

Shrugging, Lela tells him honestly, “No, I mean, she used to. But then she went and fell into a bottle of jack and never came back out.”

“Sorry,” Tony says, his face pulled into genuine compassion, “Is that how she passed?”

“Pretty much. Passed out cold and choked on her own vomit,” Lela states with a tight purse to her lips, “Had to find her like that a week after the fact. Shit was…ugly.”

What Lela doesn’t say is that the image of her mother has been burned into her mind. What she doesn’t say is that for about a full year, Lela could still smell that stench in her nose. What she doesn’t say is that for two whole years after she had nightmares where her mothers decayed body just rose up and tried to choke the life out of her. Lela doesn’t say all that because her lips are tightly sealed over her growing fangs.

And like something just clicks, Tony’s face goes from inquisitive to something like guilt as he pulled his gaze away from her and down to his feet.

“Shit, I…I’m sorry?” Tony mumbled as he ran one hand through his poofy brown hair.

Feeling like she’s poking at an exposed nerve, Lela simply shrugs and tells the man, “Don’t be. It’s…it’s whatever.”

What Lela also doesn’t say is that she doesn’t ever want to walk in on Tony’s decomposing corpse too.

But Lela hears it ring in the air regardless.

“It’s just…” Tony starts only to stop as he dragged a rough hand over his face, “our bonds…they’re—they don’t feel like they used to.”

Lela stays quiet as she crossed her arms over her chest and pressed her lower back onto the counters edge behind her.

“I’ve been trying, you know?” Tony says, like Lela knows he has—she doesn’t—but his eyes look genuine as he continued on, so Lela believes him anyway, “But they’ve got bonds to each other now, they’re a pack on their own. What the hell do they need me for? I’m a fucking Alpha, but, I wasn’t taught how to…I don’t know how to…how the hell do I look after them when I don’t know how to do it for myself!?”

By the end of it, Tony’s growling. Full on alpha growls that rumble out of his chest and out of his open mouth. The sound of it sinks down into Lela’s bones; shaking them until she feels something in her chest rattle with the force of it.

And for as much as it is an official Alpha growl, it doesn’t set Lela on edge like she figures it should’ve. Not when it’s coupled by that frustratingly sad face he’s wearing. All it does is make Lela feel for the man. Tony was an idiot, sure, but sometimes, Lela thought he might be a well meaning one. An idiot who didn’t know how to deal with half the shit he put himself into.

Only after the pot starts bubbling and Lela stirs it, does she offer him a simple, “Have you talked to them? Have you told them how jacked up you are?”

Lela doesn’t need to turn to know Tony’s wearing his most stubborn expression as he told her back,
“They’re neglected bonds kid, I’m pretty sure they know how jacked up I currently am.”

“Yeah, but have you told them dickhead,” Lela bites out as she turns to stare at him, “Like have you fucking said, in no uncertain fucking terms, that you’re fucked up over the whole thing?”

There’s a hiss and a growl from Tony as he too crossed his arms over his chest and glared at his feet.

Taking that for the answer it was, Lela searches through his cabinets until she unearths fancy looking bowls. She sets two on the counter beside him and says, “I’m pretty fucking new to whole bonds shit, but I’m pretty sure you don’t fix shit unless you sit down and fucking talk about it.”

Which Lela realizes is fucking ironic considering she’s never sat down with anyone of her pack mates and talked about a single thing. Lela figures if she’s ever got to, it’d be Sam who she’d sit down and do it with. Natasha and Clint, not so much. They were more emotional handguns ready to go off. If Lela so much as voiced a grievance of any kind, they’d run off and murder whoever was at the end of it.

Lela’s done a whole lot in life, but there’s no blood in her hands. None but her own and she’s hoping to keep it that way.

“You should talk to them,” Lela mutters softly as she began ladling out food into each individual bowl, “tell’em you’re sorry or some shit and just…start from there.”

When she hands Tony his bowl, the man is looking at her like she’s just asked him to rip his fangs out of his head to see how it feels like. When he opens his mouth, he starts off with, “Apologizing isn’t my…forte.”

Pursing her lips up tight, Lela glares at him as she gripped her own bowl and tells him through tight lips, “Then fucking make it, asshole.”

Sliding a cabinet at his left open and pulling out two spoons, Tony glares at her. He’s quiet as he twirls his spoon around in his broth. The steaming vapors falling into his face as he blew upon the surface. The clink of metal meeting porcelain echoing in the vast emptiness of Tony’s enormous home. The sound making Lela feel like she was in some kind of empty museum, not a home.

It reminds her why Tony refuses to come around. Why he preferred to lock himself up in his labs where at least the static hisses and pops of his robot children kept him company. The sadness she feels for him then lands like a solid brick into her chest. It makes the bonds she’s got running warm twist up with the force of it.

Pushing her own spoon through the flowered rice in the liquid, Lela awkwardly offers, “You can always just come around the hotel you know. When it gets too fucking quiet around here.”

The sound of Tony’s eating abruptly stops. If he’s looking at her, Lela doesn’t know because she’s busy peering down at her bowl. Too much of a fucking coward to look the man in the face least she find something too human glowing in his gaze.

Slowly, Tony says, “That’s…thanks kid.”

There’s a heavy weight to his simple words. Heavy enough that Lela feels it on her fucking shoulders. Like the man is genuinely blown back by the weak ass offer she’s put out there.

Shrugging her shoulder, Lela pops a too hot chunk of chicken and potato into her mouth and tells him as seriously as possible, “Still not my type dickhead.”
When Tony laughs, he sounds much more like himself. It rumbles out of him smoother than his alpha growls of desperation. It makes her hindbrain slither and writhe until something strange pulls. A strange type of warmth seeps into her bones as she chances a peek up into those chocolate colored big eyes. It feels a little like she’s slipped into a dryer warm jacket and snuggled in deep.

Lela feels it wrap around every inch of her and then just fade away when her bonds pulse madly beneath it.

Ignoring the feeling, because she’s good at that, she offers the man a smirk as he sent her a brilliant smile. She’ll probably ask Sam about it, if she remembers.

*~*

About a week later

Sometime around noon

With the rush of his rockets, he flies through the air until he spots the familiar balcony deck a dark haired pixie usually haunted. Despite his suit being made of pure metal, he hardly makes a sound as his feet meet smooth concrete. His rockets effortlessly turn off when they acknowledge he’s on safe ground.

Sliding open the balcony door he steps into the hotel suite. The moment he makes it past the threshold, he’s bombarded by all manner of sharp ended weapons. They ping against his protected face and toss his head to the side with the sheer force they’re thrown with.

“Well, hello to you too,” he drawls through the mic.

“What are you doing here?” Natasha’s cold and deadly voice is the first to greet him. Her green eyes are narrowed as she stood just to the left of him. Somewhere between the living room and the dinning room.

“I was in the neighborhood, thought I’d drop by,” Tony starts as he pulled up his mask and smiled at the red head.

“Lela’s not here,” Clint tells him immediately, his eyes holding insane amount of displeasure for Tony standing where he is. The very picture of a gamma defending his packs den.

“I know, kid’s up in the tower, cleaning up the minions,” Tony announces as he stepped into the hotel suite with all the confidence of the world. Nevermind the fact that he’s just been halfway accosted.

He’s just about pulling open the fridge door when Natasha speaks again, “Why are you here Stark?”

They don’t call him Tony anymore, he knows, not since everything that went down the way it had. Whatever familiarity and camaraderie they’d shared before was gone now. They were all back to where they’d started when Fury first forced them to start working alongside one another. A project to save the world from itself.

*Earth’s mightiest heroes*, Fury had called them. Mighty they may be, Heroes some of them were, but Tony knew they were all as dysfunctional as human beings could be. Some, admittedly, more damaged than others.

They’d all been friends once, at least, they’d tried to be. They’d all offered each other a shoulder to lean up against when the other needed to lick their wounds. Tony misses that. More than he could
ever put into words. He misses all of them. But the apology he knows he owes stays locked up tight behind the white of his teeth.

“So what are you doing here?” Natasha bit out as calmly as though she were holding a high powered assault rifle and he a damn butter knife.

Which Tony knows isn’t the truth. He’s got enough fire power on him to down an entire militia. But hell if fear doesn’t trickle down his spine at the coldness lodged in her voice. Because whether or not he was safely locked away in his suit, Natasha was a wraith on any given day. He’d personally seen what she could do with armed with a single pocket knife and dressed in a shimmering black cocktail dress.

Only when he’s done serving himself a cool glass of orange juice, does Tony say, “I was wondering, are you guys seriously thinking about keeping the kid locked up in here forever?”

Eye’s spelling cold blooded murder, Natasha is the one to answer him as she stepped into the kitchen, “What business is that of yours?”

“None,” Tony tells her honestly, even if his gut clenches at his admission. He likes the kid. He’s liked her since the first time she growled at him and hadn’t backed down. Lela’s spine had been made of the world’s toughest iron. Seared black and tempered by all the things she’d endured.

The more he got to know her, the longer they talked, the more they shared with one another, the more Tony grew to like her.

In the suite, Tony can smell her all around him. Something like brushfire and flowers. Tony can smell her happiness and her anger sitting space heavy all around. His alpha instincts ache for him to pull that scent into himself and memorize every bit of it. So he does. He pulls in a deep breath through his nose and out his mouth. Half tasting it as it went.

He can make out Clint’s bubble gum scent and Natasha’s usually subtle blackberry one. He even catches a few whiffs of Wilson’s honey and oakwood scent hanging around. Something in him aches to rub his scent somewhere where Lela will pass by and pick up on. To leave a little of himself behind, to mark, to lay a territorial claim.

It riles the more rational part of himself as much as it soothes his baser instincts.

“It just seems like you guys should start thinking about the future,” Tony states as care free as he can manage while actively kicking a hornets nest.

A hornets nest chalk full of deadly assassins.

“Why?” Clint growls out as he made his way to the dining room. The man doesn’t bother to hold the hostility from his gaze or his tone.

“What happens when you guys have to go out on a mission?” Tony questions as he leaned up against the kitchen counter, “You guys have been putting a hell of a lot of vacation days. There’s gonna come a day when you aren’t going to be able to pawn a mission off.”

Which Tony knows is coming a hell of a lot sooner rather than later.

“So what?” Clint growls out, his gamma fangs peeking out from underneath his tight frown.

Shrugging, Tony decides to get to the heart of the matter, he’d come up here for a reason after all. And it wasn’t to poke at old wounds. He’d come with an idea in mind. A way to settle an itch in his
mind that had begun to grow since that day he’d spent locked up with Lela in his usually empty home.

There was a rattling need in him festering larger and larger the more he tried to settle it. All of his jumbled up alpha instincts were pulled tight into a wire when he’d thought about the kid locked up alone in a hotel suit when the time came. To know she would be up here, in the dark, it had made him grow restless. The thought had made him completely unable to work on a single thing.

So he’d figured, if anything was going to get done, it was going to be because he kicked that hornets nest until it broke.

He liked the kid and so he figures a few stings were worth the comfort given to him over a chicken soup made especially for him. The kid didn’t need to have helped him out as she did. But Tony thinks, underneath all those sharp as volcanic rock edges she’s got, Lela was actually a soft touch. There was a well worth of care in there.

Lela hadn’t needed to go out of her way to help Tony when he was at his lowest. But she had. She didn’t have one good reason to stick around and help him when all he had wanted to do was wallow in his pain and misery. But she had. The kid didn’t have to help him, when even his own pack had left him to deal with all his bullshit on his own, but she’d taken one look at him and decided to do it anyway.

So, yeah, a few stings was well worth the hand she’d stretched out for him.

“You should think about helping her look for a place,” Tony offers when he puts his cup back down. When he’s met with silent glares Tony goes on, “Kid needs stability, you’re her pack. It should come from you.”

Silence rings for a lot longer than he’d like. It sits heavy on his metal shoulders until he feels the weight of it start to tip them downward in defeat.

Huffing out a long suffered sigh, Tony rolls his eyes, and pushes off the counter, “Hey, it’s just a suggestion. But you should think about it. She’s gonna be left on her own up here and—if I know the kid at all—it’s gonna feel a hell of a lot like she’s been abandoned.”

At least, Tony thinks so, because that’s how he’d get anytime his parents left him in hotel’s around the world for weeks on end.

“Do you…” Clint starts only to falter as he glared in Tony’s direction. It takes him a while to find his words as he gruffly demanded, “Do you have any suggestions?”

It’s clear to anyone with two eyes, that Lela was an obvious soft spot for them. As much as it was for Tony, it seemed.

Tipping his lips down into a frown and shrugging his shoulders, Tony lies, “A bit.”

He has a hell of a lot of suggestions. He’s got a whole database up and running in his labs. Jarvis has, for the last four days, been holding the proceedings to about 125 different places. So yeah, a bit.

Figuring the job done, Tony places his dirty glass cup into the sink and makes his way towards the balcony door. Only when he’s about halfway there he’s stopped. Natasha is impossibly fast on her bare feet.

Taking confident steps until she met him toe for toe, Natasha glared hard at him as she demanded, “Why are do you care?”
Feeling his usual bravado slip out from underneath his feet for just a second, Tony goes quiet. His witty words fail him as he pops open his mouth. Tony could lie, could tell them he doesn’t one way or another. But his stomach clenches at the mere thought. For once, Tony thinks, he owes them two—two of his greatest once friends—the truth.

“Lela, she’s…” Tony starts only to stumble and fall. His face twists up as he tries to put into words the queer little lunge his heart did whenever the five foot menace walked into a room he was in. The weird way his chest felt too full and entirely too small whenever she laughed at some asinine joke he shot off at her. The way he felt somewhat whole when she pushed him around and forced him off his ass.

“She’s a friend,” Tony declares firm and true.

Emerald green eyes stare at him like they’re trying to pick apart every piece of him and find the easiest way to hurt him. Tony thinks, no pair of eyes should be that scary. Something entirely too wise sparks in those emerald eyes right before they soften and a smirk spreads slow and dangerous across her blush colored lips. Tony’s half afraid what those eyes have figured out because he himself doesn’t know what they’ve found.

But he figures it’s nothing to get himself stabbed over.

Side stepping out of his way, Natasha tells him with a smirk, “Send us what you have and we’ll figure something out.”

Nodding, Tony heads for the balcony door and tells them just as he closes his mask, “Sure thing.”

And with that he’s flying back to his tower to make some last minute adjustments on his growing list. Because, like hell was he going to hand in something half assed, not with Natasha’s knowing gaze following after him.

It feels a little like a second chance, an opening, given to him by the black widow and her distrustful strawberry haired gamma. Tony was a lot of things, but he wasn’t the kind to look a gift horse in the mouth for anything. He was the kind to see and opportunity and snatch it between his hands and never look back. So he does just that because he can still feel the warmth in his belly that came from a home cooked meal made by a dark haired hellion.

*~*

It’s bullshit. It’s absolute fucking bullshit. But Lela can’t say that. She can’t open her mouth and say a single goddamn thing lest she make it fucking worse. Instead she’s forced to grit her teeth and swallow back the venom that builds up on her tongue. She’s got rage—pure and unadulterated—burning up in her chest. The flames of it licking up her throat until she can taste her own seared flesh.

Since Lela went and broke one of Mr. Owens cardinal rules—ditching work without a proper heads up—Lela has been, for a lack of a better word, punished for it. She’s been switched over to night shifts, graveyard shift. It’s not all bad, the work is much the same, but Lela’s gotten complacent. She’s gotten used to getting back to the hotel suite around eight or nine, eating food with her bond mates and sleeping the night away until eight o’clock rolled around. Being forced to get up around eight o’clock—in the afternoon—and in the tower till five in the fucking morning. It was seriously fucking Lela up on an emotional level.

And then on top of it all, she’s managed to make it to the top of Mr. Owens shit list. Like, Lela’s pretty much taking up the top three listings of it with her name alone. Because, of course, now that she’s on night shift, Lela’s being given absolutely no heads up on which sectors she’s being assigned
to. She’s being given no amount of fucking say so on anything. If someone needs a day off, needs to leave early, there was Lela scrambling to cover the shift left stranded. If no one wants to run down to the basement levels to stock up on cleaning supplies, well there fucking went Lela pushing carts that outweighed her.

It’s absolute bullshit, but again, Lela’s not allowed to say a goddamn word about it. Mr. Owens is holding that pink slip in his hand every time Lela glares at him with murder in her eyes. A pink slip that will get sent straight to HR who will call her in and most definitely suspend her for whoever long they see fit with absolutely no pay. If Lela makes so much as a passing fucking comment, it gets scribbled on the back of that pink slip to add to the mountain of shit she’s cooped up for herself.

So, like she said, it’s bullshit but she can’t say shit about it.

Today’s probably no different from the day before, except that’s kind of the problem. It’s been three weeks since Lela took off from work to deal with Tony’s dumb ass; that means it’s been three weeks of Lela being given the shit end of every stick pushed into her face. Three weeks of being barred from the main tower to work on posts on the far ends of the entire compound. Three weeks of using up every lunch break she’s got to run to the main tower, track Tony’s dumbass down, and make sure the fucker is adequately feeding himself and sleeping. Three weeks of having absolutely no days off and stressed the fuck out.

Around the time she’s supposed to be gathering her shit to clock the fuck out, she gets called to run down to building J’s underground branches; Lela’s pretty fucking certain it’s for nothing good. Nothing but fucking gross monstrosities came from building J. Some kind of college program was being run out of there. Genetically altered food usually led to mind numbing messes. Gritting her teeth so hard her temples fucking ache with the pressure of it, Lela grabs her cart and wheels her ass there.

The night manager—Mr. Clark, but Call me Gary—was a chill ass dude. He didn’t ask much from her except punctuality and a decent work ethic. She doesn’t actually have to run to get to where he’s asking her to go, because Gary’s a nice dude, he understands what long hours can do to one’s knees. In all, Gary was an older Gamma man, dark skinned and more white in his curly hair than dark. He was a nice enough man, always smiled whenever Lela groaned about the suits—because that’s what Gary called the official Stark Office employees—and the shit they left behind. Lela gets along with him well enough, likes him enough not to hold anything against him when inevitably he has to report back to Mr. Owens about everything.

It wasn’t after all, Gary’s fault that Mr. Owens checked the surveillance feeds.

Either way, Lela pushes her cart faster and makes it to building J from the last security out post on the opposite side of the compound in less than twenty-five minutes. Three pairs of sheepish faces greet here when she swipes her badge and pushes her cart into the proper lower level.

Some kind of college kid, all long limbs, soft shimmering long brown hair, and stinking of Beta regret, steps towards her as Lela tries to wrangle her panting breath under control.

“H-Hey,” the girl starts off with. Her big brown eyes looking all kinds of sheepish and embarrassed, “We, uh, we kind of had an accident.”

There was no kind of about it. Every square inch of the damn lab room they were in was covered in pinkish red goo. The kind of which dripped ugly and thick. Lela could spot some of it slowly leaking from the ceiling. The whole of it reminds her of that weird ass movie Lela used to watch when she was younger and going through her stoner phase. The Thing.
“I can see that,” Lela drolls as she leaned her stomach against her admittedly taller cart.

The one she’d long ago laid claim to was given to someone else. The one a certain slate eyed gorgeous motherfucker had fixed up for her taken away to be replaced by an older shitter model.

Mr. Owens, it seemed, was the king of pettiness.

“It was an accident,” the Beta girl tells her as she rang her fingers in her hands. She’s shifting her weight from one red clad converse foot to the other.

“If Brian here had just listened about not hiring the dosage, on test subject E-12 we’d have been fine,” A lanky glasses wearing gamma grits out through tightly clenched teeth. His deep coca features shifting into that of deep aggravation.

The one Lela assumes is called Brian makes a disgruntled noise as he slipped his goggles over his pink goop splattered face to glare at the lanky glasses wearing kid. Gamma growls are leaving his throat as he flashed his fangs and declared, “I was working on a theory Adam.”

“You aren’t at liberty to just do what you want, theory or not,” Adam—Lela figures—bites out through an annoyed expression, “We’re trying to—“

Issuing a tentative Beta Bark, the brown haired girl tries to reign in her lab buddies. The sound does absolutely nothing as the two kids start to lay into one another. Insults—beautifully strung together with A-Class wording—just gets louder and louder. It starts to grate on Lela’s nerves the longer she has to stand there and listen to it.

So before she knows it, a growl, deep and ugly, spills from her parted lips. It breaks the growing argument right in half. By the time it tapers off, the room is entirely silent. The only sound that can be heard is the drip drop of goop falling from the ceiling.

Only when she’s sure that no ones about to fucking start talking, Lela says as calmly as she can manage, “Look, pendejos, I don’t give a fuck about the who and the why’s. Y’all called me in to clean, so either get the fuck outta my way so I can do it or I can just leave y’all the shit to clean it up with.”

“Uh, no, I,” the beta girl starts only to stutter and stop. She has to physically pull herself up before she finishes off with a firm twist of her lips, “We’ll get out of your way.”

Trying for polite, Lela falls just short of sarcastic as she said with a pained smile, “Thanks.”

After that, the beta and her two gammas go skittering out of the lab door like spooked alley cats. The hostility they’d shared for one another bleeding out as they banded together to pass Lela on their way. It takes less than five minutes for Lela to be left alone with the horror show that was the room.

Biting back all of the worst kinds of vulgarities she knows by heart, Lela grabs her mop and attempts to clean the shit up.

It’s somewhere along Lela’s with or sixth attempt to clean the shit up when she realizes there’s no way to do it. With an angry growl on her lips, she tosses down her mop and glares at the whole of the room. Willing it, by gaze alone, to catch flame. Leaning up her temporary cart, Lela’s just about to fucking call it quits when she spots the saw dust bucket reserved for puke. Figuring it can’t hurt, she grabs it and sets to start sprinkling it on a small pile beside her booted feet.

The fucking shit works, it dries right up. Lela almost fucking cheers as a triumphant grin spreads across her lips. Grabbing the bucket she goes around spreading it until most of the shit is covered up. When the bucket runs dry Lela is suddenly struck with the fucking problem of scooping it up.
Irritation flares ugly and bright in her chest over it because, of fucking course, a simple clean up job has to get all kinds of difficult this late into her shift.

Lips pursed, Lela grips the lid of the empty bucket in her left while she placed her right hand on her hip and called out, “Hey J?”

Yes ma’am?

“Tony got any shovels lying around?” Lela asks.

Yes, they are currently being held in building H.

Nodding to herself, Lela dumps the bucket back into her cart and heads out.

It takes a little over thirty minutes for her to track down the right level and fucking room those elusive shovels are in. When she finds them they’re locked up tight in some kind of kennel. The lock on the door isn’t electronic but a simple pad lock. And of fucking course the only guy with the key is out for the night—Lela had asked Jarvis. Snarling at the lock in her hand Lela contemplates fucking just not going back to building J at all. She’s seriously thinking about just leaving the shit for someone else to deal with. But then she remembers that pink slip sitting on Mr. Owens desk and she knows it’s not an actual fucking option.

Gritting her teeth tight, Lela yanks fruitlessly at the lock and thinks about breaking it.

“Yo J.”

Yes ma’am.

“How much shit will I get into if I break this fucking lock?” Lela asks as she leaned her head against the square lined fence.

Well that depends ma’am.

“On what?”

On who finds out ma’am.

It’s such a Tony like response that Lela can’t help the laugh that bubbles right out of her. Tipping her head back to grin wide and wicked at the ceiling, Lela huffs out a laugh and says to the magic man in the ceiling, “You are an actual fucking god J.”

I do what I can.

Licking her lips, Lela kicks at the cage with her left before turning around the room trying to spot anything to break the damnable lock before her. She spends about ten minutes doing just that before she finally figures she isn’t about to find anything in here. Right around the time she’s about to accept defeat Lela is struck with the sudden brilliant idea.

The last time she’d been in a certain garage she’d spotted a simple pair of bolt cutters. Something like anxiety and excitement twirl up tight in her belly as Lela recalls the last time she’d been in there and with who. She hasn’t been avoiding building D, not at all, she’s just been reassigned. Sure she’d been all kinds of bummed and simultaneously relieved at the knowledge, but, she wasn’t avoiding him. Not at all.

Especially considering their last parting words. Lela’s just been reassigned.
Glancing at the digital clock embedded into the wall on the far right of the room, she spots the time. The electric blue digits read back to her: 4:05. Lela figures, the odds of her running into him at this late hour are pretty slim. So she grits her teeth and forces herself into motion.

When she arrives at building D, Lela’s running on fucking fumes. She’s genuinely considering just taking the fucking suspension by the ugly throb of her feet alone. Because sure, this gig was good—paid fucking sweet—but this was just too much. Lela’s all kinds of tired and hungry as she moved. Her head aches in a way she hasn’t felt for a very long time now. The joints in her jaw ache where she’s been consistently gritting her teeth all day long. Her eyes burn where all she wants to do is lay the fuck down and pass out cold.

All she wants to do, in that moment, is find those fucking bolt cutters, break into that cage and pull out a shovel, clean up that mess in building J and go the fuck to sleep. Fuck eating, she’ll eat when she’s fucking dead. Mindlessly, Lela pushes the familiar door open and just…

Music greets her first. It’s nothing Lela can name readily, but, it’s all kinds of old school bluesy rock. It’s entirely James that Lela just freezes on the spot. The door behind her swings shut loud and obtrusive against the soft thrum of sad music. Her head jerks up so fast sh thinks she hears a few spots pop.

Like they’ve been magnetized to spot the exact location in which James could and would be, Lela spots him by a large work truck. He’s crouched down low, sitting on the heels of his big boots, and looking up at her with a mix of wild surprise and something else. His hair is loose—falling down to frame his gorgeous face like soft down—and making it so he looks all kinds of fucking beautiful. His eyes—dark and stormy like the sky before a big rainfall—pin her down and suck the air right out of her lungs.

“He…Hey,” Lela says by way of greeting. It comes out sounding at least two shades shy of breathless.

“Lela,” James calls out. His deep rumbling voice pulling at the four little letters of her name until it sounds completely different on his tongue.

The sound of it makes strange type of shivers race up and down her spine. Lela has to physically suppress a round of shivers she gets on account of it.

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela awkwardly shuffles her way into the garage. Her eyes trained on the alpha before her. Only when she’s standing in the middle of the whole garage room does she go on to say, “Didn’t think I’d find you here, it being so late and all.”

Tipping his head to the side, his waterfalls of brown hair fluttering all around him, James hesitantly states, “I work late.”

A weird little expression falls on his face as he continues to look at her with those storming eyes. He looks like…like he’s not sure if his presence is making Lela uncomfortable. Like, he’s about two seconds away from bolting if it is.

It makes Lela’s belly seize up with something she can’t readily explain or name. Scrubbing at the back of her neck, Lela nods and offers, “Yeah? Me too.”

“I thought you worked the day shifts?” James asked as he lifted the tire before him and placed it back into it’s proper spot. He’s working on lazily screwing the bolts back while his eyes trail over to her every two seconds.
Issuing a lazy dark laugh, one that is seeped in her own disdain, Lela tells him, “I’m in the proverbial shit house with my manager. He switched me over til I can learn how to not act like a total bitch. Which to be honest, isn’t something I can do. So, I’ll probably be stuck on these long ass shifts till I quit or he fires me.”

“Don’t quit,” James tells her with a firmness in his voice Lela feels down to the marrow of her bones. Something like quiet desperation rings in his eyes for a flash—like lightning through a dark sky—before he forces his gaze back on his working hands.

“I’m not,” Lela says, feels like there’s a reassuring comment on her tongue right before it dies. Because it’s right then that Lela looks down and spots one major difference she should’ve seen the second she spotted James.

His hands…they’re two different shades. One is his normal flesh colored and the other…isn’t. It’s black and cybernetic. Lela can see the way it flows up his entire left arm and finishes off at his shoulder. What with the way James is only wearing a dirty muscle shirt, Lela can see where normal human flesh started and ended.

And like a sharp flash, Lela can tell the moment James realizes she’s spotted it. It being his robotic fucking arm. His whole body goes stiff. Like he’s a wire pulled taut and ready to snap outward or inward. Lela can see the way his soft face grows tense over it. His eyes, dark like storm clouds, grow ever dark and shuttered.

She doesn’t have to be well trained in behavioral tells to know she’s just unknowingly walked over a sore spot for the man. Unintentional as it was, Lela feels guilt and something like regret pile high on her chest. It forces away her fatigue and makes her feel painfully wide awake. She feels like an asshole despite having not done a single fucking thing.

Because there was James, tight as a wire, stiff as a carved statue, waiting for her to jam her fingers through a scar he isn’t ready to have touched. His pink lips—usually offering her some kind of soft smile—are down turned and tight. He’s still crouched down like he’s got to hold that tire in place despite having screwed in those bolts. The crowbar he needs stills lies off to his right untouched. He hasn’t made a go for it like he’s worrying over making one wrong move. Like he’s worried if he moves too fast she’ll bolt like she’s some kind of doe.

It’s an ugly thing to see. An ugly thing to watch James—beautifully gorgeous James, and all his of dazzling white smiles—be reduced to. And it’s in that, that Lela decides to do something about it.

Gritting her teeth, Lela heaves out a heavy breath through her clenched teeth and forces herself into motion.

Steps clear and firm, she walks over to him and grabs the crowbar he hasn’t touched. Before she can really put any kind of thought into it, Lela shoves the arms of her stolen black long sleeve until her arms and all their ugly scars are revealed. Track marks, torn up and scarred over pink and hideous, are bared to the florescent bright lights hanging overhead. She figures, the only way to put someone at ease when their scars were sitting in the wide open, are to show some of her own.

When she’s got it in her hand she shoves it into James line of vision and waits. It’s probably less than ten seconds but it feels like an eternity stretched out before James carefully takes the offered tool from her hand. He takes it with his otherworldly black arm. Lela only lets go when it’s clear he’s got a firm handle on it.

Hands empty, Lela leans up against the truck despite it being held up on a jack. She’s got a burning itch to smoke; a problem she knows she can fix on the long walk back to building J. But Lela feels
like if she leaves now, especially on account of how quiet James has gotten, she’ll fuck something right up. Exactly what that is, Lela has no fucking clue. Only that she feels it swirl around her brain hard enough that she stays rooted to her spot. The bottom of her boots practically glued to the ground beneath her.

Lela’s got a wicked urge to shove her sleeves back down, to hide all that she’s put into the air, but she forces it down with a bitter kind of savageness. Lela feels the worst type of open vulnerability sitting hot in her chest. Shame and embarrassment war within her to be the top contender. Her fangs stretch out til Lela can feel the sharp ends poking into the delicate inside of her lips. But, for as much as Lela wants to, she doesn’t pull down her sleeves. She leaves them bunched up at her upper arms.

“Are you going to ask?” James questions as he worked to screw the bolts back into place good and proper. He’s got his head bent, his shoulders set, like he’s bracing for the blow she’s about to deliver.

Gritting her teeth at both the words and the sight he makes, Lela bites out harsher than she intends, “Are you?"

“Only if you’re willing to tell,” James rumbles nice and low. Those storming gray eyes cutting over to her with this dark kind of knowledge.

There’s no judgment in his words or his eyes. None that say he’s about to cast any kind of stones. So Lela bites back the acid laced words sitting on her tongue and says as calmly as she’s able, “Heroine.”

It isn’t a lie, but it feels like one on her tongue. Lela pumped more than just tar through her veins. But she isn’t about to lay that out there. Not if she can fucking help it.

“War,” James tells her with just as much bitter casualness as she had used.

And oh, doesn’t that make Lela feel like she’s about two inches tall. There she is putting her scars into the cold light when they mean absolutely jack shit compared to James’. His scars—his whole fucking arm—a thing lost to blood and mayhem. A payment given to a country he fought for. Blood and bone handed over to serve for the greater good. And Lela, Lela was a fucking rat sitting on a rotten three day old burger found in a dumpster.

Her scars were track marks. Lines jaggedly sitting over one another to mark her decent into absolute bullshit. Every scar she’s got she’s given to herself in one form or another. Drugs she’d given herself to hide the ugly truth about her. Drugs she’d used to burn away the worst of her thoughts too. Scars from fights she’d had to get into to keep herself free and clear running through the muck and the grime. She’s got an ugly one running up the length of her left elbow up the meaty side of her upper arm from a bloody fist fight turned dangerous; a token gift given to her from some Beta man who hadn’t wanted to pay the full price and had whipped out a pocket knife to scare her.

This time around, when Lela feels the need to hide her arms away, she does. When the maddening itch to smoke sparks up, Lela pulls her crumbled soft pack from her breast pocket and lights one up. She’s at least halfway through it when she mumbles over the filter:

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

She wasn’t. Honestly. Not that Lela’s ever come across shit like this, but, she knows better than to poke her nose where it just isn’t welcomed. She wouldn’t have asked. She’d have taken it at face value. James was missing an arm. Still didn’t stop him from being drop dead—dangerously—handsome. it didn’t do shit to stop the ugly fluttering of her heart when the man’s smooth deep
baritone laced voice dipped down into her skull.

“Most people do,” James tells her. Something dark swirls in his rolling deep voice. It spills out into the air bitter and deadly. Like James hates the truth of his words and the people that ask.

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela ashes her cig at her feet and tells him with as much conviction as she can summon, “Most people are douchebags. You don’t owe ‘em shit even if they do.”

Because he didn’t. James gave his fucking arm, they could give him the fucking choice to give the where’s what’s and why’s when he damn well chose. If Lela ever met anyone of the fuckers that demanded the origin of that sci-fi looking arm, she’d punch their fucking teeth down into the pit of their damn belly’s. But Lela doesn’t say that. She just pulls harsh drags from her cig until her lungs fill with smoke and snuff out the sentimentality.

Huffing out a laugh that was two parts bitter and one part amusement, James offers her a brittle kind of smile as he glanced up at her, “That they are.”

And like that, the tension on his shoulders breaks. They ease until James is working with a lot less rigid movements and more familiarity. His hands—both of them, regardless of their make—are beautiful when they move with purpose. Lela watches him work through a cloud of smoke billowing from her lips.

“Where’s your cart?” James asks as he released the jack and let the truck down onto it’s own four wheels.

Huffing out a smoke laced heavy sigh, Lela runs a ragged hand over her face and grumbles, “The one you fixed up for me, or the one I’m stuck using now?”

Flashing her a somewhat quizzical expression, James pulls himself up to his insanely tall height and shrugs his right shoulder, “Both?”

“The one you fixed is currently locked up in storage until I’m out of the shit house. The one I’m using now is down in building J’s lower levels.” Lela tells him as she asked her smoke, “Got called up there to deal with some kind of lab experiment gone wrong. Which, is what I came over here for?”

Dark brows pinching over his gorgeous eyes, James stares at her with something that says: Go on, without actually saying it.

Running her tongue over her dry lips, Lela quirks a brow and asks the man point blank, “You got any bolt cutters lying around?”

“Yes,” James nods his head easily before tacking on, “Why do you need bolt cutters.”

“I need a shovel, but they’re locked up. So I’m going to… liberate them.” Lela delicately skirts around the fact that she’s about to break into a locked cage. Lela doesn’t want to know how many more of Mr. Owens rules she’s about to go and break.

A slow smile spreads on James face as he stuffed his hands into his pockets and quirked his head to the side, “You gonna need any help with that?”

And, well, probably not. Lela knows how to use a cut a lock off with a bolt cutter. She knows it only ever requires a bit of elbow grease. So, no, she doesn’t need any help. But her belly twists up tight when she watches that grin of James spread wider and wider. Lela’s never been one to be superstitious or all that mystically inclined, but, she thinks that smile might be steeped in a hell of a
lot of magic.

So without really thinking about it, the words just fly right out of her mouth, “Uh, if you want?”

Smile dazzling enough to fell entire fucking kingdoms, James turns to his tool laden workshop bench and rummages until he finds what he’s looking for. He comes back with the bolt cutters in his robotic black arm. Carefully, he holds it out for her to take. Something like quiet apprehension and frail resignation sit in his eyes as he waits for her. Like, he’s half expecting Lela not to.

Pulling one final drag off her cig, Lela drops it down to the floor and stubs it out with the toe of her left boot. Through a mouthful of smoke, she grips the bolt cutters and jerks her head to the building entrance, “We’ll probably get into some shit over it, breaking company rules and shit, you down for that?”

So far, Lela’s not met a single Stark employee that was willing to jeopardize their current employment here. They’d rather eat hot coals than step a foot out of line. So Lela’s seriously doubting James is about to go along with her. She’s half expecting him to chicken out, or something.

Huffing out a soft laugh that rumbled all the way down Lela’s spine, James grins and tells her as he followed her out, “Never been much of a fan for rules doll.”

And it’s less what James rather, how he says it, that makes Lela’s heart skip a beat. The way he’d tacked on that little pet name at the end like it wasn’t at all a tired worn out thing that makes Lela fucking burn. She feels something wild spill hot and needy into her chest. It’s stupid but she goes all fucking breathless over it. Because, she’s been called a lot in her lifetime, but never that. Lela thinks, if anyone else had said it, she’d have lashed out and punched them square in the mouth.

She wasn’t anyone’s fucking doll.

But James said it and…and that makes her go gooey inside.

Ignoring the lurch in her chest, Lela issues a ragged laugh as she placed the bolt cutters on her right shoulder and asked, “Yeah? You some kind of hell raiser James?”

the thought of James—hot as fuck as he was—having some kind of bad streak was all kinds of lust inducing. But Lela shoves that down as far as she’s able to.

“You could say that,” James tosses from a half or so step behind her, “Never met a rule that couldn’t be bent, just a little.”

Grinning, Lela turns her face to him and says honestly, “Yeah?”

“I mean, you can’t tell me you’re not a little bit of a hell raiser yourself. I’m pretty sure punching Alpha’s in the throat’s breaking some kind of rule out there,” James throws back with a shit eating smile spread wide on his face.

The action making him all the more beautiful. Enough so, that Lela’s breath hitches in her throat. Because James looked about 100 times hotter with amusement painted across his gorgeous features.

Running her tongue over her teeth, trying to bite back a smile, Lela shrugs her shoulders as they pushed through Building D’s main exit. Once they’re out in the open night air, Lela says, “Wouldn’t call myself a hell raiser. But I am a shit starter. Never met a situation I couldn’t turn some kind of violent.”

Lela says it like a joke, it rolls easy off her tongue, but it rings true in her ears. Because, yeah, Lela’s
never been able to tame the wildness in her veins long enough to be a decent human being in the past. These days, she’s getting better at biting it back. But there are days when the old beast she was licks at her throat and begs to be let loose and wild.

After that, they grow quiet. Both of them happy enough to simply be walking in companionable silence until they reached where they needed to go.

When they get to building H Lela makes a bee line to where the shovels are being kept and pushes into the room to come face to face with that cage once more. Tilting her head around to make sure the coast was clear, she steps right over and puts the bolt cutters on the lock. The lock fumbles down to the floor easily enough after Lela’s cut it in half. Satisfaction makes a deep rumble spill from her chest as she turned and tossed James the cutters and kicked the door wide open.

Only when she’s got a shovel in her hands does Lela stop and stare at the multiple ones hanging on their respective hooks. As casual as she can summon it up to be, Lela half turns and asks the hulking man just outside of the gate, “You wanna do me a favor?”

Bolt cutters in his left arm, broken lock in his right, James eyes zero in on Lela’s face. Without an ounce of hesitation, he says, “Yes.”

“Yes.” Lela mumbles as she grabbed an extra shovel and dumped them into a large waste bin that was empty. Gripping the plastic handle, Lela drags the blue bin out and tells the man, “The shit I gotta clean up ain’t a one man job. You down to help me out?”

Without a word, James grabs hold of the bin and hefts it up as he told her with a small smile, “Of course, doll. Just tell me what you need me to do and I’ll get it done.”

Ignoring the pet name again, Lela just nods her head and walks past him as she warned him, “It ain’t gonna be pretty. Don’t know what kind of freak show they’re running down there. But it looks like someone blew the fuck up. You’re not, like…squeamish, or anything right?”

Laughing, James follows her out again, a half step behind her like he’s determined to keep himself as close as possible while still giving her ample breathing room, “Haven’t been for a long while.”

Flashing him a dubious look, Lela tries her hand at keeping a normal conversation going. She tells him with a small smile, “You don’t gotta front man. Just cuz you’re an alpha with a weak stomach aint gonna make me think any less of you.”

Which was true. James could probably kick a puppy—not that he would, the fucker looked too nice to do that—and Lela would sit there wondering what the puppy did wrong.

Barking out a smooth rumbling laugh—like thunder rolling through the sky—James eventually says through his deep chuckles, “Hey, c’mon doll, let me try to impress you.”

This time around it’s Lela that laughs because, shit, James could literally do anything and Lela would think it was world news worthy. Watching him change a tire had made her head fill up with a red hazy lustful cloud. But it’s as her laughter is trailing off that his words hit her in their entirety.

“Why do’ya wanna impress me?” Lela asks as they made their way into building J with a flash of her badge.

Something strange wraps itself tight around her chest, squeezes until she can feel a queer little pressure in her throat. The very idea of someone like James—anyone really—wanting to impress her dumbass, well, it makes something slither in her hindbrain. Makes her want to roll her neck to the side and issue some kind of noise over it. It makes her want to puff out her chest and fucking...preen
over the fact. That an alpha—one as otherworldly mind bendingly hot as James—was trailing after her trying to impress her, has her head swirling all topsy turvey.

“I gotta sell you on the idea of me if I’m ever gonna get that date,” James tells her with a smooth heart breaking grin.

And oh, doesn’t that stop Lela dead in her tracks. If not for the man’s quick reflexes, Lela would’ve crashed into the bin he carried with him. With her body shock still, Lela eyes him with her eyes narrowed. It takes her a full minute to work up the words from over the lump in her throat. When she does, they come out jagged and clipped.

“What, you were serious about that?”

“About the date? Or me trying to impress you?” James asks as he settled the bin between his booted feet. His eyes—beautiful and dangerous—stay trained on her own. They don’t waver or fault when he firmly announces, “I’m serious about both.”

“Why?” Lela asks but it comes out sounding like a demand.

She can feel a strange wave of anxiety rush over her that even her bonds rile up over it. The thought of James wanting to take her out on a date—good and proper—makes her feel a wild mixture of excitement and dread.

Looking like he’s trying to work up the courage for what he’s about to say, James shrugs his shoulders and simply says, “Because I want to.”

“I’m not…” Lela starts to say but finds herself to be four different types of breathless as she tried to explain why that just couldn’t happen, “I’m not the kind of girl people take on dates.”

“Why?” James asks, his lips twisting into a dissatisfied frown. Like he didn’t like the words she’s just said at all. Like he’s about to tell her all the reasons people should be taking her out at all. Like he’s ready to search out the person that’s told her that at all and put his fist through their mouth. Like… like he wants to say more but is keeping himself quiet.

Because she’s dirty. Because, she’s a fucking mongrel stray dog that’s been given a loose bath in the rain. Because, she’s got enough scars lining her body to make the toughest men blanch. Because, the only time anyone touched her willingly, was because they had no other choice and they were paying for it already. Because, she’s used her body in ways most people wouldn’t dream of ever doing. Because…because she’s that fucking dynamic and people didn’t take omegas out on dates. They just staked claims over them and pushed them down until they got what they wanted.

Lela’s got a whole list on why. She can feel them fill up her mouth like stomach bile. Burning up her throat and stinging at her tongue. But when she opens her mouth not a single word actually comes forth. She’s standing there, staring up at seven long feet of muscled marvelous beauty and gaping.

There’s a certain part of her that doesn’t want to tell James why he shouldn’t take her out. She doesn’t want him to know what she’s done, where she’s been, what she was. She doesn’t want him to look at her like that. She doesn’t want him to think of her as less. she wants to keep that soft smile on his lips whenever he looked at her. There’s a part of her that is…afraid of what’ll happen if she tells him all the reasons as to why. And it’s in that fear that the words stayed locked up in her throat. Burning a damn hole through her flesh until they slipped back into the pit of her belly.

Eventually, Lela just says, “Because…have you seen you? and have you seen me?”

She doesn’t mean for it to sound as self deprecating as it does. But Lela can’t find any other way to
say it. Her self hate is thick on her tongue. It coats her words until it practically drips onto the floor like the mess she’d first walked into in Building J.

Face pulled firm, eyes unwavering, James lets his eyes roam over her face for a moment before settling back onto her eyes. There is no ounce—not even a drop—of hesitation as he declares, “I have, and I would very much like to take you out on a date. If you’d let me.”

And maybe it’s the words, or the heated look burning in James eyes, or maybe it’s all of it. But Lela feels her whole face catch fire. She feels her ears burn with it. Her chest pulls tight like someones wrapped a belt around it and notched it to it’s last fucking hole. She feels her hindbrain surge forward. Her head feels all kinds of loose on her neck. Her mind goes weird, her second nature rushing forward, trying to snatch the offer out of the air with it’s dirty grimy, black clawed talons. Her heart stumbles in it’s fast paced rhythm before kicking itself back into an ungodly speed.

Running her tongue over her suddenly dry lips, Lela goes for cool calm but ends up sounding just as riled as she feels, “Wha—Seriously?”

“Yes,” James resolutely tells her as he picked the bin back up and made to follow her despite the fact that Lela was glued to her spot.

Why? Lela wants to demand of him some more. She wants to fucking rip out the reason from his fucking chest. What did he see in her that made him want anything from her. Lela was…well, let’s be honest, she’s not a looker. Never has been. She’s stick thin, a mop probably had a better feminine figure than she did, she’s got nothing to pull in the attention of an Alpha like James. She’s short, dark haired, dark eyed, and brown like wet earth. She’s got none of the beauty that lined the covers of magazines. She’s not funny, she’s not smart, and she’s got shit for charisma.

So why, fucking why, did James want anything from her?

As if reading all of her thoughts on her face, James offers her a small smile that is as delicate as only he could make them look, and says, “There’s not a thing I’ve seen from you that I don’t like doll, you just let me know when you’re up for that date, yeah?”

Swallowing a sudden lump lodged in her throat, Lela shakes her head and turns on her heel. She keeps all her scattered thoughts to herself. She beats them down with a nail riddled bat until to go quiet. She forces down James words until she can barely hear the hum of them. But they prickle underneath the surface, like they’re lined in needle sharp spikes.

When they reach the lab room, Lela doesn’t say anything. She just pushes the door open and walks in. When she turns to grab a shovel out of the bin he carries, she doesn’t dare look up into his face. Half scared that the conversation they left alone in the halls of this building will be picked up yet again. Instead, she tries to focus on the task at hand.

If James minds the silence, he doesn’t say. He just follows her lead. He grabs the second shovel and starts scooping the dry clumps up and depositing them into the bin just like her.

It takes a solid two hours for the job to be done. By that time, Lela is uncomfortably sweaty and still all kinds of fucked up from the conversation they’d had. When she’s sliding her cleaning products back onto her current cart. James rounds the large table he’d been wiping up, rag in hand, and comes to the cart too.

He’s wearing a strange kind of expression on his face as he looks at her. Like he’s got some kind of apology lining his tongue. Like he’s sorry for putting her in an awkward situation over the whole thing. Something like self loathing sits in his eyes. Like he thinks Lela’s hesitation stems fro
something about him.

And it’s in that expression that Lela is hit with a wave of guilt. Something in her coils up tight and twists itself over. She’s heard tale, once, that sometimes in dogs that their stomachs could physically twist over. Lela wonders if that’s what she’s feeling because she feels an ugly pain in the pit of her stomach when she thinks about James feeling any bad way about himself over her.

Gritting her teeth, Lela runs a ragged hand over her face and tells the man, “I’m not… I’m not good James. You don’t wanna… you don’t wanna get too close to me. I have, like, a bad habit of fucking up anything I touch.”

Lela hates how true the words are. James deserved the best kind of things. His smile was meant to be treasured. His gorgeously sad eyes deserved to be held in gentle clean hands. His body was meant to be worshipped by someone who’s knees weren’t caked in fucking shit. James didn’t deserve to get tangled up in Lela’s jagged barb wire messes.

When she looks up from her cart and over to the beautiful man before her, Lela is almost fucking winded by what she sees sitting on his face. Gone is that twisted up expression of guilt. Now what he wears is something like stony determination. His beautiful face is pulled like he’s about ready to walk through a minefield just cause she’s on the other side of it. Like, he knows for a fact that he’ll do it and come out in one piece.

Carefully slow, James brings up his robotic arms and flexes his onyx colored fingers. Lela watches in quiet awe, how the individual plates shift and whirl around for the casual movement.

“I’m not good either Lela,” James admits in a quiet low voice. There’s a wells worth of pain seeped into his words as his eyes grew dark and gloomy, “I’ve done some… bad things in my life. I’ve got enough on my name that I know where I’m headed when I get buried down low.”

For whatever reason, Lela feels her breath hitch and then stall. She’s holding onto an out take of breath like she’s readying herself for a blow that was whizzing through the air.

“A friend once told me,” James tells her as he met her eyes with his own, “We don’t gotta be the monster the world created. We can put our demons down. We can walk away if we want. Whatever it is that’s keeping you from giving life a second try, you should let it down.”

And Lela… Lela doesn’t know what she’s supposed to say to that. She doesn’t know what kind of words she could string together to tell him he’s not the problem, she is. That if anyone deserved second chances at life, it was him. Lela doesn’t know what to say so she just stands there staring up into those beautiful eyes until her neck aches from the insane height difference.

Turning so he can pick up the full bin of scientific goop, James hefts it up into his arms like it weighs less than a paper weight. He’s walking towards the door when he stills and flashes her an honest and open smile. Eyes that wonderful shade of slate Lela’s come to be haunted by, James tells her smoothly and invitingly, “You know where to find me if you’re ever up to picking up that date. Offers always on the table.”

With that, he leaves. The door closes behind him with a quiet whoosh.

For a long while, Lela just stares at the spot where he’d once been. His words are ringing in her head like a church bell in the middle of the dead night. Lela doesn’t think she’s worthy of a second try, but damn if she doesn’t want it. She can feel a wicked kind of heat curl up under her heart and spill out into her veins.
Lela wants, wants so fucking bad, that she can taste it on her tongue. She wants to try, even if it’s to repeat some of her worst mistakes. She wants to run her fingers through those brown luscious locks. She wants to feel the softness of those pink lips. She wants to see how light those gray eyes can get. Lela wants… she wants James.

Pulling in a breath she’d been denying herself, Lela gulps until her head swims with it. Her heart is rabbiting out of her chest as she stands there clenching and unclenching her hands into fists. A restlessness crashes into her that Lela feels likes she’s about to vibrate right out of her skin. Grinding her teeth together so hard she can feel a dull ache in her temples Lela forces herself to be brave.

She’s tired—so very fucking tried—of being a goddamn coward.

“Hey J?” she calls out into the open empty room.

‘Yes ma’am?’

“Can you… can you put in a personal day for Sunday?” Lela asks, feeling dread build up in the pit of her belly.

‘Your request as been recorded, would that be all ma’am?’

Going for the door, Lela pulls it open and stalls in the empty hall. Her eyes roam but come up empty so she asks, “You know where he went?”

‘Yes, he’s currently making his way out of the building.’ and then because Lela’s sure Tony had a hell of a hand putting his own personality into the damn magic man, Jarvis goes on to say, ‘If you hurry, I have no doubt you’ll catch him.’

Pursing her lips up tight Lela rushes towards the open elevator waiting for her. The whole ride up her mind is scrambling to find any kind of excuse to not do what she’s about to do. She’s got a hell of a lot of reasons to just not. But then they’re all eclipsed by the sheer want that keeps building in her belly.

By the time she makes it out of the building’s side exit, she spots James hulking figure walking through the illuminated concrete path walk. He’s carrying the bin with ease as he goes. Lela has, in no way shape or form, run but she feels breathless as she enters the cool early morning air. Her blood is pumping so heard she can feel it in her ear drums. Adrenaline is gushing through her like she’s about to push herself into a fight between a horde of rutting Alphas.

Ignoring the nervousness pushed up into her throat like a stone, Lela pulls in a breath and shouts, “James!”

Stilling in his walk, James turns to her easily. when he spots her, he backtracks until he meets Lela halfway, “What happened?”

“You…” Lela starts only to fail as she takes in his worry filled face. Feeling her heart fluttering in her chest, Lela has to pull her body up to it’s fullest height and widen her feet below her like she’s readying to meet someone in a fight. Shoving her left hand into her pant pockets and using her right to rub at the back of her neck, Lela wills herself to grow a pair and asks, “You got any plans for this Sunday?”

Dark brows pinching over his eyes, James simply says, “No, why?”

Feeling like she’s about to barf up an empty stomach, Lela rolls her lips between her teeth and asks, “You wanna, like, go out? Or something?”
A cold kind of sweat lines Lela’s palms as she waits for his answer. She’s got painful regret sitting sharp on her chest. Telling her she’s a goddamn idiot for asking and telling her that she’s about to do the dumbest thing to date. An urge, bone deep, to run sparks up in her.

Painfully slow, the tension filled furrow between his brows undoes itself. A sweet smile, bright as the fucking full moon on a dark night, James looks down at her like she’s handed him the world on a silver platter. Readjusting the bin he carries, James shrugs his shoulders and tells her, “Yes.”

Stuffing her remaining hand into her other pant pocket, Lela nods her head and goes for casual despite the way she feels like shrinking underneath a gaze like that, “Cool, I’ll, uh, I’ll see you then, yeah?”

Smiling wide enough to split his face in half, James looks at her with a mixture of amusement and warm fondness. He nods once before saying, “See you then doll.”

Kicking her foot out at some stray rock, Lela nods but says nothing else as she take two steps backward. Her hands don’t shake as she pulls her pack of smokes out and lights one up, but it’s a damn near thing. She hides the stupid smile that threatens to engulf her face behind the smoke she’s pulling in. Nodding her head, Lela turns to walk away and refuses to look back until she’s back at Building J’s door. When she turns to flick her cig away she spots James exactly where she’d left him.

the sight of him still standing there, watching her, makes her heart rumble faster in her chest. Something ugly and entirely too fucking fragile twirls in her until Lela feels fucking high on it. Pulling in a last desperate drag, she flicks her cig on the ground and stubs it out. When she pulls the door open, she’s still got her eyes on James because there’s no way in hell she can look anywhere else when he’s still smiling that wide and pretty.

The door closes on his face and all Lela can do is pull ragged breathes into her lungs until the wild adrenaline she’s got burns out. She’s leaning her head on the cool metal surface of the door before Lela finally lets that smile slip onto her parted lips. Pinching her eyes tight, Lela fucking wills her heart to calm because it’s a date. Just a fucking date. There’s no need for her to have a full blown fucking spastic attack over it.

It’s a date. With James. Nothing for her to be freaking the fuck out about.

Only, she is. She’s freaking the fuck out. Pulling her bottom lip between her fanged teeth, Lela bites down hard enough to almost spill blood. Thumping her head against the metal door, Lela is reminded, yet again, that she was absolutely shit at making choices for herself.

But then, that wonderful smile—brighter than the moon and equally as magnificent—pops up into her mind. The smile James had given her just a few seconds ago. That smile…it makes her tangled up messy mind go mushy. Grounding her forehead against the door, Lela growls at herself and forces her way back to where she’d left that cart. She ignores the way her hands shake and the way her bonds desperately reach out to calm her. She pulls those bonds to her chest and reassures them that she’s fine—as well as she could be—while probably making a horrible decision.

When she’s halfway up to the lab room, Jarvis calls out to her, ‘Miss Lela?’

“Y-Yeah?” Lela answers, breathless and unsteady.

‘Your shift is officially over.’

And thank fuck, because Lela’s about ready to fall down on her ass with what she’s just done.
Nodding her head she gathers up her cart and trucks it back to the main tower. She puts it back into storage and clocks the fuck out without staying to let anyone know she’s leaving. If Mr. Owens is around, Lela’s not about to fucking deal with his ass. Not right now. Not after she’s fucking put her foot in her fucking mouth. Not after she’s just asked the worlds hottest alpha on a fucking date.

Only when she’s collected her leather jacket and is out on the city streets, cigarette pinched between her teeth, Lela is struck with the uncomfortable thought of what she’s going to tell her pack mates.

“Fuck,” Lela hisses like she’s been burned. The growl that leaves her throat is ugly enough to send a gaggle of preteen beta’s scurrying away from her. The flutter of their catholic school girl outfits dancing away.

Lela knows for a damn fact, Sam will be nothing but supportive. He’ll probably want to squirrel out info about James, but he won’t stand in Lela’s way. Clint…Lela’s pretty sure he might want to invite himself into the date. An unofficial/very official chaperone who will probably try to keep everything as awkward as humanly possible. Natasha….Natasha, fuck, Lela doesn’t even want to know what Natasha will do. The red haired demoness was a fucking wild card.

Gritting her teeth, Lela forgoes the bus she usually caught back to the hotel and decides to walk the whole way. Her feet will probably kill her, but its a nice distraction against the current dilemma she’s brought onto herself.

Lela really was the worst possible person elected to run her own life.

---

Chapter End Notes

You guys
YOU GUUYYYYYYSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS
I have been writing this chapter out on my lunch breaks and anytime I come home and my arms don't shake. I hope you guys liked it. The flow just doesn't feel right. But I'm tired of re-reading it over and over again as I try to add more. So I'm posting it for you guys that are waiting around for it. I really hope you guys liked it.
tony my blessed child, Lela was a mean kid. But honestly, what do we expect from her at this point. SMH. But she's trying my dudes. She's just shit at being a person.

Bucky. Oh my god. I love writing bucky scenes but in between Lela's shit communication and Bucky's awkwardness, it's a fucking burden yo. Hope you guys don't hate it.

As always, Thank you a billion to those of you who read this messy brain child of mine. Please feel free to drop a comment down below to let me know what you think!
If any of y'all have any kind of clue on where I should take the next chapter please feel free to say so. I'm dead ass serious when I say I'm open to fucking suggestions.
Love you guys to the moon and back!!
-Ani
The More the Merrier, right?

Chapter Summary

This time around—with experience under her belt—Lela knows exactly what she’s done and who she’s done it with.
A bond.
A fourth fucking bond.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She’s tired. So bone achingly, spine bendingly, heart sinkingly, tired. She feels it down to the very core of who she is. It seeps into her flesh and makes it so she feels like she’s a little drunk despite being painstakingly sober. She should be sleeping right now, considering she’s got to go in at five to cover a shift someone was bailing on, but she isn’t. Not at all.

She’s not because Clint had come bounding onto the bedroom and woken her by jumping up and down upon the bed she’d been sleeping on. ‘Pack Brunch!’ he’d declared with a wide smile. The silk ribbon wrapped around her chest had practically danced with the excitement he’d been overrun with. And while there was few things Lela indulged in besides sleeping, she couldn’t tell the man to fuck off. Not when his eyes had glowed honey bright and his freckled face had been split like that into a grin. She’d pulled her tired ass out of bed gotten a shower to wake herself up and gotten dressed. She’d followed them three out of the suite half dead on her feet.

“We can…always go back to the hotel if you’re not up for it, babe,” Clint tells her from where she’s half plastered onto his side.

Touch, it seemed, was coming naturally to her. If she didn’t find herself reaching for one of them, Lela found she was already somehow holding onto them. Her greedy little hands grabbing them or brushing over them. Her hindbrain, the obstinate fuck, always settled itself at the brief contact.

Pursing her lips, Lela lets a mildly aggravated growl spill from her lips as she glares from behind Natasha’s stolen pair of thick rimmed ray-bans. Gritting her teeth, Lela pulls her head off of Clint’s shoulder and forces herself to sit straight in the booth she found herself in this afternoon. The act shouldn’t be so difficult, but the moment her head is being supported by her own neck, it becomes infinitely heavier.

“I’m fine,” Lela bites out. It’s a lie, one she knows every single one of her pack mates can feel. A lie Lela wills herself to believe because she’s not about to ruin everyones afternoon because she was feeling a little sleepy.

It wasn’t often that they went out for food together, they usually stayed in and cooked for one
another. Or at least, Sam cooked. Because as much as everyone was gung-fucking-ho about Lela eating healthy, there were days when bacon and sausage was fucking required to start the damn day. And if Natasha was left in charge for the meal, they’d all be eating egg whites and some kind of exotic fruit smoothie. To keep Lela from tearing their faces off with her fangs, Sam had started throwing bacon and sausage in her direction.

So, yeah, Lela’s not about to bitch out. Not when the foods just gotten to them nice and steaming.

Plus, she likes being out with them as a whole. She likes when they decide to spend time outside of the hotel room. Pulling her all around town because despite having been there a near year, Lela hasn’t seen much of New York other than it’s back alleys. Lela liked when Sam decide to string them down the culturally thick part of his borough. Lela liked when Clint pulled her along to some little shop that had the best kind of burgers. Lela liked arguing with Red about going into stores to buy herself a whole new wardrobe.

So yeah, she’s tired, but she isn’t going to ruin it for the rest of them.

“You don’t look fine,” Natasha blithely states as she speared her fork through her fruit salad.

“Have you been sleeping,” Sam asks as he placed his coffee cup back onto the table between them all. Worry is etched into his warm brown eyes. Worry heavy enough to tilt the ends of his lips down into a frown.

The flower on her heart trembles with whatever it is Sam’s trying to hold back away from her.

Reaching out to swipe his coffee cup, Lela takes two gulps of the shit before placing it back down with a grimace. For a man as sweet as Sam, he drank his coffee as black and as bitter as humanly possible.

When her mouth is empty of the foul drink, Lela is about to lie that yes, yes she has. But before she can issue the lie, Clint beats her to the punch as if knowing where Lela was trying to take it.

“She’s been working 15 to 12 hour shifts, back to back,” Clint informs the dark skinned beta man. When he’s got a mouthful of bacon does he add on, “So no, she hasn’t been sleeping like she ought to be.”

“You, Chuckles,” Lela starts as she kicked hard at his shin, “Are a no good, goddamn, snitch.”

The gamma man doesn’t even bother to pretend like her hit has hurt him. He just shrugs his shoulders while stuffing his mouth full of greasy food. When Lela’s lips twitch up into a fraction of a snarl, Clint merely grins through his messy chewing.

“Plus,” Natasha starts as she drank from her lemon water glass, “She hasn’t taken a day off in almost a month.”

“Seriously?” Lela demands of the woman. But her voice is hoarse from the fact that she’s running on little more than three hours of solid sleep. So it comes out sounding far more pleading than Lela would like.

“What? Why?” Sam demands. His face growing hard as he pinched his brows and stared straight at Lela. The bond between them swirling hard with his unease and concern over her state of being.

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela picks up her cold coke and lazily drinks from it. She hasn’t told any of them about the bullshit she’s cropped up for herself at work because…well, she doesn’t want to tell them about how fucking ragged she’s being run. If she did, she has no doubt they’d take the issue up
themselves to Tony. And Lela really doesn’t want them to be arguing with the man over her. Because…well…they’ll probably want to blame Tony.

And Tony had little to do over it. The thought of anyone of them going for the Alpha makes her hindbrain slither in distaste. Tony was all kinds of fucked up at the moment. He didn’t need three super heroes knocking down his door because Lela couldn’t hack.

“Schedules changed is all,” Lela smoothly lies as she gripped her fork and pushed around her scrambled eggs. As much as she knows she should eat, Lela’s just not up for it. The thought of so much as chewing makes her want to roll right over and fucking pass out.

“Have you talked to your supervisor?” Sam pushes on, ignoring the flare of irritation that flies down all the bonds from Lela’s end.

Lips twitching into a snarl and then back down, Lela glares at her big breakfast and bites out, “I have this sunday off.”

A sunday she’s probably not going to use for resting considering she only asked for it so she could go on that date she’d gotten tangled up on. But Lela resolutely doesn’t think about that. Because she’s too fucking tired to worry herself half to death over it. She’s not in the right state of mind to be thinking about liquid silver eyes and shoulders the size of mountains. So she ignores the whole thing to be dealt with at a later time.

“Okay, that’s good,” Sam says as he pulled his coffee back to himself and in turn Lela out of her swirling thoughts, “You shouldn’t stretch yourself out so thin. If you’re tired just ask for the day, you’re allowed to rest Lela.”

Mulishly, Lela purses up her lips and offers a tight nod. She doesn’t say anything else on account of how her eyes are starting to dip down again. She’s slumping in her seat again, slipping down low, when Clint clears his throat and directs his words to Natasha and Sam, “Maybe we should wait? She’s dead on her feet.”

“Yeah, maybe we can put it off until sunday,” Sam agrees but still looks over to Natasha who he’s seated beside.

Nose twitching, Lela rumbles a low growl and demands of the conspiring group, “What’re you assholes going on about?”

Munching on a slice of crispy apple, Natasha wobbles her head in a so and so manner before daintily cleaning her lips with a white napkin. Only when her mouth is empty does the red head say, “We actually brought you so that you could give us your opinion on something. But the boys are worried you might be too tired for it.”

Sucking on her teeth, Lela tilts her head to the side and demands with a raise of her brow, “Opinion on what?”

“About a place,” Natasha vaguely states as she picked up her lemon water glass and swirled it around like one of her expensive reds.
Sleepy as she is, tired as she feels herself, Lela is utterly fucking confused. But one look into those glittering green eyes, Lela knows she can’t back down. There’s far too much amusement in those jade orbs for Lela to back away. If Lela were a little more awake, she’d fucking know Natasha was doing it on purpose. Goading her on through a silent challenge in her eyes. To make her go along with the plan that had been set up at the start of this whole fucking meet and eat.

Downing at least half of her drink, Lela drops it back with a forceful clack and declares, “I’m ready when you guys are.”

Not even bothering to hide the fact that she’s thoroughly enjoying the turn of events, Natasha nods her head and grins at the whole of the table. Her smile was all sharp teeth and deadly confidence. If Lela was even a shade or so more awake, she’d have back pedaled. But seeing how she’s fucking delirious from lack of rest, Lela’s got shit for brains.

With a huff that showed all of his reluctance, Clint pops the last of his bacon and eggs into his mouth till his cheeks bulged with it. He looks somewhat like a greedy little chipmunk by the time he’s done. Messily chewing his mouthful, he pulls himself out of the booth and waits for Lela and Sam.

Flashing her a reluctant and hesitant look, Sam opens his mouth and says as compassionate as only he can be, “If you’re not up for it, you can just say so. We don’t have to…”

And there was a time, before, where Lela wouldn’t have hesitated to push all that concern back into their faces. To snap and bite that she was as strong as a raging bull even if she was bleeding out her mouth. These days, not so much. These days, Lela cares way too much how she’s making anyone of them feel. These days, Lela goes out of her way to make sure to be the nicest she’s ever allowed herself to be. These days, it comes easier to just breath and not be an asshole.

Guilt rings like a broken bell in her. The sound bouncing off the hollow emptiness of her chest until it rattles her teeth. Lela knows the only reason why Sam is being difficult about anything is because he cares. He cares about her.

Swallowing down the sudden flare of warmth that threatens to spill into her chest, Lela grips her face beneath the dark shades. She pinches and pulls until the pain of it successfully wakes her and drowns that warmth. Slipping Red’s glasses off her face, Lela lets a heavy sigh fall form her lips, “I’ll be fine Sammy.”

Whether it’s the nickname or her honesty, something knocks loose in Sam’s stern face. Reluctantly, his shoulders lose their tension until he sits in the booth. Like he’s swallowed a mouthful of sand, Sam says, “The bags under your eyes say otherwise.”

Going for a grin but feels the strained nature of it upon her lips, Lela huffs out a laugh and swipes her index finger through the dollop of cool whip on Sam’s half eaten pancakes. Wobbling her head side to side, Lela pops her finger into her mouth just as she slid her glasses back into place. Only when they sit good and proper does she say, “C’mon Sam, my main man, you’re holding up the party here.”

Looking like he’s got a million and one good things to say to pull Lela out of her seat and back to the warmth of her bed, Sam eventually stands up. Those million and one things never leave his lips because Clint is quick to drop his arm over Sam’s shoulders and shake the man with an award winning smile.

“No point fighting it Sammy,” Clint steals the nickname from Lela’s mouth as they both followed her out and over to where Natasha was waiting for them, “When the girls agree, you just gotta keep your mouth shut and follow their lead.”
Snorting out a laugh, Lela tosses over her shoulder at the blonde, “What’re you trying to say Chuckles?”

Face shrugging, the Blonde gamma merely states, “Better to agree with both of you than it is to piss off either one of you.”

“Or worse,” Sam intervenes as he dug his car keys out of his front pockets, “Both of you.”

Swiping her tongue over her smirking lips, Lela asks the two men, “Are you implying something here?”

“It sure does sound like they are,” Natasha pipes up from where she’s standing by the front seat of Sam’s crimson colored Jeep.

“I’m not implying anything!” said Sam with a laughing smile. As he rounds the front end of his car he flashes a white slightly gapped smile and tosses out, “I’m just stating facts, you two have the worst types of tempers known to man.”

“That so?” Natasha drawls nice and slow as a maroon perfectly manicured brow arched in question.

Laughing, Clint pops open the back seat doors and waits for Lela to slide in before he says, “Way to step in it bird-brother.”

Groaning from his own seat Sam starts up the engine as Lela and the rest slide in. As he shifts into drive, Sam mumbles out with a begrudging smile, “Fuckin’ let the bird jokes go man.”

“I’ll let them go when I’m dead,” Clint declared threateningly.

Shaking her head at the blonde, Lela turns her attention to the red head in the passenger seat and asks, “So where we headed to?”

“Brooklyn,” Natasha announces as she tapped at the screen of her fancy looking cellphone.

At that, Lela frowns and pulls asks, “What’s in Brooklyn?”

“It’s a—” Sam starts to say as he turned over the engine and pulled his car into drive. Only he doesn’t get to finish because of the punch Clint gives the back of his seat and the harsh glare Natasha sends his way. Dark eyes meeting hers in the rearview mirror, Sam nervously ducks out of sight and resolutely keeps his eyes on the road ahead of them.

Not so long ago, Lela would’ve seriously had a problem with how vague everyone was deciding on being. Her paranoia would have been pulled into it’s highest gear. She’d have kicked open the car door while it was running and jumped the fuck out. She’d done it a few times before and knew exactly how to curl her body for the impact to leave her with only a few mild bumps and bruises. But today, now, not so much.

Why?

Well, because, Lela trusts them all. She knows they aren’t about to drop her off somewhere unsavory. They weren’t going to hurt her or pull a fast one. They were all decent people who only ever seemed to want the best for her. They cared for her almost as much as Lela cared about them. So she’s got nothing to fear.

And isn’t that a mind fuck. Lela trusts them. She feels the whole of it seep down low into her chest and refuse to budge no matter how hard some of her old instincts argue she shouldn’t trust anyone.
But she does. She trusts them far more than she trusts the fucked up nest in her brain.

Quirking her brow up, Lela leans up to the middle of the front seat and feels a familiar shithead vibe settle into her ribs. Grinning, she asks, “Are you guys gonna take me to some abandoned warehouse in Brooklyn to like…whack me?” at the end of it she’s miming shooting herself in the head.

“What?!” Sam sputters out before hastily adding on, “Lela, seriously? No we’re not luring you to your death here.”

“Hey,” Natasha says from where she’s fiddling with her phone, “Speak for yourself. I’m definitely luring you to your death.”

“Finally pulled that life insurance out on you,” Clint announced from where he sat back lazily, all sprawled limbs, “Pay out’s gonna be huge.”

“Aint it supposed to be unforeseen death, or some shit like that?” Lela questions the beta beside her as she slipped back into her seat and leaned all her weight onto his side.

“Not always, but I can make it look like an accident if that’s what you want,” Natasha muses from the front.

Frowning, Lela takes a moment to think over the offer and then shakes her head, “Nah, if you assholes gotta kill me you do it proper. I wanna look like a real hardcore bitch when they report about it the next day.”

At that, Natasha and Clint both laugh. The redhead sends her a dazzling grin from the front while Clint draped his arm over the back of her head and pulled her closer.

“You guys, are like, seriously messed up in the head,” Sam announces with a small shake of his head as he made a turn. He’s shaking his head like he’s not at all okay with their humor but there’s amusement lining his bond and tipping the ends of his lips up into a smile. So, he’s probably only chastising because he figures he ought to. Like a goddamn stay at home dad who wanted to be firm but just couldn’t hold it together well enough.

“True,” Clint announces with a shit eating smile, “But you’re stuck with us Sammy.”

Shaking his head but with a smile bleeding into his brown eyes, Sam grumbles low, “Lucky me.”

And no, Lela thinks, the lucky one was her. She didn’t deserve them. Not at all. But she’s sure as shit not about to say so out loud and put a damper on the mood. Instead, because she’s all kinds of groggy, Lela floods the bonds she’s got with warmth and appreciation. She lets it bleed out of her hot and all consuming. She can feel the way the steel band on her wrist expands. The silk ribbon wrapped up tight around her chest sinks into her skin until she cannot tell the difference between silk or flesh. The flower on her heart unfolds wide and gorgeous. The brilliant white petals dip with their immense weight.

If any of them have any questions as to what or how Lela’s feeling in that moment, they don’t ask. The bonds between them merely hum in something like happiness. They vibrate so hard that Lela feels her teeth chatter in her head.

Arm draped over her shoulder from Clint, Lela lays her head on his shoulder and lets her eyes droop low. With that warmth coiling up in her chest, her bonds trembling, Lela ends up falling asleep to the quiet murmurs of Sam and Natasha arguing about what turn off they should take.

*~*
When the car stops, somewhere in a fancy part of Brooklyn, that was all apartment buildings and cleanly kept streets, Lela’s somewhat awake. The little nap she was able to squeeze in doing wonders for her energy levels. When they all step out of Sam’s parked car, Lela’s properly confused as to why she’s here at all.

Her confusion must be felt down the length of the bonds because as soon as Sam rounds the front end of his car, he’s all nervous smiles and awkward shuffling. Natasha walks with ease up the steps of the building they’re parked in front of. Clint stands just beside Lela, his arm still wrapped over her shoulders and keeping her close to his side. Like he’s half afraid if he steps away, Lela will sway and fall.

“So,” Sam starts, only to still and falter. His eyes flash fast over Lela’s face as he goes on to ask, “We’re here.”

“Yeah?” Lela drawls, her brows pinching over her eyes as she looked over her bond mates and over to the building before her.

“C’mon,” Clint softly nudges her forward.

With Clint at her side, Sam a step or so before her, and Natasha at the door, they head up and in. Opening the door, like she’s got all the right in the world, Natasha leads them in. They breeze right past an empty front desk and over to a gold painted elevator. When it slides open, they all step inside. Natasha is the one to press the number 9 button on the 1 thru 10 panel.

Stepping out of the elevator, they make their way down a hall filled with exactly two doors. Lela’s about to ask what the hell they’re doing here when Natasha doesn’t go for the gold gilded knob and instead just opens the door like she’s got all the right in the world.

The door swings open without any kind of struggle.

What Lela finds inside is a beautiful home. A large apartment with crimson colored walls and black moldings. An apartment riddled in gold fixings and money dripping off the fancy chandeliers hanging over head. Lela thinks, if vampires existed, this was maybe one of their homes. It had all of that old school gothic vibe with all this era’s modern expense. Lela’s half afraid to step on the rug that leads down the narrow hall in case she ruins it.

Stilling before a large painting with two dancing milk colored babies, Lela turns a confused stare at the group. She opens her mouth to ask where the hell they’re doing here when Natasha doesn’t go for the gold gilded knob and instead just opens the door like she’s got all the right in the world.

The door swings open without any kind of struggle.

What Lela finds inside is a beautiful home. A large apartment with crimson colored walls and black moldings. An apartment riddled in gold fixings and money dripping off the fancy chandeliers hanging over head. Lela thinks, if vampires existed, this was maybe one of their homes. It had all of that old school gothic vibe with all this era’s modern expense. Lela’s half afraid to step on the rug that leads down the narrow hall in case she ruins it.

Stillling before a large painting with two dancing milk colored babies, Lela turns a confused stare at the group. She opens her mouth to ask where the hell they are when Lela catches the familiar tang of an Alpha Musk. Jasmine, Orchids and aged Leather explode on her tongue. Her hindbrain slithers and picks it’s head up at it’s familiarity. Despite all logic, her second nature whirls in pleasure at the thought of that damn alpha being anywhere around.

Lips pulled up into a purse, Lela pulls away from Clint and breaks off from the group. She doesn’t need to know where she’s going to find him, Lela merely follows her nose. She finds him in a kitchen heavily steeped in money filled objects. Lela finds him with his back to her and holding up some kind of stack of color pallets that fanned out like an old hand fan.

“Yo, Tony,” Lela calls out the moment she spots him and enters the empty kitchen.

Smile spreading wide on his face, Tony tosses down the bible thick creation in his hands down onto the counter. Whirling around so he can face her entirely, the Alpha calls out happy and bright, “Hey kid, how’s it going?”

Now, it’s only been three weeks now, but Tony was looking worlds better than when Lela had
found him that one afternoon. He’s got a healthy glow to his skin. His eyes don’t seem so vacant anymore. He’s showered and in a clean two piece get up that probably cost more than Lela’s ever going to see in one lifetime. So he looks good. He’s even got his ridiculous goatee expertly groomed.

The sight of it makes relief flood into Lela’s veins. She’d been trying, as much as she was able to what with the way shit was at work, to keep tabs on the man. Half the time, Lela had to pull into work a whole two hours early to catch the man in his personal labs. It was in that time that Lela made sure to check if the man was sleeping, eating and acting like a reasonable thirty-two year old man. It was half exhausting and half ridiculous. But Lela didn’t complain to the man because, she liked spending time with him and his robot-children.

Still, for all that Tony looks like he’s in a better state of being, he’s got that unmistakable look in his eye. The one that spelled danger and quiet possibly bullshit shenanigans. Lela’s gotten pretty good and being able to sniff that look out of him. To know when he was about to do something utterly fucking dumb that she was forced to intervene for the sake of the entire fucking world.

Lela’s not sure how being a janitor translated into being a personal billionaire care taker, but, here she was. Constantly on the lookout for when Jarvis—because she’d asked him and he was an actual god or saint—would ping her and let her know that Tony was on a downward spiral again.

“Not bad,” Lela starts off with her eyes narrowed in suspicion, “Got woken up too fucking early, had late breakfast with the shitheads, now I’m standing in a weird fucking apartment looking at you.”

“Ah,” is all Tony says to her. His warm brown eyes twisting up as his smile stretched thin and uncomfortable. He looks a touch awkward before it vanishes as he clapped his hands together and rubbed them with a maniacal gleam in his eyes, “Okay, well, lets get this started then.”

Lela’s about to ask what the hell the man means when suddenly, Tony starts firing off information like he’s memorized it for a grand big show.

“So the building you’re currently standing in was built in the mid 50’s. Everything’s up to code, so no need to worry about that. This condo’s got four bedrooms and three baths. It’s got a living room, a kitchen and a dining room. It’s located deep in blue collar suburbia meaning you’re probably gonna be seeing a lot of old folks and soccer moms every morning, but the neighborhood has a record low on crime rates. So it’s a relatively safe place. It’s also got—”

Huffing out a low enough growl to still the man’s words but also not be over looked, Lela waits with her arms crossed until Tony is staring at her before she starts talking.

“What’s any of this gotta do with me?” Lela asks because, really, what the hell did any of what he was saying have to do with her.

Lela’s confused, fucking confused, as to why she’s been driven up to brooklyn on a whim by her pack, to meet Tony, in an apartment designed by some kind of blood drinking rich monster.

“Oh, well,” Tony shrugs his lean shoulders smoothly as his eyes darted behind her to where her merry band of idiots came trailing in. Spotting the redhead among them, Tony easily tosses the baton, “Nat, be a dear, let her know why she’s currently being shown a condo in Brooklyn, of all places.”

Turning to face the redhead, Lela squares her jaw and juts out her hip in waiting. She tries to keep her irritation out of her bonds, but it bleeds into them regardless. In the end, it’s not Red who answers her, but Clint instead.
With a nervous shine in his mostly green eyes, Clint starts with a wobbly smile, “We were thinking, maybe we could get this place for, uh, for you?”

And that, well, that pulls Lela up short. She goes shock still as she looks at Clint and takes in his words.

“What?” the word comes tumbling out of her mouth before she knows she’s saying it.

“I mean, the hotel rooms good and all, but, it’s not exactly…homey,” Clint says, his eyes bleeding his nervousness. His silk ribbon bond twirling itself up into knots around her chest.

Running her tongue over her dry lips, Lela tries to understand what the hell is going on here. There’s a lot she’s come to find out that Natasha, Clint and Sam would be willing to do for her. All at the drop of a hat. From getting late night take out, to just walking the empty streets by moonlight because she can’t sleep on account of how much bullshit sits in her memories. But trying to buy her a place has never once entered her mind as an actual possibility.

“You guys…you wanna buy a house?” Lela tries, her voice coming out all strange and wobbly.

“Only if you…only if you like it,” Clint tells her.

For a long while Lela doesn’t know what she’s supposed to say. Or how she’s supposed to feel about it all. Lela knows, if this had been any other time, on any other day where she was the person that first got sober, she’d have bared her fangs at them. Anger, indignation, fucking shame, would’ve boiled over until she was spitting their offer back into their faces. Because, it would have felt like charity, like fucking pity to her then.

But Lela’s self aware enough to know that it would’ve just been her inability to fucking take anything from anyone no matter their intentions.

Now…now, well, she’s still not sure how she’s supposed to take this. Only that the thought, the fucking mere thought of it all, is making her burn from the inside out in a weird kind of way.

Scrubbing her hand across her face, Lela pushes at her glasses until they sit high on her bridge and hide what she knows might bleed out in her eyes. Though, Lela knows, it probably shows in her bonds. So it’s a pretty lame attempt.

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, Lela waves her left hand at the group before her and says, “You assholes wanna show me around or are we just gonna stand here with our dicks in our hands?”

Barking out a laugh from behind her, Tony moves fast and with purpose until he’s got a hand on the upper part of her back. His touch is oven warm but does nothing to pull any kind of unease from Lela like she knows it had once done. It seemed, after taking him home and feeding him, Tony was the kind to touch like he was starved for it. Affectionate like a fucking stubborn cat.

“I personally, enjoy having my dick—” wherever Tony was about to take that sentence is cut off by the warning growl Sam lets out from behind Natasha. Tony merely laughs as he pulls Lela where he wants.

In a weird kind of tour that was riddled in back handed compliments aimed at the whole of the house, Tony shows her around. He takes her through a series of doors that keep opening up into rooms lined with art and furniture not meant for comfort but expensive presentation. They breeze through the main bedroom that was heavy in it’s BDSM vibes that Lela is instantly creeped the fuck out.
It’s only when they’re standing in the dining room that Tony turns to her and asks, with a weirdly tense smile on his face, “So, whadd’ya think kid?”

Half sprawled in the gold trimmed red plush chair, Lela shrugs her shoulders and stares at the polished surface of the insanely long table in front of her. She knows her pack is just at her back, awaiting the verdict, but can’t find herself to turn to them just yet. She’s got all kinds of fucked up emotions swelling in her chest.

None, Lela bleakly notes, can she readily name.

“Not bad,” Lela mumbles lowly, it’s not a lie—but it feels like one. The place had some serious serial killer vibes on it, but it was nice looking. If Lela looked past all the red and gold.

Looking like he can read all the words Lela won’t say out loud and agreeing with them, Tony nods his head and pulls out his ever present tablet and starts tapping at the screen. He’s not looking at her as he says, “If you don’t like it, I got at least six other places in the general area we can go see. I mean, none of them are great-great, but, they’re not so…you know, white bread.”

Lela’s just about to open her mouth and demand what about this fucking apartment was ‘white bread’ for him when suddenly a thought strikes her. For the first time since she’s spotted him here, Lela suddenly wants to know why Tony’s there.

She’s got a burning suspicion, but she asks anyway, “You found this place?”

“Yes, it was on the list, but not like the top twenty. It doesn’t even have a pool Lela,” Tony admits to her, his brows furrowed and his lips pulled down into a frown. When he opens his frowning lips he says, “Thing One and Thing Two said you wouldn’t want something too flashy. But Honestly, you should’ve seen my other choices. They were way better than this.”

Ignoring the pulse of her second nature behind the tight confines she’s placed it in, Lela demands of him, “Why? I mean, like I get them,” at this she cocks her head to the side to signify the merry band of three and then continues on, “but what’d you get out of doing this?”

Face scrunching up, Tony looks back down at his tablet and lazily clicks at it. A fine kind of tension riddles his shoulders as he offers a small face shrug and declares, “I don’t get anything.”

“Then, why’re you helping?” Lela asks. Because Tony’s not pack to her. Tony’s not bonded to her. He’s got no reason to be involved and yet, he was. There he was clicking at his tablet like he was hunting down better options if Lela really did have a problem with the place.

Lela feels her hindbrain kick and slither. A bone aching need to find the reason as to why filling up her chest. Lela can feel the hammer of her hindbrain in the back of her mind. Like a second heartbeat, it thumped ugly and mean. Wicked and angry in it’s attempt to not be ignored or swayed. There’s a thought, burning at the tip of her tongue, that Lela wants to pull him close and wrestle the truth from him.

There’s an ache, building just below her pulse, that aches for her to sink her fangs into any fleshy side of Tony and bite down until she tasted the cooper tang of his blood.

Pulling his tablet down, Tony levels her with a serious expression and pinches his lips up as he shrugged. It takes him a while before he can answer her. His voice all kinds of awkward and stilted, “I don’t know. Just felt like doing it. I…I like you kid. The wonder twins and big bird have to go back to their job soon and then you’ll be up there on your own. I…I didn’t want you to be alone…up there.”
And Lela doesn’t know the why’s or the hows, but she feels her chest simultaneously constrict and expand. Like maybe she’s not breathing air but has taken in a lungful of water. Lela has to swallow a dry lump down her throat in order to continue to stare at the man’s face. Because Lela hasn’t spoken to anyone about that fear. About coming home to a silent house because she’s afraid of what she might find hidden in the silence. Lela’s afraid of old faces peering out at her when she stared into the shadows of an empty hotel room. She’s afraid of what she’ll do, what’ll come crawling out of her, if she’s out on her own. She hasn’t told anyone about that fear, except, maybe, that day she took Tony to his own house. The day she put herself out there and hadn’t expected anything back.

Lela didn’t tell him she was scared, but she’s sure it was probably in her eyes. An ugly black beast burning in her eyes, twisting her up from the inside out. Lela didn’t tell him, but seeing as to how alike they often times seemed to be, Lela knows Tony probably saw it anyway. And Tony, who was so quick to usually make a joke or a witty sarcastic remark, hadn’t said anything then and wasn’t going to say anything now. He’d probably swallow his own tongue than rat Lela out like that. Because Tony’s just like her. He was raised on words meant to hurt. He was held by hands that pinched and cut more than they soothed.

Two wounded dogs knew when to keep their muzzles shut.

So here stood Tony now. Heart in his eyes and apprehension lining every inch of him in the middle of gaudy dining room. Looking like he’s about to face down a firing squad and ill prepared for it.

Instead of going to his own empty home to deal with all the problems dogging at his heels, Tony came here. Came to help. Came to show her a house where she could call her own and not be afraid of the silence and emptiness. There was Tony, a straggler pushed out of his own pack, and on the fringes of everything. There was Tony, barely holding on to his own mind from the amount of pain he felt on a daily basis. There was Tony, shy awkward look in his eye, half expecting Lela to push him out and away. There was Tony waiting on any word from Lela that said he wasn’t welcome here.

In that moment, something dangerously possessive strikes up the entire length of Lela’s body. She thinks about Pepper’s soft scent and soft words. She thinks about Bruce’s stuttering well meaning nature. Lela thinks about them and thinks—fuck them. If they could look into big sad brown eyes like that and not pull Tony in, then shit, Lela would. Lela would pull him up and out of the hole he was content to lie in until sickness and death came for him. Because all Tony ever did was help her; he put himself out there with the full expectation of getting his hand slapped for it and kept doing it.

The thought is so intense in it’s feeling that it rushes out of her in a wave of scorching hot mess. It floods her down to the bare bones of who she is. The flesh wrapped around ivory sizzling until it charred.

Something warm and utterly alien swirls itself around Lela’s spine. It twirls itself up the knobs of her back until they settled loosely over the juts. It sits heavy and awkward on her like it’s weight is meant to bow her down but is forcing her back ram rod straight instead. Like it refuses to be a burden. Like it wants nothing more than for her to always be pulled up straight to meet the hardships of her life head on and with her chin held high.

It slithers, not like the ribbon around her chest but weighted and half dangerous. It moves, like a boa around it’s prey, like it’s ready to constrict at any moment but just isn’t feeling up for it right now. Lela can feel, in that moment, all the intensity of six different cars hitting her all at once. Lela can feel, in that moment, the exact time in which all her other bonds rear their heads up like they’d been bitch slapped by the very hand of god.
Wide eyed, Tony stares at her from across the dining room. The chair legs that had been hovering in the air as Lela leaned it back fall down with a dull thunk. Tony’s wide eyed gaping is mirrored in her own as she stared at the alpha man.

“Did you…” Tony starts, his deep voice unnaturally high and reedy. There’s a sense of panic in his eyes that is mirrored by the heavy snake wrapped around her spine, “Do you…”

Cautiously, almost as if experimentally, Tony prods the bond through his end. The snake around her spine ripples like water before it coils tighter at the harassment. In that smooth movement, Lela can almost feel the snake-bond’s reluctance to be moved.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” Clint says from somewhere at her back. Shock lining his silk ribbon.

“Are you two—Did you just—” Sam attempts to ask but seems to fail both times. Surprise makes the flower on her heart twist up like they’re waiting on the first heavy fall of an oncoming hurricane.

With laughter in her voice, amusement ringing in her steel band, Natasha calls out, “Figures.” She neither sounds or feels all that upset by the fact. Despite the fact that she’s got to be the only one still staunchly dead set on keeping Lela away from Tony.

This time around—with experience under her belt—Lela knows exactly what she’s done and who she’s done it with.

A bond.

A fourth fucking bond.

A bond that trailed out of her and over to the insufferable mess of a human person that was Tony-Fucking-Stark.

Making an aborted movement forward, as if attempting to close the distance between them, only to still, Tony stares at her. His big brown eyes—heavily rimmed in long curled lashed—stare at her in a strange mixture of wonder and fear. His bond flares with them as well as something cold and prickling.

“We don’t have to…you don’t have to.” Tony starts mouth twisting cruelly. There’s a furrow between his brows like he’s trying to piece together an especially difficult thing.

And then, because she’s heard that sound before, seen that look before—all of it aimed at herself in the twilight hours of the night in front of a mirror—Lela recognizes all of the self hate rushing through Tony’s bond. It seeps in cold like ice. It makes Lela physically recoil from the seat she’s on to get her flesh from pressing up tight into that newly made bond.

“I’m sorry,” Tony rambles on, completely unaware of what he’s feeding down the line, the self loathing on his words dripping down into the pit of Lela’s stomach, “I don’t mean to, uh, I didn’t mean to do this. I was just, well, I was just worried. I…You…I didn’t want you to be alone. I don’t like being alone and the thought of you sitting up there, on your own…”

Lips pulling themselves up into a furious snarl, Lela growls into the tension riddled air. Jaggedly, Lela lets her irritation sink it’s claws into the bond wrapped around her spine. Lela feels, first hand, the way all of Tony’s wild emotions begin to back away.

It is, she muses, nothing like the bonds she has with the others. Where Natasha was cool and collected, Clint’s soft and delicate, or Sam’s warmth and care—Tony’s was as wild as Lela felt on a good day. They were messy things. All piled on top of one another until Lela could barely make out
the main source of it. She figures, it must have everything to do with the state of mind of the person and their ability to properly process emotions like they were born to do.

Distantly, Lela wonders, if that might be how she feels like to the others.

“Tony,” Lela starts off with, her tone far gentler than she intends for it to come out. She feels the way her hindbrain sinks down onto her tongue. The way her second nature aches to pull Tony closer to her and not away, “Shut up.”

“No, Kid, if you’re mad, say so. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do this,” Tony continues on, oblivious or unhearing of the tone Lela’s got.

Gritting her teeth, Lela pulls herself out of her seat and makes for the man. She stills only when there’s about a hands distance between them. Now that she’s standing, staring up into big brown fear filled eyes, Lela’s not entirely sure what she’s supposed to say. She doesn’t know what’s supposed to come out of her mouth to put the alpha at ease. All she does know is that she’s got an ugly cry or whimper building at the base of her throat. A cry that would spill out into the room and leave little to no doubt at all of what she really is.

Pursing her lips up tight, Lela inelegantly starts, “Not your fault asshole.”

“But I, we, fuck—we’re bonded now,” Tony spits out, his Alpha fangs peeking out from behind his lips as he waved a frantic hand between their two bodies.

“I fucking noticed that,” Lela bites out as she glared up at the living breathing embodiment of Anxiety.

“And you’re not…you’re not mad at me?” Tony questions through a confused expression that was more than half scared.

Biting the vulgarity laced words on her tongue, Lela has to dig her fingernails into the palms of her hands to stay in place. Once the bubbling urge to hit something ebbs, Lela offers a terse reply, “Sometimes this shit happens on it’s own whether we like it or not.”

They’re not the cool and calming words Sam had offered her not so long ago, but, they also aren’t as mean as Lela knows she can be. Their rudeness undercut by the way Lela looked up into Tony’s eyes and refused to be swayed.

“So, we’re…we…sh*t,” Tony huffs out as he ran his hand over his face. Taking a couple of seconds to pull himself together, he finally throws out into the air, “This was not what I had in mind when I set out to do this.”

Quirking a brow and attempting to swallow down the innate fear that statement coops up, Lela asks, “Is this….a…problem?”

Whipping his head up from where he left it to hang, Tony nearly rips his own damn head off. His eyes, darker than Lela’s ever seen them, pin themselves upon Lela’s own. They trap her as they attempt to drill into her head, “No.”

Pursing her lips up, Lela shoves her hands into her pant pockets and then shrugs her shoulders, “Then what’s the big deal asshole?”

“Wha—kid, you’re like….stuck with me now. I’m not exactly the best Pack Member out there. You saw what happened to me the other day. What if I fuck up. What if something happens and you…” Tony declares, his self deprecation bleeding into his twisted up bond.
The sight of it, coupled with the stench of sorrow spilling out of his frame as well as the feel of his self hate seeping up her spine—it makes Lela grow uncomfortably soft. Something rattles until it shakes loose entirely. The frayed edges of her composure split until they render her a complete and utter mess. Because, if anyone was stuck with anyone, it was them with her.

Tony was good. Clint was undoubtedly golden. Natasha was a noble beast. Sam was a fucking saint. Lela was…Lela was fucked in every way that mattered.

Before she can put any real thought into it, Lela reaches out a hand until she grips Tony’s forearm. The action isn’t new to either of them. Lela reaching for him and Tony letting himself be touched. Lela’s had more than enough reasons to grab Tony, to pull him up by one of his limbs by force or by none too gentle prodding. On two rare occasions, by the twist of his ear. So her hand falls with easy familiarity that they now both share.

At the mere touch they now shared, the bond goes liquid soft. The boa around her spine spills down in waves until it pools in the arch of her spine.

Lela has to grit her teeth hard enough to make her temples ache, for a whimpering cry not to bubble out of her mouth. Her fingers dig into Tony’s clothed forearm, hard. Hard enough that they still the man’s erratic movement easily enough. Hard enough that it forces the Alpha man to focus entirely on her for the moment and not his whirling thoughts or emotions.

Stuffing down that cry and everything else, Lela gathers all the strength she can from all four of her bonds combined. She grips them tight in her imaginary hands and looks into those big brown eyes as she said, “We take this shit as it comes man. One day at a time.”

Silently, she floods all her bonds at once, with wobbling reassurance and something so soft it might have been hope. But Lela doesn’t look at ay of it too closely.

Wide eyed, Tony looks down at her with slightly parted lips. It takes him a good long while before he nods his head and his free hand falls over her own. The difference in their hands nearly laughable. Grip light and yet all encompassing, Tony holds the hand that grips him in place. Almost like…well, like Lela might slip away from him and never return. It’s such a painfully raw look in his eyes that Lela wishes to hurt the fucker that ever put a shred of doubt in him at all.

“One day at a time,” Tony agrees, a heavy breath rattling out of him like he’s just now taken a full breath of air since this whole shit happened.

Nodding her head, Lela slowly pulls her hand away and feels the way the boa bond takes shape once more and twirls itself back into place. Lela’s only had it for a short time, but it already feels familiar and welcomed. It sits there, at her back, like it’s always been there.

Slipping her hand into her jacket pockets, Lela nods her head and attempts some kind of smile as she told him, “Yeah man, that simple.”

A strange little smile slips onto Tony’s face as he stared down at her with oddly wet brown eyes. His voice is all wobbly when he asks, “So…pack?”

Feeling like she’s got a hot lump of coal in her throat, Lela nods her head and firmly declares, “Pack.”

And then, because she was undoubtedly the biggest bitch around, Natasha clears her throat and announces, “Well, if you’re quite done, we’d like to hear your thoughts on this place.”

Turning to level the redhead with a glower that Lela didn’t actually put any feeling into. Lips pursed,
Lela steps away from the alpha now bonded to her and levels the whole fancy dining room with a down turn of her lips. When she’s done with that, she stares at her pack—all four of them now—and says:

“Not really my cup of tea.”

“What? Why?” Tony asks, all that soft tenderness in his eyes fading away as he stared at her with some kind of affront.

Screwing up her nose in distaste, Lela tells him easily, “Too fucking fancy man. Like shit, can I even afford rent here?”

“Rent?” Tony repeats the word like he doesn’t really understand why it’s falling out of Lela’s mouth.

“Lela, it’s not about whether you can afford it or not.” Clint says as he walked over to her. His eyes flashing from Lela and over to Tony. Something like guarded apprehension lines the bow of his mouth before it fades away with a smile he gives her, “We’re all chipping in to get the place, so don’t worry about the price. Worry about whether you like it or not.”

Narrowing her eyes just a smidge, Lela stares at the blonde and then over to the others. She’s got a retort building up in her mouth that she doesn’t want them to go and buy her a home just cause they feel bad for her and her technically homeless ass. But it dies away when Sam smiles and tells her:

“We’re pack, we look after each other, remember?”

“So if you like it, just say the word,” Natasha picks up after Sam’s spoken, “and we’ll get it.”

“Plus, it’s not only for you, you know,” Clint clips on at the tail end of Natasha’s words, his eyes glowing honey warm and smile bright as the sun, “It’s for all of us. It’ll be, like, our pack den.”

The declaration sways Lela from her indignation so that instead she’s hit with the realization that the place is for everyone involved. Or at least, she hopes it is. And with that in mind she asks, “People actually do that? Live with their pack?”

Stepping forward, so that he’s closer to Lela, Clint and in turn Tony, Sam tells her, “Well, yeah. I mean, it used to be that a pack all lived together in one den until they got married or something. Even then, people just used to move on down the hall. It’s not a very popular trend anymore, but, uh, if you’re fine with it—I actually already asked Natasha—I’d kind of like it if I could stay wherever it is you decide. Only if you’re fine with it!”

By the end of it, Sam looks like he kind of wants to pick the words he’s uttered one by one off the wooden floor and eat them. His flowers’ trembling with something like fear of rejection and nervousness.

And honestly, Lela doesn’t care if people did or didn’t live with their chosen pack mates. Lela was going to force Natasha, Clint, Sam and fuck it at this point Tony too, to liv with her until she fucking kicked over and died. Lela wasn’t ready yet to be a true adult and face the world on her own. She needed her Beta’s and her Gamma. And now, well now she had to look after the Alpha she’d entangled in her web.

Nodding her head with a purse of her lips, Lela pulls her shades back onto her face and declares, “I don’t like it here. Fucking reeks of white old man balls.”

Huffing out a laugh that looks half punched out of him, Tony smiles wide at her and nods his head, “Okay, so on to the next ones, yeah?”
Moving as if of one mind, the four of them begin to walk out of the room. Lela follows them out. And maybe because she’s staring at their backs and not at their faces, Lela tells them gruffly, “Everybody’s gotta have their own room. I’m fucking tired of Chuckles throwing his dirty clothes under the bed.”

It’s not what she wants to say, which is, that she wants everyone to have their own space within the home she’s trying to find. That she wants all of them—all four of them now—close at hand and comfortable. That she wants them to be welcomed even if they don’t stay there all the time. She wants her door to be open to them—all four of them—for as long as they’re willing to come in. But it also isn’t. When Natasha turns to her, just outside of the fancy-smashy apartment, she stares at Lela with her knowing green eyes glittering. Like the raging bitch has heard it all regardless.

“All of us?” the green eyed demoness hedges, like she knows what Lela meant to say and was forcing Lela’s hand to say it out loud anyway.

Narrowing her eyes, Lela grits her teeth and shoves her hands back into her jean pockets, “Yes, all of us, asshole. Tony too.”

“Me?” Tony stills mid walk. His right hand hovering over the tablet like he’s not sure he’s heard Lela right.

Rolling her eyes, Lela pushes past the frozen group and heads for the elevator. Only when they’ve all piled on does Lela throw out into the air, “Obviously, you’re fucking pack now. Gotta make sure you keep yourself alive somehow.”

When both Clint and Tony open their mouths to say something—probably to argue, Clint to say Tony living with them wasn’t such a good idea, and Tony probably about to agree, considering the shit between them all—Lela shuts them both up with a growl. She lets the growl tumble out of her mouth till her fangs slip down and flash in the soft florescent lighting of the elevator. Lela can make out the audible clack of their teeth hitting together.

Narrowing her gaze at her original two, Lela bites out, “You two told me pack sticks around for one another, that just a load of bullshit?”

“Wha—” Clint fumbles as Natasha leaned her long back against the elevator walls. She’s got a smile in her eyes despite the way her face is closed and stern. Elegantly Natasha crosses her arms over her ample chest and declared, “Not bullshit.”

“Whadda’bout you Sammy?” Lela turns her shrewd glare onto the silent man, “Was that just bullshit you were feeding down my throat? Pack being family and all?”

“No, never. I meant every word of it.” Sam tells her so firmly Lela feels his bond thump with it.

Nodding her head, Lela aggressively steps forward to the three and says, “Tony’s bonded to me. So he’s in it just like the rest of us. Pack.”

What Lela doesn’t say, but must be on her damn face, is that she’s willing to fight any of them over that fact. That she’s not about to leave Tony out of it like he’d been left out of his previous one. Lela doesn’t say it, but, she’s got a wicked sense of possessiveness ringing through her. Her hindbrain is pairing itself up with the worst volatile side of herself. Her second nature won’t go quiet over this. This was one of this rare times in which all sides of herself are on the same damn page.

It’s probably somewhere around five or so seconds, but, it feels like an eternity stretched out. By the time the elevator lets them down into the front lobby, Lela’s ready to bare her fangs to get her
fucking way. The tension sitting in the air is thick enough to choke. Lela kind of thinks she might have fucked something up. She feels a rumble of fear in her belly, mixing together with the fact that she hasn’t eaten.

That thick as shit tension eventually breaks when Natasha lets down her arms and breezes past the threshold hold. She’s got a devil may car smile tilting her lips as she says, “Alright, he’s pack. He gets a room.”

“Not like he needs one, fuckers got like eight different houses on the upper east side,” Clint grumbles but doesn’t look like he’s about to kick up any real fuss. Quiet reluctance—like a dog that’s been told to not shit on the carpet—sitting in his eyes and ringing in his bond.

“He’s got five.” Lela says at the same time Tony declares, “I’ve only got five.”

Smiling wide and accepting, Sam merely lets out a low chuckle and claps a hand onto Tony’s stiff shoulder as he happily announced, “Welcome to the Pack, man. It’s a hell of a ride.”

“I can see that,” Tony drawls, sarcastic and half removed. But Lela can feel the giddy excitement that pours off his bond. All of it coming like waves of electricity.

Rolling her eyes, Lela follows Sam out and throws over her shoulder, “So what’s next Boss?”

“Ah,” Tony calls out before he’s burying his nose back into his tablet, “I’ve got two condos just up the street from here. If you’ve got the time.”

Lela doesn’t say that she’s got an early start and should probably be heading back to the hotel if she’s going to manage working that shift. Lela doesn’t say it because waves of eager excitement are steadily being pumped into her system via a certain brown eyed Alpha.

Pushing her shades back up her nose, Lela grumbles, “Well, lets get on with it then. Burning daylight here.”

And like that, all five of them pile back into Sam’s Jeep. Sam behind the wheel, Natasha riding shotgun, Clint, Lela and Tony riding in the back. If Lela’s feeling a bit squished between the two men, she doesn’t open her mouth to say anything. She just knocks her knee into Clint’s own and jabs her elbow into Tony’s. They don’t actually give her any room, but, Lela’s not actually all that mad about it.

*~*

It’s somewhere around the sixth, or maybe eighth house, by the time 4:30 rolls around. Everyone of them worse than the one before. All of them were far too fucking fancy for Lela’s liking. So she’s kept a steady stream of ‘fuck no’ on the whole way through.

It’s a townhouse—because they were all townhouses or brownstones in one form or another—just outside of hells kitchen. The moment they roll up, Lela figures they must be in the wrong spot. Because Tony was the type to prescreen just about everything down to the type of neighborhood a house sat in.

On the outside, the neighborhood, it’s run down. The off white paint of the building chipping like it’s been years since someone came around and tried to keep it up. The neighborhood isn’t teeming with the usual signs of a poverty but it’s walking that fine line. Like, Lela wouldn’t be surprised if by this time tomorrow it turns out at least two of these places aren’t trap houses.

“No, seriously?” Sam calls out as soon as they’re all up on the concrete steps leading up to a large
“Okay,” Tony says, as he stared down at his tablet and over to the numbers awkwardly sitting on their sides upon the wall, “This was not in the bio. Alright, my bad guys, let’s pack it in. Plenty of other fish in the sea!”

Staring up at the building, all three stories of it, Lela finds herself mildly intrigued by the old school nineteen hundreds feel of it. Frowning at the fact that everyone’s already being loaded up to the car, Lela calls out, “I kinda wanna check it out.”

“Wha—for real?” Clint sputters as he looked at her and then the building behind her.

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela takes up the last of the five steps and stands before the door, “I mean, lets at least check it out before y’all fucking snub your noses at it.”

“We’re not snubbing our noses,” Natasha easily refutes as she climbed back out of Sam’s jeep. Her nose turned up high in the air as she daintily stated, “It just looks like it’s been foreclosed for about a decade.”

“Snob,” Lela scoffed as she went for the handle and found it open. Quirking a brow Lela looks back at Tony for an answer.

The man easily provides one with a simple, “Spoke to the realtor, they left it open for us.”

“Just like that?” Lela questions as she pushed the heavy door open.

“Kid, you’d be surprised what kind of doors open up when you’ve got a face as pretty as mine,” Tony smugly stated as he followed on after her.

“Hell of an ego you got there dude,” Lela laughed as she stepped into what she now knows is called a foyer, “How the hell do you make it through doors with a head that big?”

“Usually, if I don’t fit, I get them remodeled,” Tony tells her with a wide grin. But the moment he turns to look at the place in front of them he frowns and grumbles, “Which is exactly what the realty company said this place would be, remodeled. Clearly, it has not.”

And yeah, it hasn’t. The place is empty—completely bare—with light fixtures hanging out of the ceiling and everything. The paint on the walls, must have been white at some point but have faded to a soft yellow, is peeling and stained. The further in they go the more Lela starts to think this place must have at once been a flop house. There’s all kinds of graffiti on the walls splayed out artful and vulgar.

But it’s pretty, in a weird kind of way. The further they go, the more Lela gets a feeling that at one point in time this place was as fancy as all shit. It’s just got that kind of vibe. What with the deep dark wood paneling halfway up the wall and running on all the moldings.

“How many rooms this place got?” Lela asks. She can spot a large staircase just off the side leading up to the second floor.

Nose back in his tablet, Tony mumbles, “Five.”

“Shit,” Lela says with a low whistle, “That’s a lot of rooms.”

Humming like maybe it’s not, Tony pulls down his tablet and begins leading her down the hall into the kitchen. Like the other houses before, Tony is the one to take point. Lela closely trailing after him.
and the merry band of three following her.

The further in they go the larger the rooms seem to get. The living room is empty but it’s got a huge fire place just off the east wall. One that looks like it can hold an entire bon fire and not set the house a blaze. The kitchen is empty too, though it’s got a wide counter for about two different kinds of chefs. Downstairs—cause of course it’s got a basement too—it turns out it’s got it’s own laundry room and a den of some sorts. A large entertainment room with an empty bar in the far back.

Up the stairs they go and the second level is filled with three bedrooms that all have their own little private bathrooms. On the third level Lela finds what is clearly the main bedroom because it’s just so fucking huge, with it’s own fire place and it’s own terrace. The other is smaller with a wall lined in empty book shelf space and a little nook under a large window facing the rise of the sun. Lela’s gaping at the insanely large claw foot tub in the private bathroom when Tony shouts something from the other room connecting to the main bedroom.

“I think they converted this into their private study,” Tony shouts, his voice carrying in the empty house.

Turning around on her heel, Lela nearly bumps right into Clint. The man rights her with warm hands on her shoulders. Wide eyed, she looks at Clint and asks, “Who the fuck needs a bath tub that big?!”

Laughing, Clint steps around her and enters the sprawling bathroom with all the familiarity of having been there on multiple occasions. Hoping into the porcelain tub, Clint looks like he’s all of five years old in there. That’s how fucking huge it was.

“Maybe they had like group showers,” Clint tells her with a smile.

Shaking her head, Lela walks up to the man and leans her hip against the tall lip and snarks, “Maybe it saved on water?”

“We can probably fit all five of us in here,” Clint laughs out as he sunk lower and lower in his seat.

“We are not taking group showers,” Natasha announces from the doorway.

“We have to be environmentally conscious Nat!” Clint shouts as he slowly climbed his way back out. When he’s standing on his own two feet beside her, Clint waggles his brow and asks as charmingly sweet as only he could, “C’mon babe, I’ll scrub your back and you can scrub mine.”

“Imma have to pass,” Lela told him with a laugh as she lightly punched his shoulder and made to leave.

Once she’s back in the main bedroom, she finds Sam out on the terrace with the door open behind him. Seeing the opening for a quick smoke, Lela rushes out with the man. She’s got a smoke lining her lips—lit and already filling her lungs—when she comes to a stop beside him.

Only when she’s pulled in a deep enough drag, does Sam ask all soft and comfortable as only he could be, “So what do you think?”

“It’s big,” Lela tells him as she ashed her cig off the ledge.

“Not what I was asking,” Sam tells her as he turned his body so he was facing her entirely. He’s got this firmness in his eyes like he’s ready to plunge into a deep conversation at the drop of a dime.

Frowning around her cig Lela’s got an urge to lie and say she doesn’t know what he’s asking then. But then, Lela knows that to be a damn lie. She knows exactly what Sam’s getting at. She just
doesn’t want to get into it here and now. She just wants to pick up the ball that’s been tossed to her and run with it. She doesn’t want to get bogged down by the who’s or whys. Because if she stops to think, really stops to pick it all apart, she’ll freak the fuck out.

It’s a bond, that shit was immovable. It was an immovable bond to an Alpha. An Alpha she worked for. An Alpha who was as just as much in the shitwheel as she was. An Alpha.

If Lela stops to think about any of that, she thinks she’ll probably barf or sink her fangs into the closest person next to her. So instead of thinking about it like she ought to, she just... doesn’t. The whole thing is easier to swallow down if she just isn’t thinking about it too hard. Like a fucking self portrait, it’s pretty to look at if you squinted at it from a distance.

Lela finds, there’s more than half of her that doesn’t really want to think about it. To pull it under a scope or whatever. Half of her just wants to just take it as it came. To move on with it with just as much ease as waking up in the morning. Because, yes it’s new, but it doesn’t really feel like it is. Like an old shirt she hasn’t worn in some time—stretched out in all the ways it could be comfortable—it just drapes on her without effort.

“It is what it is,” Lela drawls through a mouthful of smoke. She’s resolutely ignoring the pang of fear she’s got in her chest. Ignoring it because she just doesn’t want to touch it.

Brows furrowing, Sam says, “If being bonded to him makes you feel uncomfortable in any way, you can say so Lela. I’ve never heard of bonds just snapping into place the way it did for you back there. Bonds take time, this was...this was out of left field here.”

_All my bonds have been formed from that left field_, Lela thinks but doesn’t say. She just stuffs her smoke between her lips and puffs. In the silence that follows, Lela chances a look back into the bedroom to spot Tony arguing about something or the other with Clint. They’re locked in deep into some kind of debate. It’s nothing serious because Natasha’s got that smile in her eyes that says she’s more entertained than annoyed about anything. So Lela’s got no real concern to go in there and break anything up. Still, her hindbrain slithers like maybe she ought to anyway. To keep the peace. To keep them from tearing into one another and keep the pack whole.

And isn’t that new? Lela, who was quick to start shit before fully thinking through anything, wanted to keep everything nice and tame between those bonded to her. It comes straight from her hindbrain, from what she is and not who she is.

“He’s a good guy,” Lela informs the beta man. When she spots a wry twist of Tony’s lips and the puff of his chest, Lela smiles from around her cig and continues on, “He’s kinda like me. Pretty fucked in the head when it comes to being a normal person.”

“You’re not fucked in the head, Lela,” Sam immediately argues. Like he can’t stand the thought of anyone—herself included—putting her down like that.

Shaking her head, Lela twirls her dwindling cig between her thumb and index, “Yeah, I am Sammy.” When Sam opens his mouth like he’s gonna argue, Lela continues on, “But I’m working on unfucking the mess I got up here,” Lela jabs her cigarette holding fingers into her temple, “And he’s...he’s trying too. Pep and Bruce, they left him on his own and...I’m pretty sure if you guys left me, I’d be a hell of a lot worse off than he is.”

“We aren’t going to leave you,” Sam states in this hard and steel lined tone. He’s got this look in his eyes that says he’s about to walk through hellfire to prove his words.

Flicking her cig down into the hot afternoon air, Lela shakes her head and shrugs her shoulders, “I
know. But, I’m telling you, I’m not walking away from him either. So, it is what it is.”

Lela can feel the strength of her words rumble in her chest. They way they snake down into the newly formed bond she’s got on her spine. They way they almost solidify it firmer, solid and sure. Unshakeable now that she’s accepted it fully. As much a part of her as the other three. It twirls tighter around her as if to reassure her that for as long as it’s welcome it will never leave.

Pulling in a fortifying breath, Sam lets a rueful smile sit on his lips as he closed the gap between them and wrapped her up in his thick arms. He’s hugging her like if he lets go she’ll vanish back into the shadows she used to creep in. Lela feels the way she melts into the touch. Her arms loosely wrapping themselves around the lower part of his back.

“He’s pack then,” Sam mumbles into the crown of her head. When he says his next words, his arms squeeze just a little tighter, “You know we’re never just going to leave you right?”

The flower on her heart lets its roots snake down low until they constrict around her heart, “I know.” Lela tells him as she pressed her head into his chest.

And she does. If it had been before, anytime before now, she’d have recoiled from a promise like that. But she knows now—with something unshakeable and sure in her chest—that they won’t leave. They won’t just kick her to the curb like she’s used to being handled. It settles some strange part of her, all damnable second natured, to be reassured anyway.

With one last comforting squeeze, Sam pulls her from him and smiles down at her with that same smile he’d used to lure her into the park on that first day. The sight of it makes Lela’s insides go soft and slow. Her hindbrainrumbling low in her mind like it’s readying itself to make some kind noise.

“We better get in there before they start tearing into one another. Your gamma there’s got one hell of an overprotective streak on him,” Sam says with a laugh.

Rolling her eyes, Lela slowly pulls her arms away from the man until she’s standing on her own two feet. Twisting so that she’s facing the open door of the bedroom, Lela throws out, “Nah, he’s just a grudge holding bitch.”

Barking out a laugh, Sam follows her back inside. Once they’re all standing in the same room, Lela chances a look around and says, “So, thoughts?”

“It’s big,” Natasha allows, her eyes cutting away from Tony and Clint to land on Lela. Her entire focus on Lela’s gaze.

“That’s what she said,” Clint immediately throws out with a wide grin before adding seriously, “But it needs work.”

“No, that’s what she said,” Tony interrupts with a shit eating grin of his own. His words prompt a small laugh out of Clint that is mirrored in Natasha’s gaze. Lela can only roll her eyes and smirk at the twos immature jokes. Grinning like he’s just said the worlds smartest thing, Tony turns to face her and says a little more seriously, “There’s a lot here left to be desired. Half this place has to be gutted and replaced. I’m pretty sure it’s been forty plus years since the last time something was up to code. Don’t even get me started on the back yard—”

“There’s a back yard?” Lela interrupts quickly. Her ears half perking.

“Oh, yeah, you didn’t see it down there, up on the terrace?” Sam questions with his thumb jutted out behind him.
Shaking her head in the negative, Lela glances at the four before her and then quietly slips out of the bedroom. She trots her ass down all the stairs until she’s on the main level. Once she finds the back door in the kitchen she steps out into the backyard.

And so far, throughout their whole day of house hunting, every single place they’ve come to either didn’t have a backyard or did and it was a small strip of grass the width of Lela’s forearm. Every time Lela saw it, she was filled with a burning hate for the concrete over the good earth. Maybe it’s because of how and where she grew up, but Lela was used to sprawling yards lined with grass and peppered in mesquite trees. The edges of fences marked by bugambilias of various deep colors. She kind of missed sinking her toes into sun warmed earth and smelling flowers on the air.

Hibiscos used to be her favorites.

Pushing the door open, Lela steps out into the yard and takes in the over run yard. It isn’t big, probably only twice as long as the building was tall. But there was no concrete in sight. None except a small space by the door that probably allowed for some kind of bbq pit, a table and some lawn chairs. Leaving the door open she stepped down the small stairs and into the grass that stood about knee high. There’s weeds of all kinds scattered into the tall grass. Sticking out like sore thumbs waiting to get plucked right out. With appreciating eyes, Lela counts at least three oak thumbs, two at the far end and one right off the concrete square.

“Oh god, it’s worse up close,” Tony moaned as he stepped out.

“Jesus, it’s like a fucking amazon out here,” Clint declared with disapproval.

“Nah, just needs a bit of maintenance,” Sam argued as he stooped low to pluck a dandelion and blew delicately on it.

Walking into the grass so she stood shoulder to shoulder next to her, Natasha quietly remarks, “It’s nice.”

And just then a wind blows, gentle and smooth. It flutters the heavy leaf riddled branches of the trees and causes the grass to sway like ripples in a still pond. Lela’s hair, that had been let free of their tie a long while back, moves with the movement too. It snakes it’s way out and then in. Lela doesn’t bother to be annoyed by it because she’s caught up in the sound that surrounds her.

How long had it been since Lela stood still enough to hear the wind whistle through the leaves. How long had it been since Lela heard the rustle of grass. How long had it been since Lela had filled her nose with the familiar scent of growing green things?

In an instant Lela knows that it’s been far too long.

It used to be, that Lela was the kind of girl who spent her days outside rather than indoors. It used to be, that Lela had to be dragged inside by threats or especially hard yanks on her ears. It used to be that Lela was, more often than not, covered in dirt from one of her muddy adventures. It used to be that Lela’s skin used to glow with the deep tan she used to get. Her skin browning like the woman of the foothills—India, they used to call her, both a slur and yet not. It used to be that Lela once smelled of sunlight so much it was engrained into her skin.

Nowadays, Lela was paler than she’d ever been her whole life. Nowadays, Lela wasn’t ever out unless necessary. Nowadays, Lela stuck to the concrete walks the city provided her with. Nowadays…Lela just didn’t smell flowers ever.

“Yeah,” Lela whispers, half breathless and half something else, “It’s nice.”
“You like it.” Natasha states, like she knows for a damn fact that Lela does.

And, well, she isn’t wrong. But it still makes Lela crowd in on herself. She purses her lips and shrugs her shoulders like she doesn’t want to kick off her boots and pull off her socks to feel the grass between her toes.

“We can get it, if you want,” Natasha tells her in that smooth way of hers. Like she isn’t affected either way. Like she could care less one way or the other. And maybe a long time ago, Lela might have been fooled by the tone, but not anymore. Not with the way the band on her wrist tightens and sinks warmth up her right arm.

“I’m not the only person that’s gotta like it,” Lela gruffly states, her eyes falling away from the swaying trees to the redhead standing at her right, “You assholes gotta like it too, if you’re gonna live in it.”

Offering her the prettiest face shrug, Natasha tilts her head to the side and folds her arms over her chest as she simply told her, “Clint and I, we’ve slept in abandoned houses with no running water or electricity. We’ve stayed four long months in a warehouse in the Siberian wastelands that didn’t really have a roof. One time, we were in the saharas, we had to make do with the envoy truck we were running in. It broke down at least two weeks into the trek.”

When Natasha takes a small breath, her lips twisting into something like a frown, Lela almost asks what’s any of that got to do with here and now. But Natasha continues on after a small pause:

“We’ve stayed in five star restaurants with decadency falling from the ceilings. We’ve stayed in villas in almost every foreign country that were as beautiful as they were lonely. And though it all, we’ve never cared where we stayed as long as we were together for it.”

At that, Natasha looks at her. Really lays her jade colored eyes on Lela and pins her down with a single glance. Lela feels the weight of them sitting on her face as much as she feels the band on her wrist grow heavy with meaning.

“If you want to stay here, we’ll be more than happy to stay with you. Because, we know better than most that it’s less about the house and more about the people inside, that make a place a home.”

Throat tight and dry, Lela’s gotta run her tongue over her lips before she can speak, “So if I say yes, you sayin’ you don’t gotta problem with the place. You heard Tony, it’s run down. Everything’s gotta be redone.”

Lela doesn’t actually like the house. She just likes the thought of a backyard filled with grass. the place that sat on it could be a one bedroom shit hole. But she knows if she’s going to force the whole of these fuckers to come live with her, then they have to like the place she’s getting, or what was the point.

Tilting her head to the side once more, Natasha shrugs the elegant line of her shoulders and looks back out into the yard as she stated, “As long as we got a place to lay down in, I won’t mind.”

Feeling the pulsing warmth in her bond with the redhead, Lela pulls her courage from it. She can feel strength, quiet and world consuming, spill outward until Lela’s lungs are filling with it. Lela finds her bravery in it. She finds what little strength she has in her solidify like stones in her belly. It makes her feel steady as she turned to the men bickering at her back and announced:

“I…I don’t like it.”

“Seriously kid?” Tony starts, dropping the argument he’d been embroiled in without effort. Pushing
past the Beta and the Gamma at his sides, Tony steps closer to Lela with a searching look in his eyes, “I got other places we can look at. Bigger and a hell of a lot nicer than here.”

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela tries to put her thoughts into words. She tries to explain the whirling thoughts and the pinprick of emotions swelling in her chest, “I don’t give a shit about the place, honestly, as long as it has a back yard.”

Big brown eyes stare into hers as if looking for something only he could find. In a past life, Lela would have bared her teeth at such a look. She would’ve split the skin of her knuckles on someones teeth before ever willingly standing there under such a look. But now, now she doesn’t. she lets Tony look at her because…it’s Tony and Tony wouldn’t turn whatever he finds against her. She’s sure of it.

As sure about him as she was about anyone else in her pack. Which, she now knows, includes him. Tony was Pack now.

“Okay,” Tony finally says with a nod of his head. He’s about to go back to typing on his tablet when he stills and asks, “How big of a back yard?”

Turning her head, Lela glances at the one she’s currently standing on and tilts her lips down into a small frown, “It doesn’t matter—”

“Kid,” Tony firmly cuts her off with a tone that says he’s not about to put up with the half lies Lela’s spitting down at his feet. His tone makes the snake on her spine grow rigid and tight. It yanks down and makes it so Lela stands taller and straighter.

The firmness in his voice pulls Lela up short. Because for all that she’s known the fucker, Tony hasn’t once put down so much as a foot around her. He pranced around boundaries and pushed when he should’ve steered clear. Lela thought of him more as a clunky mastiff with a gummy sweet core to him.

But there it is, the hints of what Tony was, an Alpha, bleeding into his tone to get Lela to say what it was she wanted or needed. The sound, mixed with the feel against her bond, makes the baser side of her mind swirl and twist. It makes Lela swallow down dry and strange. In the back of her mind, her instincts ache to go belly up for whatever reason, to tilt her head back and offer some kind of peaceful gesture.

And if Lela wasn’t so blindsided, she would’ve snapped her teeth and growled. But because she’s as surprised as she is, all she does is answer as honestly as she can, “About this size?”

Even she can hear the question she’s turned the words into. But she does little to run them over with a savage growl to iron out the wrinkles.

Tony says nothing else after that. He’s too busy with his nose buried in whatever he’s working up. And Lela herself, she doesn’t want to fucking so much as touch the feeling she’d gotten that had wrapped itself around her newly formed bond as harsh as it had. It’s Sam that breaks the silence that now surrounded them:

“A back yard?”

Shrugging, Lela rubs at the back of her neck and looks over at the smiling man as she admitted, “I… kinda miss the smell of grass.”

And Lela, she doesn’t mean for her words to come out so small and vulnerable, but fuck if they don’t.
Face pulled into steely determination, Clint nods his head like he’s just been handed the world’s most important mission, declares in an air of finality, “We’ll find one with a back yard.”

Offering him a small laugh and crooked smile, Lela shakes her head and shoved the man lightly as he came to stand beside her. Warmth, uncomfortable and completely unshakeable, spills out of her chest to run down the length of their shared bond. It makes the ribbon grow thicker and wider until it wrapped—overlaid and sure—over her chest entirely.

Slipping his arm over Lela’s shoulders, Clint drags Lela snug and close to his side. It settles Lela in a way she hadn’t known until she met the strawberry haired menace. The embrace gives her the courage to ask into the gathered space between the group:

“Do you guys…uh, do you guys have any, like, preferences?”

“Not really, I can and will live in a dumpster,” Clint admits with a grin on his lips.

“As long as it’s not in Jersey,” Sam throws out with some kind of dark firmness that Lela immediately wants to ask why.

Running her long pale fingers through Lela’s frizzed out hair, Natasha tucks a stray lock behind her right ear and declares, “I’m fine with whatever.”

“Whatever you decide on, we’ll be fine with it,” Sam declares, echoing Natasha’s words from earlier.

If not for the bonds, Lela would needle them for more. She’d demand for something firmer than this. But she’s got bonds with them. She can feel it in the band at her wrist, in the ribbon around her chest and the flower on her heart, that they really don’t mind at all where Lela goes, just as long as they get to run after her too.

That simple knowledge makes Lela’s hindbrain do weird little summersaults in her head. It stretches out like a cocky little fucking cat that’s stolen from a nest of freshly laid eggs.

Eyes flickering up off the green grass at her feet, Lela turns to Tony and asks, “How bout you Jefe?”

“Hmm?” Tony hums out, absentmindedly as he continued to type onto his tablet, his head not even peeking up at the call of his name.

Suppressing the urge to knock the stupid thing out of his hands, Lela stretches out nice and thin, “You got any kind of hangups on what kinda place I get?”

“As long as it’s not in Jersey,” Tony mumbles.

This time around, Lela does ask what the hell that’s supposed to mean. Only for Tony to kick up a fuss hard enough to make the boa on her back slither up in displeasure. The whole way out of the townhouse Tony’s running at the mouth about ‘true new yorkers this’ and ‘true new yorkers that’. None of which Lela understands or really gets. But she lets him keep throwing things out because Sam’s agreeing with whole hearted nods and ‘yes’ s spilling from his mouth.

When they’re all piled back into Sam’s car, Clint throws out as amiable as anything, “We’ll find something for you.”

And before she can put any real thought into it, Lela opens her mouth and says, “For us, all of us.”

Sam stills in his gear shift, Natasha glances back at her through her passenger mirror, Clint tightens
the grip he has on her hand and Tony goes shock still.

“Yeah,” Clint says, all soft and fond, his ribbon flooded in something so delicate Lela nearly chokes on it, “We’ll find something for us.”

Running her tongue over her dry lips, Lela kicks her feet out and slouches in her seat, “But I want my own fucking bathroom. I’m fucking tired of picking up your dirty ass fucking underwear every time I have to shower.”

“Wha!” Clint sputters just as Sam throws out, “Same!”

“I do not leave my underwear on the floor!” Clint defends himself as the car moves not motion.

Cutting a scathing look back from the front, Natasha declares, “You’re a slob.”

“A fucking pig,” Lela agrees as she turned to Tony and told him, “Private bathrooms all around wey. You do not want to walk into a bathroom after Clint’s been in there. He leaves hair product on fucking everything.”

“And he takes like a solid hour before he’s finished up in there,” Sam tosses over his shoulder.

“Really?” Tony laughs, eyes sparkling like he’s being handed something new and shiny.

“Oh like any of you assholes are any better! Lela uses up all the fucking hot water! And it’s a fucking hotel! They never run out of hot water! How hot do you need your showers to be?! Clint barks out, his face pulled into indignation.

Pursing up her lips and putting her nose up into the air, Lela simply says, “I like my showers hot.”

“Hot enough to scald, apparently,” Natasha remarks smoothly as she pulled her glass back on her face. Somewhere along the way the bitch had swiped them back. How or when, Lela’s not sure. But she doesn’t even bother feeling surprised about it.

Rolling her eyes, Lela plops back hard in her seat and tells Sam, “Drop me off at the tower, yeah?”

“You’re not going back to the hotel?” Clint immediately asks, concern riddled in his voice.

Shaking her head, Lela merely says, “Shift starts in less than thirty minutes. I gotta spare uniform in my locker. I’ll change when I get there.”

“You’re working night shifts?” Tony asks from Lela’s right.

“Yup,” Lela causally states while glaring daggers at Clint to keep his fucking mouth shut. The asshole was a no good fucking tattle-tale.

In the end, glaring at Clint does no bit of difference, seeing as to how it’s Sam that fucking blows it with:

“Tony, what’s up with Lela’s schedule, man?”

“What do you mean?” Tony asks, pulling himself up straight as he leaned forward, his dark eyes flashing from Sam’s face to Lela’s.

“She’s been working fifteen to twelve hour shifts back to back, without a single day off this past month,” Natasha breezily states like she’s not narcing on Lela to the newly minted pack mate they’ve all got.
Growling low in her throat, Lela bites out, “I told you guys, that I was fucking fine with it.”

“Who switched you over to night shift?” Tony quickly demands like he doesn’t give a flying fuck that Lela’s growling at him. Tony’s got this look on his face that says he’s no more scared of Lela’s growls than he would be if a damn kitten was swiping at him.

Lips pulled tight into a firm line, Lela scowls at every person in the car and just stays quiet. She was seriously regretting ever liking any one of these fuckers.

“Are you…are you giving us the silent treatment?” Clint starts from Lela’s left, laughter in his voice.

“Fuck you,” Lela hisses through clenched teeth as she crossed her arms over her chest and continued to refuse answering Tony’s question.

“We think it has something to do with her supervisor,” Natasha casually announced, her eyes twinkling in the mirror.


“Nothing happened, shift just changed, end of story,” Lela gruffly states and tried hard not to let any of her lies bleed into the bonds she’s got.

Now more than ever does she refuse to divulge the information as to why she’s been switched over. Tony, the self hating prick he was, would undoubtedly blame himself if he knew the reason as to why. And usually, Lela wouldn’t have cared, but damn if she doesn’t now.

“Do you want me to talk to him, get you back on day shifts?” Tony delicately asks. His boa bond swirling like he wants to move into motion and is just waiting for the right signal.

Sucking on her front teeth, Lela shakes her head and tells him, “Nah, it’s good. Fucker will get over it eventually.”

Lela has no real evidence to support this assumption, but, she’s just kind of hoping it blows over eventually. She’s not a big fan of how shit currently is. It’d be nice if Tony did go and move her back. But, Lela’s not so sure how that’ll go down. People are already treating her like the worst kind of scum because Tony hangs around her. If he goes and makes a change to better suit Lela’s mood, then that rumor mill will just catch fire.

It probably will, regardless, if people find out that Lela’s bonded herself to the man. Not that Lela was gonna hop onto a rooftop and start announcing it. But, she doubts it’ll stay under wraps forever.

The thought of everyone knowing her business makes Lela itch just under her skin. A cold kind of prickling settling in deep. Because there’s a hell of a lot she wants to keep hidden and secret. It mainly being what she is. And, Lela knows, she’s gotta eventually bite the bullet on that with Tony. Because the idiot deserved to know the kind of shit he’d just stepped into.

“Are you sure?” Tony eventually asks as he settled himself closer to her. Their shoulders pressed firm against one another.

“Pretty sure.” Lela mulishly states. Her eyes fixed on the ripped and frayed ends of her jeans. The pair she’s got on probably has more holes than was fashionably acceptable. Being that it was as old as it was, it was a miracle it was still clinging together at all.

“Okay,” Tony finally says with an air of finality. A weird gush of electricity runs up her spine that lets her know that Tony isn’t, in any way shape or form, done with this conversation. Only, he’d left
it alone for now, in a car filled to the brim with people dead set on baby proofing life for Lela’s convenience.

Pulling in a tired sigh, Lela tells the alpha, “You know, just cause we’re bonded doesn’t mean you gotta start running around fixing every little thing in my life, right?”

“I know that,” Tony petulantly states, but his eyes say he doesn’t agree with the knowledge given to him. And then, like a light has been lit, Tony’s big brown eyes turn sharp as dagger as he zeroed in on a weakness only he could see, “But the minions have been getting into all kinds of shit while you’ve been away.”

Narrowing her eyes, Lela glares at the man and demands, “What did you do?”

“Me?!” Tony exclaims, defensive in the only way a guilty man could be, “I didn’t do anything.”

“Have you washed them?” Lela hisses through tight lips.

“No, I told you, they’re on a learning program, they’re supposed to get the gist of…” Whatever Tony intends to say gets cut right the fuck off by the growl Lela lets loose.

Pulling herself forward till she’s between the two front seats, she demands of Sam, “Get me to the fucking tower right the fuck now.”

“What, why?” Sam jumps at the intensity in Lela’s voice. His shoulders bunching like he’s about to jump the curb and start taking the empty sidewalks to get her where she needed to go. He doesn’t, but the intention is there in his face all the same.

Falling back into her seat, Lela glares at the Alpha at her side and threatens, “I fucking swear Tony, you are the worst kind of dead beat dad I’ve ever met.”

“Maybe you should switch back to day shifts, that way you can look after the gremlins better,” Tony casually states in a very not so subtle manner.

Rolling her eyes, Lela throws back at him, “Or you could just wipe them the fuck down once you’re done fucking around for the day.”

Screwing up his nose in displeasure, Tony tells her, “No thank you. Have you seen the kind of messes Dum-E makes?”

Pinching the bridge of her nose to keep from pinching the man’s ear right off, Lela heaves out a sigh and begrudgingly allows, “Fine, put me back on dayshifts. But I swear to fucking god, if I get shit over it, I’m breaking your fucking nose.”

“You know, that’s twice that you’ve threatened me, in a span of five minutes,” Tony idly says with a huge smile over his face that said he was basking in his victory over her.

“Keep it up dumbass, and she’ll probably follow through on one of them,” Clint snarks from Lela’s other side.

Grinning wide and unapologetic, Tony ruffles Lela’s hair which only makes Lela reach out and punch him square in the stomach. He doubles over with a sharp exhale of breath and a groan. Clint laughs, happy and bright while Natasha glances back with a smile. Sam calls out for peace because there’s a cop right in front of them. But Lela ignores all that because when Tony pulls himself back up, he’s hooked his arm over her head and is pulling her down to rub angry knuckles on the crown of her head.
“You fucking asshole!!!” Lela screams as she continued to land punches at whatever part of him she can reach while she was being held.

“Every action has an equal—ooph!—and opposing—OWW!—reaction!!” Tony declared through a mouthful of laughter.

Eventually, Lela tires of trying to untangle herself from Tony’s surprisingly strong arms and flops on the man’s chest. It’s a weird embrace that is as new as it is incredibly welcoming. Face full of her own hair, Lela huffs out a breath and growls at the man pressed against her back:

“You’re a raging fucking dickhead.”

“And you’re the sweetest girl I’ve ever met,” Tony throws down at her as he pulled her tighter to himself.

Tony’s words, they’re said with all of the air of a simple sarcastic joke. Except, they don’t play out like that. They feel far too genuine that Lela feels them slap against her face like a stray leaf on the wind. They make her heart skip a beat only to double down and sprint. And they’re not true, Lela’s not sweet. She knows for a damn fact she’s the exact opposite. But, damn if they don’t make her feel like maybe she could be.

Wordlessly, Lela casually sinks into the embrace she’s caught in. Her legs kicking out to lay over Clint’s lap as she got comfortable. This bond between her and Tony was new, sure, but it really didn’t feel like it was. It kind of felt like…like coming home.

Stuffing down that sentiment, Lela jams her elbow into Tony’s stomach and demands of the man, “Wake me when we get there jackass.”

“So sweet, as always,” Tony drily snarks down at her, his fingers flexing on her upper arms and then releasing just as delicately.

“Fuck you,” Lela grumbled as she closed her eyes and attempted to catch some kind of sleep. And because she’s a dickhead just as much as the alpha at her back, Lela mumbles just as she slips under into unconsciousness, “Hey asshole, I’m an omega.”

Lela half expects the words to stick in her throat. For them to glue themselves on her tongue with her wild fear and paranoia. But they don’t. Not at all. Because it’s Tony. Aside from the fact that he’s pack, it’s fucking Tony. Lela should’ve been—would’ve been—scared, like she had been when she’d had to tell Sam, but it’s different. She can’t readily explain why, but it is. It’s different because it’s Tony. And even before she bonded with the fucker, she trusted him.

She trusted him enough to take his ass up on a job when she didn’t know shit about him. She trusted him enough to run around town in his car when she should’ve stayed free and clear of him. She trusted him enough to look after him and share bits and pieces of herself to him without ever entertaining the thought of him using it against her. She trusted him even back before she knew what it felt like.

Lela trusted Tony and it had little to do with the fact that they were bonded. That fact only made her stand firmer on his side.

“What?!” Tony chokes on the word, his body going stiff as his snake writhed with his shock and fear.

Whatever face he’s wearing Lela doesn’t know because she doesn’t bother to open her eyes to see. She’s too fucking comfortable, and way too fucking tired, to bother staying awake. She lets sleep
drag her under and leaves the rest in the shitty hands of her three idiots to explain to the biggest baby among them. Lela knows it’s a bad idea but, she’s too fucking tired to do anything about it.

Chapter End Notes

Let me just start off with an apology. I am sooooooo fucking sorry you guys have had to wait so long for an update. I am also so fucking sorry that this is the update that I'm handing you. I have been staring at this update so long I'm starting to see the worst parts of it only.
But for whatever reason if I try to take this chapter out and all it's events, the story just stops dead in my head. So it's in here for better or worse.
I hope you guys don't hate it!!!
And trust me the date is on it's way. We just have to have Tony there because he's gonna be a pivotal role in upcoming events. (i.e. DRAMA)
So yeah, I hope you guys liked at least some parts of it.

As always, thank you for reading, I hope you guys enjoyed.
Please leave comments down below to let me know what you think!
-Ani
Chapter Summary

After all, it was fucking Pepper. The same beta that had taken her out to eat when she had every reason in the world to avoid the person Lela was then. The same beta who’d stretched out a helping hand and had it tossed back into her face. The same beta who patched her up and stitched her up when she could’ve turned Lela over to someone else.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s weird, she thinks. That most days she finds herself in a better mood. That no matter the amount of ugly looks she’s given, Lela merely shrugs them off like water over a ducks back. Nothing sticks between the feathers and ruffles her. Lela knows before she’d have bared her teeth like an ugly dog. She feels quieter now. More settled, grounded, than she’s ever felt her whole life.

Half peaceful and something else.

It’s weird, she thinks, because she’s only ever known how it feels to boil over with self hate.

But these quiet days, gentle and often filled with the bullshit that was being bonded to her own brand of shitheads, are quickly becoming the norm.

Lela thinks, she might be...happy. Or at least, as close to it as she’s ever been. She’s a stranger to the feeling after all. She’s not topped with the ugly need to fight anymore. Her self loathing fading away to the contentment she feels radiating out of every single one of bonds.

It’s weird, but Lela doesn’t mind it.

Humming beneath her breath, Lela idly makes her way into the break room of her designated level. She’s rarely ever found herself in here on account of how much everyone makes it a point that she isn’t welcomed. But she’s on her break and there’s a vending machine inside. This time around though, there’s no-one inside. With a small bounce in her step, she makes a beeline for the too big machine.

Rolling her lips between her teeth, Lela stares at the choices laid out before her. Rummaging through her pant pocket she unearths the bundle of singles she’s got hidden away for moments like this. Feeding the money through the intake, Lela punches out the code for the flaming hot’s on the top
rack. Feeding in more money she goes on to buy a roll of starbursts and a bar of snickers. When she retrieves her goods, Lela’s about to slip out and away from the backroom when she notices a large pink box on the middle table.

Though the box lid is shut, Lela’s nose always has been the stronger side of things. She can smell chocolate, sweet bread and sugar from where she stands. Ducking around to see if anyones looking, she heads over to the box and flips the lid.

Inside sit the daintiest of fucking cupcakes Lela’s ever had the pleasure of seeing. There’s chocolate cupcakes with red icing. Vanilla cupcakes with pale blue icing. There’s even strawberry cupcakes with with white frosting.

And Lela herself isn’t very familiar with what the protocol is when there’s food pastries in the break room. Hell, any time someone brought anything in for the group, she was almost always excluded. Claire the conniving bitch that she was, made sure to keep Lela firmly on the fringes of all things. So Lela knows there’s a snow ball chance in hell that says she’s privy to anyone of these.

But faced with the sight of them in neat little rows, covered in sugar and wrapped in star dotted wrappers, Lela finds she doesn’t fucking care. Reaching in, Lela snags a strawberry cupcake and takes a big bite. She almost groans out loud when she realizes the icing is some of the good shit and not that whipped cream bullshit. She’s in the middle of balling up the wrapper in her hand when she drops the lid back into place and spots the name written on the side.

In big sprawling black letters reads out: Claire’s. DON’T TOUCH!

Now, Lela might find herself a hell of a lot happier than she’s ever felt her whole damn life, but she was still just a shithead. And there was a reason, probably, that she got along so well with Clint and Tony when the two fuckers decided to be the worst versions of themselves. Lela knows damn well it’s a bad idea, but man how it makes a smile spread wide ver her too sharp teeth.

Huffing out a laugh, Lela ducks around to make sure no one’s looking and grabs up the box. She hoofs it fast to the elevator barely managing to get the door to close as she watches Claire and her gaggle of friends exit the cart room.

Hands full, Lela calls out to Jarvis, “Hey J, you mind getting me the fuck outta here?”

‘Of course, Miss Lela. Where to?’

For a hot second, Lela thinks about Tony. If there was anyone in the world that would devour a whole box full of stolen cupcakes and laugh with her, it was him. But then she remembers the fucker had come by earlier and informed her of some meeting he had out of the Tower. So that left two possible options where she could peacefully enjoy her stolen goods without issues.

Knowing what she knows of Bruce, Lela picks him. Because Dr. Banner, with his soft polite smiles and glittering brown eyes, could say a lot of no to just about everyone, but he couldn’t say no to chocolate. Chocolate in any form was as good as gold for the man.

In her minds eye, Lela pictures the way his face practically lights up. Bruce always had this impossibly soft looking kind of smile on his face whenever Lela tossed him a bar of chocolate. It was always the kind of smile Lela found herself taking a mental snap shot of and hoarding it away to be examined at a later date.

“Bruce up in his labs?” Lela questions as she balanced out the big box in both hands.

‘Yes ma’am he is.’
“Alright then J, take me to him.’

*~*

Every door from the elevator to Bruce’s private labs and office open without prompting. Lela smiles each time and thanks the big man upstairs. She gets a ‘you’re very welcome Miss Lela’ each and every time. When the final door is opened, Lela walks into Bruce’s private office with a:

“Yo! You in Doc?”

From behind his desk, half hidden away by the mound of journals and paper work piling high, Bruce squeaks out a surprised noise before jolting up to greet her.

“L-Lela! What, uh, what can I do for you?” Bruce asked as he rushed out from behind his desk to help her. Only he doesn’t actually help because Lela shakes her head at him and carries her pink box to his desk. It leaves him with flailing arms and nervous tittering.

“You busy?” she asks as she looked the gamma man over.

It never failed, Lela thinks, that every time she saw him, Bruce was a complete and fucking mess. She’s not sure what kind of requirements there are to be some kind of smart assed doctor, but apparently one of them was the inability to look after themselves.

For there stood Bruce, in the same fucking navy blue dress shirt and black slacks combo she’d seen him in three days ago. His hair, all soft brown curls, a tangled fluffy cloud on his head. His face—void of his glasses—is covered in a fine dusting that was soon to be a blown out scruff. Just by look alone, Bruce looked worn out and ready to fall over.

Taking in a good whiff of air, Lela can smell all the sure signs of fatigue. Bruce’s usually warm apple pie and cinnamon scent has gone sour. It smelled, more than anything, like a rotting field of apples.

The smell makes something entirely made up of her second nature slither beneath her skin. Worry, the same kind of worry she felt for Tony when he couldn’t be bothered to eat a single meal the entire day, flashes hot inside of her. Worry makes that otherness inside her—all bullshit second natured instincts—want to reach out her hands and soothe the man before her. Something like a whine builds up in her throat, aching to be let loose, to voice her stress.

Because she likes Bruce, with his soft smiles, gentle nature and warm light brown eyes. Lela likes him well enough that she fucking can’t stand the scent of his frustration, his failure, his worry in the air. And the thought of him up here, miserable, makes all that contentment she’d felt earlier boil away. The vapors half burning her as they flew off. Frustration lines her chest as she narrowed her eyes and glared at the good doctor:

“How long’s it been since you went home and slept Doc?”

Confused, Bruce’s tired face pinches tight as he awkwardly shrugged his shoulders and said, “I uh, slept this morning.”

“Where?” Lela demands in a low rough growl, her second nature curling out of the cage Lela was content to let it rot inside of.

Waving at the brown leather couch, all lumpy and ugly, Bruce tells her, “Here?”

Lela can spot the moment Bruce realizes his mistake at admitting the truth. His face pulls up into that
half scared, entirely nervous, expression of his. The same one he used any time Lela growled or snapped her teeth when in his general vicinity. His shoulders bunch up to his shoulders as he half curled into himself. His scent bleeding out into the air something like fear and desperation combined.

It’s an ugly sight and a hideous scent. One Lela’s whole brain can’t stand to be subjected to. So despite the fact that she’s glaring hard enough to rouse up a fight in an Alpha, Lela jerks her head over to the pink box and asks as casually as she can manage:

“You hungry?”

“Uh, n-no, not really,” Bruce stumbles out as he shook his head. When Lela crosses her arms over her chest and pulls her lips up into a purse, Bruce immediately adds on, “But, I, uh, I could eat!”

Rolling her tongue over her teeth, Lela bites back the urge to smile and reaches out to flip the lid on the pink box. Waving at the whole of it, Lela offers the man, “Pick your poison, Doc.”

Hesitating a step forward, Lela watches in silence the way the gamma inched his way over to his own desk. His eyes flashing from Lela down to what lay opened on his paperwork. It’s only when he’s peering down at the contents does he mumble:

“You got cupcakes?”

“You like chocolate, yeah?” Lela idly asked as she reached inside and grabbed a chocolate cupcake. Holding it out for the doctor, Lela waits for the man to take it.

Confused, Bruce takes what’s offered to him with a mumbled ‘thank you’. When he bites in though, he closes his eyes like he’s seeing the face of god himself. Groaning low in his throat, Bruce finishes off the pastry in two whole bites. He’s reaching in for a second one when he asks:

“Where’d you get these?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela smiles and tells him, “A…friend of mine left’em out. Good shit, right?”

Like hell was Lela going to tell the man they were stolen. He’d probably try and regurgitate the shit. Bruce was like that, Lela’s come to learn. Eager as all shit to do the right shit. Kind almost to a fault.

Nodding his head, Bruce happily undoes the wrapper of his third cupcake when he mumbles over his full mouth, “We should call Pep, these are…god, these are so good!”

At that, Lela’s smile half slips off her face. Pulling her gaze away from the happily munching man, Lela stares at the top of her feet as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Things between Pepper and her, well, they’re sort of strained. Well, not really. Nothing could ever be anything but smooth with Pepper. The blonde beta had patience, forgiveness and every good white and noble virtue etched into her eyes. But things weren’t exactly easy now. Not after everything.

Lela had forced Tony into motion. She’d pushed the man into telling his old pack about the pack he was in now. Lela had forced Tony into spilling the truth at Pepper’s feet.

The Alpha man hadn’t wanted to, but, Lela had pulled a dirty move and kicked him where she knew it’d hurt. She’d told him, if the roles where reversed and Lela had a bond with someone else and kept it secret from him, it’d be all kinds of fucked up. It hit the man square between the balls and while she hadn’t been too proud of it, it had worked. Tony had marched his ass up into Pepper’s office and
spilled.

Now, seeing as to how Lela wasn’t there, she’s not entirely sure what went down. She’d offered to go with, but, Tony had shot her down. He’d said some bullshit about needing to handle this on his own. So Lela isn’t all too sure what happened. What she did know was that Lela’s boa on her spine had curled up tight and sparked blazing trails of electricity down to the mid of her claves. Tony’s bond, which was already a loud and unruly motherfucker, had twirled and spun and pulsed with every emotion the man had felt.

Almost all of it had been guilt. Guilt so heavy and fucking destructive that Lela had reached out and gripped that boa tight. Guilt so heavy that even Clint had looked some kind of worried when he asked about it. Guilt so heavy that Lela almost marched up into Pepper’s office to cut the shitshow off.

But then, something soft like hope had trickled down the length of her spine. Hope so frail that it felt as if the boa had taken a breath in and was holding it just incase the feeling fell by the wayside.

Lela’s not sure what happened, she only knows that the boa feels happier now. That Tony himself looked worlds better. Lela only knows that things are being worked out but not what happened.

And so, yeah, the shit might not be between them, Lela’s not all to eager to find out if it’s about to transfer over. So, she hesitates as she listens to Bruce stuff his pretty pink mouth.

There’s still a large part of her—happy, grounded, and settled or not—that was still very much a coward. Lela had no issue pushing Tony into motion that day but she’s finding a hell of a lot of issues doing the same for herself. That knowledge rankles something old in her because that’s not fair.

It wasn’t fair to Tony and it sure as shit wasn’t fair to Pepper.

After all, it was fucking Pepper. The same beta that had taken her out to eat when she had every reason in the world to avoid the person Lela was then. The same beta who’d stretched out a helping hand and had it tossed back into her face. The same beta who patched her up and stitched her up when she could’ve turned Lela over to someone else.

Everything in her, second natured or not, makes a growl grow deep in her chest. Because it ain’t fair to Pepper that Lela can take Tony in one day, slide into Bruce’s office like nothing, but avoid her in the same breath.

It ain’t fair.

So she nods her head and calls out to Jarvis to call Pepper. He does so with ease.

‘Lela? What happened?’ is the first thing out of Pepper’s mouth overhead.

And there it is. The main reason shit between Lela and Pepper couldn’t be anything but smooth. Pepper’s care. The kind the blonde wore on her face, in her voice and in her eyes. The same care she’d given Lela when she was a no one. When Lela was dirty, drugged up and mange covered.

“Hey Pepper, what’s good? You busy?” Lela asks as she dug her fingers into the gray material of her long sleeve.

A long sleeve that came from Sam’s growing stack of clothes left in the hotel room. A long sleeve that still had his lilac, honey and oak wood scent engrained into every stitch. Lela holds tight to that scent. She lets the beta’s man scent, as well as his bond upon her heart, lend her his strength to not
bow the fuck out.

‘No, not really? Why? Is something wrong?’ Pepper questions like she’s five seconds away from hunting her down and making sure Lela isn’t bleeding out from some kind of wound.

“I got cupcakes, wanna come pig out with me and Bruce?”

There’s a half second of a pause where Pepper says nothing. A half second pause where Lela thinks this might have been a bad idea. But then that pause fades away and Pepper calls out:

‘I’ll be right there.’

The call ends without a noise. It plunges Bruce’s office in silence. A silence that is loaded in all the things Lela wishes she could work out. A silence that rings in her ears and her’s alone. It makes her grip tighten on her forearms. It makes her reach out and grip every single one of her bonds and selfishly bask in the ripples than run back from everyone in her pack.

“You know,” Bruce softly starts from where he’s slowly working on his fourth cupcake, his gaze is gentle when Lela looks over at him, “You being, uh, bonded to Tony doesn’t change anything between you and Pepper.”

Lela is quiet as she takes in Bruce’s words. Bruce, unlike Pepper, hadn’t been any kind of vocal about Lela being bonded to his former Alpha. From what she got from Tony, Bruce had merely accepted it and congratulated both of them.

It’s kind of why Lela had no issue still coming around Bruce. The good doctor, with all his pleasing calming gamma nurturing notes, never made Lela feel any kind of way except welcomed. No matter the fact that Lela might be stepping on toes as she was, Bruce was only ever polite and welcoming.

Lela thinks it’s less about the fact that Bruce is a Gamma and more about the kind of man he is. That he can be the best type of person there was, kind and gentle, because it’s just who he was born to be.

“I know,” Lela gruffly forces out of her mouth as she dug her sharp teeth into the insides of her cheek.

She doesn’t know that at all though. But she’s not about to admit it out loud. Her doubt coats her tongue, makes it so it feels like stomach bile, burning the roof of her tongue.

In less than five whole minutes, in enough time that Bruce has nearly finished off all the chocolate cupcakes, Pepper arrives like a living breathing hurricane.

Today she’s dressed in a warm cream colored silk shirt. The kind that hung delicately on Pepper’s sender frame and belled out and cuffed at her slim wrists. Pepper’s wearing black slacks that belled out around her feet. Everything about Pepper, from the glittering earrings she wore, was so bohemian chic it could be modeled on the cover of a fashion magazine.

Sure, Pepper was always dressed sharp enough to rule the company she did, but there was always a softness in her clothes that reflected the woman underneath. Nothing was ever too much. Everything was always just shy of being casual and comfortable.

Smiling wide and pretty, Pepper calls out to her, “Hey Lela.”

That smooth cottony, lavender and chamomile scent of hers invades Lela’s nose without effort. Everything about that scent, so smooth and familiar, makes the tension in Lela’s body bleed out. Her
hindbrain kicks at the familiar scent, aching in that dumb way of itself, to pull the woman close so Lela could breathe it in fully.

That scent, the one she’d thought she’d smelled in a past life, is one of the best things Lela’s ever smelled. Something about Pepper’s scent always filled Lela’s mind of soft memories where she laid out on green grass and bathed in the light of the warm sun. It’s a scent that her second nature insists is home despite it never being anything of the sort.

Fuck whatever shit had happened with Tony, Lela can see it clear as day, it hasn’t carried over to Lela at all. Because, Pepper was too good of a fucking person to be that kind of way.

Licking her lips, aching for a smoke, Lela jerks her head to the side and offers, “Cupcake?”

“Yes please,” Pepper says with an impossibly fond smile spread across her lips. And with that she lets the door close behind her as she makes her way over to the desk and grabs up a vanilla flavored cake.

Only when she’s on her third cake does Pepper ask around her bites, “So Lela, how’s your day so far?”

Huffing out a tired a ragged relieved sigh, thankful that Pepper is just as welcoming as she’s always been, Lela shrugs her shoulders and tells her, “Not bad, I mean, there was a fire over in building C that was all kinds of fucked up. But, it’s all good. You?”

“Much the same, I’ve been in and out of budget meetings. Tony’s trying to convince me into building four more buildings on the west end.” Pepper tells her easily as she made herself comfortable on Bruce’s only other chair in the room.

Brows high on her face, Lela mumbles, “No shit? What the fuck for? This place is fucking endless as it is.”

Which was the gods honest fucking truth. Lela still had to keep a tight hold of that nifty little electrical gadget Pepper had given her so long ago. She was always getting lost despite the many days she’s been working here. Her sense of direction failing her every time she found herself in an unfamiliar building or level.

“I’m not entirely sure, to be honest.” Pepper says with a tired kind of expression falling over her face, “I told him, until he can give me a good enough reason, I’m not pushing anything through.”

“I think he wants to move the R&D department out of the main building and push the test building further out,” Bruce throws out as he made himself comfortable on his lumpy and worn out couch. Only when he’s settled does Bruce add on, “And I think he said something about adding a rec building.”

Laughing, Lela shakes her head and pulls a strawberry cupcake out of the box, “Fuckin’ Tony.”

“That man, I swear,” Pepper huffed and shook her head. She’d look exasperated if not for the way the ends of her lips tick up into something like another smile.

And like that, they all grow quiet. It isn’t tense or awkward, the silence. Lela knows there’s a hell of a lot sitting in the air waiting to fall down, but no one in the room looks like they know how to touch it yet. And call her a fucking coward, but Lela sure as fuck wasn’t going to do it.

It’s Pepper who does though. It’s Pepper that decides to reach a hand up and yank something down.
“So, Lela, how’s Tony been, um, treating you?”

Not knowing how to answer that question, Lela takes a too big bite out of her cake and uses that as an excuse for the way she simply shrugs her shoulders.

“He’s treating you…respectfully, I hope?” Pepper tries as she tossed her empty wrapper into the trash bin.

Respectfully? Lela doubts there’s a respectable bone in Tony’s entire fucking body. That man was fueled in dumbassery and bullshit.

But in all, Tony wasn’t really treating her any different than when they weren’t bonded. Sure now he was way more confident in the way he reached out and pulled Lela into a hug but that was about it. Like, shit, Lela couldn’t fucking look at the man without the dude running over to her and trying to squeeze the air out of her fucking lungs. Just this morning, Tony and tackled her into a bear hug and lifted Lela clean off her feet.

She’d punched him so hard her wrist had popped.

But aside from that, Tony wasn’t any different than usual.

Well, if one didn’t count the weird way he was tossing Lela gifts left and right.

The phone in her back pocket hadn’t been there before. The same day they’d bonded, Tony had tracked her down, tossed the phone at her face and left before Lela could chuck it back. When she’d spotted the Stark logo on the back and the main screen picture Lela had been tempted to toss it into the Hudson. Because like fuck was she going to be walking around with a phone that had Iron-Man—all crimson and gold—standing with his guns out with an American flag waving in the background. But when Jarvis’ voice had slipped out of it, she’d been less so.

Jarvis was a god and you didn’t chuck a god into the river. Lela was still working on changing that fucking background but hadn’t figured how to do it just yet. She’ll probably get Red to do it since she looked like the more tech savvy among them.

And, despite knowing what he knew about Lela, Tony wasn’t really treating her any different. The whole reveal about her dynamic remained just as untouched as the days where no one knew. Sure, there was a weird kind of glint in Tony’s eyes that spoke to the man’s curiosity, but the Alpha never actually voiced it.

“I mean, he’s still the same dumb-shit asshole as before,” Lela offers out as she reached behind her and ripped open her bag of chips.

Nodding her head, Pepper looks like she’s having trouble wording her next sentence before she eventually settles with, “But he hasn’t…he hasn’t made you feel uncomfortable has he? Just because you’re bonded to him, Alpha or not, he can’t make you do anything you don’t want to.”

Brows pinching tight on her face, Lela’s confused for a solid minute before realization crashes into her bright and loud. Feeling like someones come up to her and slapped her straight across the face to wake her up, she stares at Pepper and then at Bruce. Pepper wears this frown on her face with a tight little pinch on her brow while Bruce looks like he’s uncomfortable as all shit and is willing to leave if anybody felt like he should.

Swallowing her mouthful of chips, Lela gruffly asks, “What’s tha’ supposed to mean?”

Something wild burns in the pit of Lela’s stomach. A kind of wildness that is fueled both by her
second nature and everything else that’s kept her alive after so long. A wildness that doesn’t seem to like—in no way shape or form—whatever it is Pepper’s implying. A wildness that seeps out of her gut, into her chest and over her bonds.

That strange feeling grips tight her bonds like it’s half afraid someone’s going to reach on in and rip them out.

And fuck whatever she said about being less likely to bare her teeth these days. The thought of anyone, Pepper, Bruce or not, thinking they could step anywhere near her pack and spit shit like that, Lela was willing as ever to sink her teeth into someone. To trade blood for the insults thrown their way.

And her thoughts, her intentions, must be clear on her face because it sure as shit is clear in her scent. The air around them is filling with smoke, with her rage, with something so dark it might as well be feral. She can hear the way Bruce sucks in a breath and issues out a long gamma whine of peace. The way his head lolls to one side to keep from showing that he’s any kind of threat. Pepper, Pepper though, is not moved.

The scent of Lela’s wrath is sharp—sharp enough to get druggie Alpha’s to balk, back in the day—but not harsh enough to bend Pepper’s neck. All it does is make Pepper sit up straighter, stare firmer, and not bent.

It’d be fucking admirable if it weren’t going against the anger Lela’s steadily filling up with.

“Tony, he’s never…when it comes to Pack, Tony’s never known when to not push. He’s, well, as much as his heart is always in the right place, he never thinks before he acts. And, I was worried that…that he might push you into something you weren’t comfortable with,” Pepper says, her eyes unwavering, though her tone rises and falls.

Jutting her chin out, squaring her shoulders for a fight she didn’t know she’d stumble into right now, Lela throws out, “Tony can push all he fucking wants, don’t mean I gotta let him get anywhere I don’t want him to go.”

“Yes, but, he’s Tony and some times, he kind of thinks that’s what gives him the right.” Bruce mumbles from where he nervously shifts on his couch. The squeak of the leather grating on Lela’s nerves.

“Look, I don’t know what the fuck it is he did in the past, but Tony’s never pushed me on anything ever.” Lela bites out. The truth of her words ring in her ears because, yeah, Tony was a douchebag, but he never pushed her.

For all that Tony was a fucking billionaire, an Alpha and just the best of the best, he never put that on Lela. He never once made it feel like they were on separate levels. If anything, Lela’s always kind of felt like they were on the same playing field despite the gaping differences between them. This whole bond thing wasn’t going to change that. Not one bit.

Tony knew now what Lela was, what she hid from the world, and that hadn’t stopped him from acting any different. He was still the insufferable asshole he’d always been. Only now he followed her back to the hotel to fight with Clint about what they were watching on the tv. Only now, Tony liked to crash in on Lela’s diners with loads and loads of food enough to sate lions.

So nothings changed between them. Not like how Pepper thinks it might’ve.

“I don’t know how y’all ran your pack before, but, Tony ain’t like that with me he’s…” Lela cuts
herself off before she can say the word that sits on her tongue.

Changed.

As much as everything in Lela believes that’s the right word to describe what Tony is now, she doesn’t fucking know that. She’s only known this Tony. The one that helped her get a job because he thought she was funny. The same dip shit that ran out to help her get a bank account and card. The same idiot who always found a way to make her laugh every single day. Lela’s only known this Tony—her Tony—and for all she knows, it’s the same one that broke the Pack he had once been a part of.

So, she doesn’t say it.

Either way, Pepper hears it. Her pale pink lips pinch down as she nodded her head and her eyes fell to her lap.

“I’m not saying this out of…out of some kind of maliciousness,” Pepper starts, her hands clasping together on her lap, “Tony’s a good man. He has his faults, but so does everyone. I’m just…I care about you Lela and the thought of him hurting you—whether it’s unintentional as it sometimes is with him—it worries me.”

It’s then that Lela remembers all that time ago the day she came back to this tower. The day she came by to visit Pepper just to thank the woman. The very first day she’d met Tony. The day Pepper had told her she worried and she carried for Lela.

It’s then that Lela is reminded of the whole fucking running time she’s had Pepper at her side of things. Pepper looking out for her. Pepper taking care of her if only at the distance Lela has ever allowed her at. Pepper dropping by to ask Lela how her day was going even though it was well past the time the beta was supposed to be there. Pepper congratulating her when she’d found out about Lela’s bonds to Red, Chuckles and Sammy.

It’s then that Lela is reminded that this, whatever the fuck this is, is Pepper trying to look after her too. Because that’s all Pepper ever did.

And the unfairness of it threatens to choke Lela where she stands.

Because if the world was any kind of fair, if Lela was any kind of decent and she hadn’t been born all kinds of wrong, it would have been Pepper who’d Lela would’ve bonded to first.

But Lela was born wrong and ass backwards. So she’s left that beautiful blonde beta woman, who’s heart was made of the purest of golds, out in the rain. She’d pushed Pepper to the footnotes and hadn’t looked back.

Grinding her teeth together, Lela harshly admits with her eyes glued to the dark blue tile beneath her boots, “I know. I know you care…about me. But it ain’t like that with me and him. He’s…he’s good now. He’s working shit out, ya know?”

The smile that spreads on Pepper’s lips is tired and delicate as she nodded her head and agreed, “I know. We talked some of it out. We’re going to try to fix some of it.”

“He apologized, to both of us, for what he did.” Bruce tells her as he scrubbed his face. A strange kind of weariness painted across his face like he’s not up for really analyzing what it is he’s talking about.

Brows pinching tight, Lela tosses her chips back onto the loaded desk and crosses her arms over her
chest before demanding of them both, “What the fuck happened anyway? That everything between everyone and their fucking mothers is so fucking complicated? Y’all treat him like he went and murdered a bus full of puppies and kittens.”

“You, uh, you know what it is we do, right? Tony, Natasha, Clint and Sam?” Bruce hesitantly starts as he inched over to the very edge of his seat.

“Yeah, y’all are superheroes or some shit.”

Tightly nodding his head, Bruce glances over to his beta before daring to go any further. Whatever Bruce sees sitting on Pepper’s tightly pinched frown lets him continue on:

“Yeah, kind of, most of us are. When this all first started, the whole Avenger’s project, something happened. We, uh, me and Tony, we kind of made a…mistake. We created something we thought was going to help a lot of people. But it was a mistake. One that got a lot of people hurt and killed.”

Bruce’s words, softly spoken as they are, are bone drenched into his misery and his failure. They weigh down on the good doctors shoulders. Pulling him down as his head hung low between his shoulders. His slumping body only held up by the way he has his elbows perched onto his knees. He pauses in his explanation. His lips falling open on words he doesn’t seem to have the courage to say.

Pepper is the one to carry on as she slipped out of her seat and went to lay a hand on Bruce’s shoulder. There’s a faint rumble in the back of the woman’s throat; a rumble built into Beta’s to comfort when the time came. A rumble that is as smooth and carefree as the woman it came from.

“Do you remember Sokovia?” Pepper asks, her eyes holding an old kind of pain that was still raw.

And honestly, Lela doesn’t. Not really. The name though jogs a foggy memory. One that she remembers hearing some ways back about a city or a town over seas that got bombed. Something harsh enough that a whole ass load of superheroes got tangled up in. Some kind of disaster. Though the specifics, Lela never bothered to learn.

Call her self-centered or heartless, but that shit was a world away from her. So while half the world had stopped to watch with horror and something else, Lela had kept on moving. Her life then was focused on surviving under the reign of an alpha who said he loved her every time he broke a bone in her body. What need did she have then, and even now, to worry about people she’d never met in a town she’d never heard about.

But she nods anyway, doesn’t say anything about any of that.

“We did that,” Bruce admits, his face pulled in his anguish. His scent bleeding out of him lined in misery at the fact, “We thought it’d help. But Ultron…he…he wasn’t what we thought he’d be. And the government was sent after us before the dust could settle. They gave us these, uh, these rules. Rules we had to agree to. Rules that put down in paper what we were allowed to do, what we weren’t. They wanted to round us up into a program that benefited them and only them. They wanted to put down, on paper, everyone and anyone with anything more than human in them. We got told we either played ball or we were gonna be locked up.

“And, well, a lot of us didn’t agree with it. It wasn’t right. But we weren’t really given an option over it. So those of us that didn’t agree, we had to go…off grid. And Tony…he was in a bad way after everything that had happened. He blamed himself for it all. So, he agreed with the accords. He tried to talk us into it. He kept telling us it was for the best. But it wasn’t. It was…it wasn’t!”

Despite feeling like she already knew the answer before bothering to ask, Lela forces her mouth
open and asks anyway, “So, what’d he do?”

“All the information he’d ever gathered from his friends, from those that fought alongside him, he used against them,” Pepper tells her in a low voice. Her eyes fall down and away to the gamma at her side. The grip she has on Bruce’s shoulder tightens as if through that alone she can seep her strength into him.

Slow, like the beginning of a mud slide, their words spill over her. Like she’s rummaging through wet sand, Lela puts together the odd pieces of a puzzle that had been chucked at her feet throughout the entire time she’s known everyone. Lela remembers the way Natasha and Clint had spit acidic accusations at Tony in that first shared shitty meal so very long ago. Lela remembers the way both Natasha and Clint had acted like she’d been in mortal danger when she’d told them she was going to be working here. She remembers the way dark acknowledgment had settled in Sam’s eyes when he’d come to find out too. The way he had looked apprehensive but had encouraged her to carry on her way.

It made sense of a hell of a lot.

Huffing out a heavy sigh through her mouth, Lela scrubs at her face and longs for the days her life was easier. The days where what she was mainly worried about was getting something to line her suppressors with.

This whole living like a normal person gig was shit work.

“That shits…it’s heavy. And I know it’s gonna sound heartless as all fuck, but that shit ain’t got shit to do with me, ya’ know?” Lela throws out because she kind of feels like it needs to be said.

For all that everyone was carrying around the injuries of Tony’s betrayal like it was still fresh and bleeding, it didn’t have shit to do with the fact that he was bonded with her now. It was like someone telling her the surface of the moon was covered in diamonds and that’s why it shined so prettily. It didn’t change shit for the fact that she was still earth bound.

Tony was an asshole—he’d been a major dickhead in the recent past—but he was still…Tony. Lela was still bonded to him. And despite knowing the fact that he was known for selling people out, it still didn’t fill her with unease like she guesses she should be. Tony…he was pack now and that fucking meant something now that Lela’s actively trying to stay in place and not run from it.

So she says as much.

“She’s pack now, for better or worse. And I’m not about to let that dumbass fuck off and run himself into a hole. So let him push all the fuck he wants, I can take his bullshit.”

And for all that Lela means for it to sound like a simple statement, it doesn’t come out sounding like that at all. It sounds, more than anything, like Lela’s putting out a challenge she’s not willing to ever fall down under. A challenge where she knew damn well she could loose but couldn’t afford to.

Smiling, half fond and half regretful, Pepper mutters lowly, “Well…he’s very lucky to have you on his side then, looking out for him.”

Guilt settles deep onto her chest at that smile and those words. Especially, considering, their said to her by Pepper. Running her tongue over her lips, Lela crosses her arms over her chest tighter, and tries to swallow down the lump in her throat. She only manages to wedge it down into her chest before it comes fighting back up.

There’s an ugly thought, swirling around in her head, tilting the cage her second nature sits in, till it
comes crashing to the floor. A thought that aches and slithers through her hindbrain with something like determination. Lips growing tight, Lela’s worst cowardice turns to glare her straight in her face. It tells her not to open her mouth. It tells her it’s better to have what she does and not to ask for more.

But, Lela’s always been a greedy little thing, in one form or another. Where she could, Lela would always stuff her belly full and still reach a hand out to hook a full plate and drag it closer to herself. It’s a habit she’s had long before she’d ever had to stand on street corners. It’s a habit her mother had been quick—so long ago—to point out would end up being her undoing.

In this moment, Lela knows, she’s got her belly full to bursting with all the pack she’s currently got. She’s got Clint, Red, Sam and Tony. In between all of them, Lela’s got the world. It’d be greedy to ask for anything more. It’d be…selfish to want for any more.

But Lela’s always been an ugly greedy little shit. So she bites back the voice of her mother—the memory of her sneer pulsing in the back of her mind, violently—and asks for more.

“So I guess this makes us pack too then, huh?”

Brows pinching in confusion and then blooming with something like hope and inevitably sadness, Pepper shakes her head and tells her, “Not really, we’d be Pack to you only by extension. Pack by Proxy.”

Considering Lela doesn’t really know how any of this shit really works—and considering she’s not at all that smart to work it out if she did—Lela feels like that’s a gray ass area. Sam had explained it to her, once upon a time. How Sam was connected to Natasha and Clint by Lela. That he wasn’t actually pack to them. But Lela calls bullshit on that now. Sam was almost always hanging around Natasha and if he wasn’t then Clint had him buried under fluffy pillows in a nest they’d made in front of the TV. If not, Sam was almost always hanging around Red, cooking in the kitchen or simply running his hands over her bare feet while the demoness read whatever book was in her hands that day.

So Lela figures there’s wiggle room. Enough of it, that if pushed, Lela could shove Pepper and Bruce into her pack in one smooth go. And every inch of her second nature instincts and everything else that she is, is aching to try it. To push because everyone else is dead set in standing in the horse shit of their past.

With that in mind, Lela shakes her head and uncrosses her arms to rest her hands at her hips as she firmly stated, “Nah, fuck that by proxy shit. We either are or we ain’t.”

“Lela,” Pepper starts, her wide eyes staring at her like Lela’s plucked a rainbow out of the sky with her bare hands. “You don’t have to…you know I—we don’t have to be—being bonded to Tony doesn’t change things between us. It doesn’t have to, if you don’t want it to.”

This, Lela thinks, is probably the first time she’s ever heard Pepper be anything but graceful and elegant in her words. It’s a little jarring and a hell of a lot amusing. Or it would be, if all her second nature didn’t want to tumble on out and rush over to Pepper to smooth out whatever kind of hesitance is on her.

“Yeah, I know it doesn’t have to. But it does, kinda. I mean, shit Pep, without you, there’d be no…” at this, Lela waves down at herself and all her sobered up healthy state she’s in, “me. So, we’re pack even if we got no fucking bonds between us.”

Every inch of who she used to be curls tight into itself and aches to bare it’s teeth at the open honesty of her vulnerable statement. But it’s true, so very fucking true. Without Pepper, golden goddess that
she was, there’d be no version of her left. She would’ve stayed on that dirty street corner and wasted away. Realistically, Lela knows, she would’ve died. She’d have met up with a john who truly would’ve finished her off. Or, more likely than not, she’d have OD’d.

So yeah, Pepper wasn’t pack, but she damn well deserved to be. And Lela was tired of leaving her out like she was some kind of fall back secondary net. Bruce too. He’d helped her when he didn’t know who the fuck she was. She’d just been injured and he was a good dude who couldn’t stand back and watch her bleed out. He’d extended his hand out, only ever held it out, and Lela had walked away from it.

Flashing her eyes over to the crumpled form of the good doctor, Lela announces with a gruff, “You too, doc. You’re pack too.”

And for a good long while, both Pepper and Bruce stare at her with wide eyes. Neither of the two look like they can even form words. For a split second, Lela worries they might just actually say no to her. That they might not want to be that tightly bound to her. After all, they were passing strangers in almost everything. Lela didn’t know them like she know Red, Clint, Sam or Tony. Lela didn’t know much else except that Pepper was a breathing angel and Bruce a bleeding saint.

She only knew that they were kind to her when they had no reason to be. That they welcomed her when just about everyone that’s ever met her, seen her or spoken to her, did not. Lela only knew that Bruce still went out of his way to offer her his rose tea when Lela had made it clear she didn’t drink anything outside of soda. Lela only knew that Pepper constantly asked her how her days were going and how Lela might be feeling that day.

Lela only knew that the horridness that was her past life always settled itself down and to be forgotten when she was around them. Lela only knew that she’d fight for them just as much as she’d fight for any of her four dummies.

With that in mind, Lela crosses her arms back over her chest and says, “It’s a shit show most of the time, but, we look out for each other—our pack. Whatever kind of shit y’all gotta work between each other, work on it, but this shit don’t move. It’s either all in, or it ain’t. So, you game?”

And before she can say anything else, her phone goes off in her back pocket. The incessant jingle telling her it’s none other than the raccoon king everyone was tied up into knots about. Grumbling, Lela rummages until she unearths it and the display reads out an image and a messily typed out message.

Unsurprisingly, it’s yet another listing in upper manhattan—a pretty townhouse place that screamed luxury and cash. It’s almost identical to the one Tony’d sent just an hour ago. This one, just like the one before, has almost no faults except that Lela knows it’s probably a hell of a lot expensive.

**Jefe: Wadda’ya think??**

Lips pulled up into a purse, Lela types out nice and slow: *Trash*

Huffing out a breath and ignoring the influx of streaming messages probably lined with the man’s outrage, Lela pulls her eyes up and immediately asks to the two still gaping at her:

“I need a favor.”

“Whа—What kind of favor?” Pepper quickly fires out, her face slowly pulling itself into something like determination. Like she wasn’t sure how fast she could get done what needed to get done but was willing to move mountains either way.
Ignoring the way her heart clenches at the sight of that look, Lela runs a tired hand over her face and admits, “Been looking for a place for all of us, it’s turning out to be fucking harder than turning water into wine.”

“You mean, a place for you, or all of your pack?” Pepper questions, her blue eyes sharpening on all the things Lela had skirted.

Deciding to go for broke, she tells the blonde, “All of us. Don’t wanna leave any of those dipshits on their own. Fuckin’ superheroes don’t know dick about looking out for themselves, ya know?”

What she doesn’t say—though they probably already hear it considering they ran with him in their pack before—is that she is unwilling to leave Tony by himself. That she’s shoving them all under one roof because she’s afraid of what’ll happen if she loses sight of any of them.

“No really, just need everyone to have their own space, bathrooms especially. I could give a fuck about a backyard at this point. I’m just so done with Tony’s fucking constant updates on royal fucking houses.” Lela tells them with a small smirk working its way onto her lips.

Eye’s firmly locked onto her phone screen, it’s Bruce who hesitantly throws out, “I, uh, I might know of a place.”

“Yeah? Alright then, doc, I’m game.”

“It’s not in the, erm, best of conditions, but, it’s got space enough for all of you,” Bruce hesitates, his eyes flashing over to Pepper like he’s looking for some kind of go ahead. Finding no resistance in the blue eyes that land on him, Bruce grows bolder as he pulled himself up to stand, “It’s down in Spanish Harlem, if you got the time to look it over?”

Not bothering to fight the grin that works its way over her lips, Lela pushes herself off the man’s desk and states, “I got the time.”

*~*

“I, uh, bought this place when I sold a patent of mine to the government, in ’99. It was supposed to be my, uh, my private labs. But then I had my, uh, my…accident and I just…well, I never got around to filling it up like I had hoped,” Bruce tells her as they stand outside of a run down building. Pepper is standing at Bruce’s left while Lela stands at his right.

Now Lela’s never been the type to walk into a situation with any kind of expectations. She’s always been a glass half empty kind of girl. That way she’s never had any occasion to be disappointed. Expecting nothing in place of something has saved her from a lot of heartache in her long life. So she’s not exactly feeling any kind of way about the state of the buildings exterior. But with the nervous way Bruce keeps fumbling over his words, desperately trying to apologize without actually saying the words, he’s afraid what’s he’s offering up isn’t up to snuff.

And she doesn’t exactly blame the good doctor. The exterior isn’t exactly promising, all things considered. It looks run down, the building. Like a manufacturing company that’s been out of commission for thirty odd years or so. The neighborhood it’s in, deep in what Bruce had said was East Harlem, was way more gritty than anything Tony had dared showed her.

Since they’d gotten here, a little less than ten minutes with Pepper’s car and driver, at least four
police cruisers had sped past them with their lights flashing and their sirens blaring. Lela can make out the shouts of some type of brawl just at the end of the street where some kind of strip club was opening up for the coming night.

But on this street, the one the building Bruce had brought them to, is lined with mostly abandoned buildings. What windows aren’t broken are boarded up. There’s some kind of empty shell of a theater right across the street and an apartment building on the other end of the street where kids seem to be coming and going in roving packs. Despite that though, where the building sits, amid empty buildings and foreclosed shops, it’s relatively on it’s own.

Which means, Red probably won’t twist up her nose too much. Though the redheaded demon never said so aloud, Lela’s got a suspicion that she didn’t exactly like the idea of living in packed apartments with people surrounding her on all sides. The building was tall, at least four stories, so that meant Clint would have a hell of a lot of room to stretch out his legs. The man was like a cat, constantly needed to stay in motion roaming and the hotel—with it’s limited space—was sure to be cramping him up though he wouldn’t admit it. And it was in Harlem, which meant Sam wouldn’t object at all seeing as to how the man kept saying he was born and raised here. Tony though, that man would find fault in just about everything.

“Can we go inside?” Lela asks over the lit butt of her smoke. She’d sparked up the moment she’d stepped out of Pepper’s flashy navy blue benz.

“Oh, I can call a locksmith,” Pepper offers easily as she pulled her phone out of her clutch.

Eyeing the rusted chain and pad lock over the chipping green front door, Lela asks, “It’s your place right? Like you own it and shit?”

“Yeah, I, uh, do. Why?” Bruce questions as he rubs the back of his thick brown head.

Without bothering to answer, Lela moves over to the metal trash can laying discarded on it’s side and picks it up. Walking up the steps of the building, trash can in hand, Lela grips it tight and bashes it against the pad lock. It gives way around her third swing. The lock scattering to the floor.

Easily tossing the trash can over the steps to lay where she’d first picked it up, Lela goes about unlacing the chain from the handles. Lela doesn’t even need to kick the door in because it swings open on it’s own, like it was never locked to begin with.

With a grin around her filter, Lela turns to the good doctor as well as Pepper and announces, “Easy-peasy.”

Mouth gaping, eyes wide, Bruce stares at her like he can’t believe she’s done what she has. It takes him a while before he can push his body into motion. He goes slow and careful, his head whipping behind him to see if Pepper’s got anything to say on the matter. Pepper only blinks her baby blue’s owlishly and slips her phone back into her little clutch. Neither make a comment on Lela’s actions though it seems like both are somewhat shocked.

The first floor is empty aside from the metal mailboxes in the immediate entrance. Like a long forgotten lobby of some kind. What sits front and center is an ancient looking lift and stairs leading up.

They take the stairs up because obviously the light isn’t hooked up. The second floor, which is just
as empty, is vast even and open, light pours in from these large windows on the far left wall. The third and fourth floor are empty too, which doesn’t really surprise Lela. What does is all the goddamn space. Each and every floor is sprawling. Like maybe it was supposed to be filled up with office shit. There are no walls, no kind of dividers in place or doors. Except for the individual restrooms on each floor. Every floor as a large slab that opens and connects the lift from the lobby. The stairs they’d used the second means for an entrance.

When they’re up in the fourth floor, Lela finds herself by the large industrial sized windows. She’s peering out through the brown grime into the city around them. Her eyes falling down to the empty and breaking buildings that surround the one she’s currently in.

“I know it’s not much, but, uh, there’s something to be said about a clean slate, you know,” Bruce awkwardly starts as he goes to stand beside her. His eyes fixed on the large room around them. Confused, Lela’s brows pinch together as she eyed the man, “Whadd’ya mean?”

“Well, uh, it’s easier to start from scratch than it is to find a house that’ll fit everyone’s personality and lifestyle.” Bruce explains as he ran his finger over the grime lining the window next to him, “I mean, everyone can fill it up or move it around the way they want it to be. It’s…simpler to try to find bare bones and make a home from scratch.”

And yeah, maybe it was, Lela thinks as she stared at the man before her. Every place Lela’s come across has felt wrong. Either it didn’t feel good enough for one of her pack or it was a suggestion made for her and her alone. None of them felt right. None of them felt like they could be little more than crash pads for the people she’s pulled close to her. And Lela knows, knows with everything in her, that she wants each and everyone of them to have a place wherever she settles down.

The mere thought that any of them would feel out of place, uncomfortable, makes the animal in her scream. Because that’s not the point of this. She wants Sam to wake up and have a place to cook his big breakfast’s. She wants Clint to look less like he’s bouncing off the walls the way he did in the Hotel room. She wants Natasha to not stare at the door with suspicion every time some nameless person passed it by. She wants Tony to have a place that was permanent so he’d stop rotting in his labs.

Lela wants each and everyone of them to have a home, to feel like it’s theirs too, as much as she did. For them to have something more than a simple room that belonged to them. She wanted them to have their space to run away from whatever it is they needed to.

A nameless emotion swells, ugly and hot, in her chest till Lela feels like she’s choking on it. It runs rabid down every bond she’s got till they’re all alive and thrumming. Each and everyone of them beating their own rhythm against the one her heart has.

This place, empty and run down as it was, could be a place where they all could fix up to make theirs. This place, Bruce’s place, felt like it had enough space to fill up whatever it is that each of her dumbasses might need.

“It’s nice,” Pepper murmurs as she too came close to the window. Her back is to the view as she pinned her gaze on the rolling room around her, “Needs a nice new coat, but, I think it’ll be beautiful once it’s done.”

Rolling her lips between her teeth, pinching them tight, Lela shakes her head and steps out into the middle of the room. Letting her eyes wander up into the impossibly high ceiling overhead, Lela thinks about all that she’s trying to fit into this place. Four—maybe six—lives trapped within it’s walls. Lela wonders if it’s enough. If Natasha, Clint, Sam or Tony would even like it.
Clicking her tongue, Lela calls out to the gamma man at her back, “How much you selling it for, doc?”

“How much you selling it for?” Bruce’s voice is riddled in his confusion.

Turning to look at the man, Lela shrugs her shoulders and clarifies, “You’re selling it to me, yeah? So, how much?”

“I’m not selling it to you,” Bruce shakes his head at her, his lips twisting like he’s trying to work up the nerve to say what’s on his mind, “I was…I uh, erm, I was…uh…”

Sweeping in, with all the elegance of a princess, Pepper flashes a warm smile over at Lela as she landed a reassuring hand upon Bruce’s shoulder, “He’s offering it to you Lela, not selling it to you.”

This time around, the one wearing confusion on their face is Lela. Dark brows pinching tight, Lela gruffly demands, “What? Seriously? Why?”

Leaning into Pepper’s touch, like it was the only thing holding him up at all, Bruce’s lips stretch on a wobbling crooked smile before he shrugged his shoulders and said, “You, uh, you said we were pack, right? This is…a pack den, right?”

And for a good long while, Lela is quiet after Bruce has said what he’s just said. Not too long ago, Lela would’ve rampaged over the thought of someone daring to offer her something like a fucking building as a damn gift. She’d have spit the offer back into their face and sunk her teeth into their necks. But…but…it’s Bruce and it’s Pepper. And Lela isn’t who she used to be.

Chancing a look into Bruce’s soft brown eyes and then over to Pepper’s sky blue eyes, Lela finds the answer to the proposition she’d given them in Bruce’s office. Pack. Their answer was sitting in there eyes now. Shining like something too delicate to call fire—more like starlight. It shone brilliant and gentle.

And Lela, who constantly tried not to have any kind of expectations, finds she’d been holding her breath on the whole of this. There’d been hope, sitting in her chest, frail and so very brittle, that they might say yes when everything was leading to a no.

Pack, Pepper and Bruce, they wanted to tie themselves to her and everything in her—second natured or not—was so desperate to pull them close and never let go.

Huffing out a small laugh, Lela shakes her head and stuffs her hands into her pant pockets as she told them both, “You guys realize how fuckin’ crazy it is to just go around giving fuckin’ buildings as gifts, right?”

Grinning, Pepper nods her head as she crossed her arms over her chest and announced, “You can blame our alpha for it.”

Laughing, Bruce runs a ragged hand through his hair as he nodded his own head and added on, “Yeah, he bought me a damn car on our first date.”

At that, all three of them laugh because it’s such a Tony like thing to do.

And maybe, because she’s way too raw to touch it just yet, Lela ignores the fact that Pepper’s called tony their alpha. She runs right over it and tries her hand at keeping shit light with a simple:

“Shit, tell me you put out for him doc?”
Sputtering, turning a pretty shade of rosy red, Bruce throws out, “What! N-No!”

“Nah,” Lela laughs, throwing the man a wink as she waggled her brows and grinned wide, “Bet you made him work for it. You’re too fuckin’ classy to fall into that assholes bed on the first date.”

Enjoying the way Pepper’s laughter fell from her lips like the twinkling of bells at Bruce’s unintelligible sputterings, Lela turns her attention to the level she’s on. By all accounts, it pretty much didn’t bother her where she kicked up her feet and decided to lay down. But, she’s not entirely sure how she’s going to convince the rest of her pack.

Probably, picking up on her thoughts by the look on her face, Pepper easily offers, “I can have some people come by fix it up, if that’s alright?”

Pursing her lips, Lela settles her gaze on the blonde and decidedly states, “Pretty sure you ain’t got a choice here Pep, helping push this place into a livable fucking condition falls into the whole Pack territory, right?”

Smile growing impossibly fond, Pepper nods her head as she stepped closer to Lela. Pepper tells her in a low voice, “Of course, like you said, it’s either all in or nothing.”

Feeling her chest grow too small and entirely too full, Lela stares up into that beautiful face and says nothing. When Bruce steps closer, a warm and gentle smile on his face, Lela feels something like a warm breeze slip up her back like a gentle exhale. She feels the way the back of each of her arms tingles—both too warm and too cold—and settles itself. Like two separate ghost hands touching the backs of each upper arm.

Two hands that did not grip her, they held her. Not to push, not to pull—but to guide or to keep her from falling back. Just like the boa on her spine, they would not allow her to bend down. They were there to keep her steadily standing on her two feet. Should she ever stumble, those hands held the promise of not falling flat.

Something hot unfurls in the pit of her belly at the feeling. That feeling—now not so unfamiliar to her—settles down all the second nature bullshit that had been running rampant since their talk up in the tower.

And seeing how Lela’s got four bonds now, experience under her belt and all, she fucking knows what it is thats happened.

This time around, there is no shock, there is no surprise. There is no jarring emotions.

Like everything else that was Pepper and Bruce, the feeling is gentle, warm, kind, beautiful and welcoming. These two bonds—so similar and yet so vastly different—settle down onto her like they were always meant to be exactly where they sat. It felt…it felt like coming home.

And where she’d once been fucking terrified of it before, Lela finds herself grinning sharp and wide at the realization. Running her own hand through her hair, Lela laughs low and long, “Like I said, fuck that by proxy shit.”

Looking all kinds of winded, Pepper pops open her mouth and stares wide eyed at Lela like she can’t begin to put together what’s just happened. It’s Bruce who asks without once stumbling, “Did we just form bonds?”

Lips stretched wide into a shit eating grin, Lela nods her head and tells them both, “Fuck yeah we did, doc. You fuckers are one of mine now.”
Ignoring them in favor of digging her phone out of her back pocket, Lela dials Tony’s number and waits for the man to answer.

‘Kid? What happened? I felt…I felt something through the bond. I—Are you okay?’ tony immediately fires off only after the second ring.

Rolling her eyes at the man, Lela tells him honestly, “Yeah, I’m good and I’ll tell ya when I see ya, Jefe. You got time to swing over to where I’m at? I found a place.”

‘Course I have time. Where are you?’

“Spanish Harlem” Lela tells him as she dug through her pockets to unearth her cigs.

‘What the hell are you doing there?’

“Told you, I found a place. You comin’ or not?”

‘In Spanish harlem?’ tony repeats, his voice colored in his complete disdain.

Laughing, Lela lights a new smoke and breathes down the line, “It ain’t that bad, you fucking snob.”

‘I seriously doubt that kid. I’ll be there in twenty minutes. Jarvis will send your location.’

And before the man can abruptly end the call like he’s so fucking prone to doing, Lela calls out, “Hey, you mind picking me up a burger on you’re way up here?”

Tony agrees, because he never doesn’t. But he kicks up a fuss like it’s a goddamn chore. It makes Lela laugh more than it annoys her.

When she’s off the line with Tony, Lela taps on her phone until she’s got Red reading back at her.

‘What happened?’ is the first thing Natasha says when she answers.

“What the fuck do you guys think I do for a living that that’s gotta be the first thing outta yer mouths when I call?” Lela grumbles over a cloud of smoke. Grinning despite herself because she’s riding on a high that must be bleeding down each and every one of the bonds she’s got now.

Pepper’s and Bruce’s were vibrating, tingling with the happiness the two were holding up in them.

‘Your bond's been restless for the past six hours, and I just felt something like a bond forming, so what happened?’ Natasha retorts as breezily as only the she-bitch can manage.

Pursing her lips, Lela glares into the open air and bites out, “I work for the biggest fucking dickhead in the world. That shits stressful.”

Lela’s not about to fucking say over a goddamn phone call what’s just happened. She’s not about to cheapen the fucking moment.

‘Uh-huh,’ Natasha drawls like she doesn’t believe a word out Lela’s mouth, ‘So what’s up?’

“Y’all got time to come check out a place I found?” Lela asks, because she’s got no fucking idea what the merry band of three gets up to when she’s at work.

‘We have time, Sam’s trying to get Clint to pick up his laundry off the floor. Not much happening over here. Where are you?’
“I’ll send you my location, yeah? Tony’s on his way too.” Lela tells her as she flicked her ash away.

‘Alright. We’ll be there soon.’

“‘kay, bye.” Lela mumbles as she hung up the call and sent the redhead her current location.

Turning to stare other newest pack mates, Lela smiles and flicks the growing ash off her smoke as she said, “Alright, shit’s about to get real fucking interesting.”

Shaking her head, Pepper rubs at her forehead and mutters through a small smile, “I can see why you get along with Tony so well.”

“Yeah, me too,” Bruce murmured as he pulled his glasses off his face and tucked them into his breast pocket.

Narrowing her eyes, Lela mumbles over her cigarette butt, “Hey man, are you, like, fuckin’ insulting me here?”

It felt vaguely like a dig, but despite that, her second nature stretches out at the backhanded compliment. Like it or not, her second nature omega bullshit, fucking adored the douchebag extrodinare.

Spilling out a breath laced in smoke, Lela settles her hands on her hips and declares, “Hope you guys ain’t got to go running back to the tower anytime soon. Cause, you assholes gotta help me convince Tony not to bitch out about this place.”

“You think he won’t like it?” Bruce immediately questions, his eyes going wide.

Lips tipping down into a slight frown, Pepper grumbles, “Tony can find a fault in the stars.”

Agreeing, Lela steadies herself for the oncoming bullshit that was announcing choosing this place and forming two bonds in a single day. And while maybe that should’ve being a little nerve wracking, Lela can only feel her heart thump in excitement. A stupid strange kind of smile refuses to fall from her lips as she eyes Pepper and Bruce where they speak to one anther about all that can be done to fix the place up.

And though they don’t know shit about what’s going on, every single one of her bonds pulses with something gentle like acceptance. The steel bond on her wrist thumps, the ribbon around her chest flexes until it’s snug around her, the flower on her heart unfurls further, the boa on her spine slithers and coils tight and the hands on her arms cup her closer like they’re about to pull her into a hug. It’s almost overwhelming, almost.

For a small moment, Lela feels whole and complete in a way she’s never known she could feel. It’s a feeling that thrums down the very tips of her fingers and down to her toes. It’s a feeling that makes her feel confident to face just about whatever life is stupid enough to throw her way. Grinning, Lela breathes in smoke and exhaleds hope.
Hey guys!!!!
Okay, so first off I'm so sorry I never got around to updating! But home life is currently crazy. My kids gotten super sick, I've been in and out of the hospital with him and I'm currently out of a job so I'm super tight on bills and inspiration has been real low. I'm looking into publishing online--because I've always wanted to do that--and with everything being so tight at home, it's starting to look like that's gonna have to be a viable option for cash flow. So wish me luck on that. And again, so sorry for the long wait.

I know this chapter wasn't the date we're all waiting on, but this was all I could come up with at the moment. In between everything, this was literally all I had time for. I hope no one minds.

I hope you liked it.
As always thank you for reading.
I hope to hear from you guys in the comments!!!
She’s not nervous, she’s not, she’ll cave in the face of whoever was dumb enough to tell her that with the heel of her boot. But she’s not exactly feeling full of fucking confidence at the moment either, she knows.

Not at all.

Running her tongue over her dry lips, Lela bites back the urge to reach into her breast pocket and pull out her smokes. There’s a frazzled, half desperate, feeling running down the whole length of her body. It reminds her of the shakes she used to get back when she was running on dope fumes. Though, this time around, it’s got less to do with narcotics and more of a humanish emotion.

The full weight of her cowardice sits like an ugly slimy stone in the pit of her belly. It keeps her locked in place as she stared down at her nifty little guidance gadget. Lela’s new schedule was blinking up at her cruel and vicious. Sure she was back on day shift but she still wasn’t allowed any of the prime spots in the main tower yet. She’s been relegated out into the wastelands that was building J and fucking K.
Buildings filled to the brim with broken shit and messes as high as the ceiling went.

But, it was cool, it was whatever, long as it was the simple eight to ten hour shifts from before. Lela couldn’t complain.

Only…she kind of misses the mechanic’s wing. She misses shooting the shit with some of the grounds keepers she’s gotten to know from there. Lela also misses running into James in his shop too. It’s been a solid week, almost, since she’s seen him. Six whole days since she went and agreed to that date thing with him.

Her days, which have been filled to the brim with fixing up the building Bruce had given to her, and forcing everyone to play nice in the pack, had taken her mind off it somewhat. But underneath the half tyrannical rule of both Pepper, Tony and Natasha, the building had been cleaned up, dolled up, and made livable in less than two days flat.

It’d be awe inspiring if it wasn’t so goddamn terrifying having to witness Pepper bark orders out to a renovation company run by 50 or so people. It’d be beautiful if not for the way Natasha’s eyes had gone cold and dark when someone suggested painting an accent wall red. It’d be funny if not for the way Tony had poured every inch of his heart and soul to making everything just right for everyone.

But the place was nice now, pretty in a way Lela wouldn’t have thought possible. Lela’s floor—the fourth floor—had been painted a nice cinderblock gray. The color made just about everything else stand out nice and stark. Her kitchen was walled in surrounded in glass with black rims. Her kitchen cabinets—wooden—had been painted a nice soft hue of mint green. It matched with the little stove but made the candy apple red fridge and crimson chairs stand out. On top of her kitchen sat her bedroom, loft styled, supported by big exposed black steel beams. she even had a small little desk up there with her bed, seeing as to how she had space to spare. A pair of matching dark stairs lead up to them. A silver railing had been installed on the off chance Lela might spill over. (Tony had nearly shit a cow when Clint had made the little side comment.) In the large space that was her living room, there sat a big enough couch that could probably fit just about everyone in her pack. It was a mismatched thing made up of a turquoise long rectangle, a navy blue add on and two soft purple single seaters.

(Tony had objected, of course, but with one long hard stare on her end, he’d caved and let her put it in.)

It was nice, way nicer than the concepts Tony had spewed at her with snippets of pictures. She’s got no complaints. Except, maybe, that her bed was too fucking small for her liking. But that, Lela could probably fix on her own.

So, yeah, her days have been busy. In between helping pick out what she wanted—what she’d allow into her level and what she wouldn’t—and dealing with splitting the pack up into their designated floors. Nat, Clint and Sam had bundled up on the third floor. Neither of the three willing to go separate ways despite how much Sam bitched about Clint’s piggish ways. (Though, to be honest, Lela has a sneaking suspicion, Sam would have to be ripped out of Red’s cold dead hands at this point. Those two fit snug against each other like they were born for one another. And Sam refused to budge on the whole birds of a feather thing.) Tony had settled himself into the second floor. And for a hot second, Lela had been worried about leaving him alone own there. Only, the moment he started adding spare bedrooms, she’d been less so because Bruce was grinning the whole while like Tony was hanging the moon for him and him alone. Pepper had merely huffed an exasperating breath at them both but thrown her two cents in every time they two nerds hit a snag.)

So, yeah, her hands have been full.
Forgetting that she only had a limited time to get her head wrapped around the date think, on account of everything else, feels…acceptable. Only, Lela knows it isn’t.

Not at all.

More than anything, it feels like she fucking squandered the days in-between. Lela should’ve ignored all the impromptu lunches with Pepper, Bruce and Tony. She should’ve ducked out of every bad karate movie binge Sam and Clint had pulled her into. She should’ve fought harder to not get dragged into the absolute hell that was helping Natasha pick a couch for her floor.

Lela should’ve used that time to get herself ready. To mentally prepare herself for what she’s about to do.

Because here she was now, standing before a familiar door trying her level best to not hyperventilate.

And Lela knows she can just walk away letting her cowardice get the better of her. It’d be easy, to tuck her tail and run. It’d be so damn easy to give into the coward that she is. It’d be easy to just blow it off and fucking forget it ever happened.

But…Lela knows it isn’t. Not at all. It wouldn’t be easy at all. The thought of James, beautiful and precious James, being done dirty like that? It makes the animal in her fucking slither until it coiled tight and undid itself. It’s fangs sinking into Lela’s chest and filling her with venom till it was leaking out her ears.

the sheer thought of her maybe, possibly, hurting him like that? It made her want to punch herself straight in the goddamn mouth.

There’s probably a million and one different types of reasons for Lela not to go through with this, but, she keeps thinking about James and that smile he’d worn when Lela had asked him. She can’t get the image of his eyes, silver like the moon hanging over his head, glittered like Lela had presented him with gold. So, yeah, she’s got all the reasons why but two that tells her she’s got no choice but to push the door open and head on in.

Gritting her teeth tight, Lela pushes the door open and walks inside. The moment the door opens, Lela hears the soft thrum of an old blues song. It rings sad and heavy in the air like it’s talking about heartache of the deepest kinds without ever saying a word. It’s such a James like song that Lela finds it puts her at ease…somewhat. At least, it makes her smile where she’d been tight lipped and nervous.

That ease though, it dies the moment the door shuts with a clang. Her eyes are quick to find James and all the otherworldly beauty he possesses. She finds him over by another work truck. The hood is open, the engine exposed as James labored over it. He’s dressed in his mechanic overalls, the kind that would look absolutely frumpy on anyone else but him. Those deep chestnut colored waves of his left to fall free and wild down past the lines of his gorgeous shoulders.

The moment the door had slammed, James had pulled his head up and turned to look over her. The moment his eyes land on her, a pretty—too fucking pretty—smile stretches wide over his pink plump lips.

Gorgeous as James looks, smiling as he is, it makes Lela want to turn the fuck around and duck out. Instead, what actually happens, is that her feet find themselves glued to the spot. Her heart hammers loud and mean in her chest as all the air in her lungs swoops right on out.
“Lela,” James rough and tumble voice, all deep baritones and delicious, calls out to her. The sound makes a wild kind of need spill down her throat to pool in the pit of her belly.

All that makes up her second nature, omega and dumb, aches to push a whine out of her mouth and into the air. To declare, in no uncertain fucking terms, just how much Lela hungers for the man. That she hungers in a way she hasn’t felt in…well, long enough that the feeling feels new and strange. An overwhelming feeling that threatens to swallow her whole.

Biting back that bullshit assed cry, Lela awkwardly ducks her head in acknowledgement. Shoving her hands intoner pockets, Lela inches two or three steps further in and calls back, “Hey James.”

Brows knitting in confusion, James searches her face with his steady—gray-gray eyes—and delicately questions, “Is…is something wrong?”

And, fuck, things would be a hell of a lot easier if James wasn’t so…James. Lela probably wouldn’t be so tied up into knots if James wasn’t so goddamn sweet. If he was anything but so goddamn fucking gentle. It’d be easier to go about talking to him.

Lela didn’t really know what to do with a man who looked at her the way James did. She didn’t know how to be anything but a damn mess when someone treated her as…kindly as James did. She’s not sure what she’s supposed to say. She’s not sure how to unglue her tongue from the roof of her mouth for anything that wasn’t fucking filth or aggression.

It’d be easier to do what she’s here to do if James wasn’t a goddamn angel and she a fucking mange riddled stray. And it must say a fuck ton about her that she’s far more comfortable turning tricks than she is being confronted by her fucking crush.

Nothing good probably.

“Nah, nothing wrong,” Lela lies, as she rubbed the back of her neck with her hand. Her eyes falling away to somewhere a little past where James stands.

“It kinda looks like there is,” James hedges, his hands dropping the wrench he’s got down to the tool box at his left hip. Turning so he was facing her entirely, his slate gray eyes roam over her face as if trying to pull from her expression all the things she won’t say.

Whatever they find makes a small frown tip down his lips further. Something like sadness, of resignation and something darker than all of that, wedges itself into the small lines around his eyes.

“Is this about our date?” James asks, the endless lines of his shoulder going taut like he’s bracing for a blow headed his way.

Rolling her lips between her teeth, Lela wordlessly nods her head. Her heart thumping five times harder in her chest. Mouth suddenly dry, Lela opens it and attempts to fucking say what she’s here to say. But the words stay wedged in the back of her throat. Bogged down by all the fear she’s got running rabidly through her goddamn veins.

Running a hand through his loose brown waves, James nods his head and tilts his head down. His eyes are fixed on some nameless place between the both of them as he mumbles, “I ,uh, it’s alright. I…I understand. It’s fine. We’ll just forget about it, yeah?”

For one long moment, Lela stands there, quiet and confused. Her words still caught up in knots in the middle of her throat. She doesn’t really understand what the hells James is saying. But then, like a goddamn wet towel has been chucked at her face, realization slaps her.
Half tripping in her haste to chase away that look of sadness, of regret and hopelessness on his beautiful face, Lela practically shouts, “What? No! I, uh, no—I’m not…I’m not fuckin’ canceling on you!”

Head snapping up, face filling with something like surprise, pure joy and happiness, James stares at her wide eyed. His rugged face, lined in that dark scruff of his, makes her want to fucking die on the spot.

“No?” James asks. His tone all kinds of hopeful and disbelieving. Like he isn’t sure what he’s hearing can be true because it sounds like it might be too good to be true.

Like Lela not giving up on him, on not passing him off, is heaven to him.

Burning hot heat flooding her face, Lela nods her head and rummages through her pockets to unearth a smoke. The clench in her belly—both from the nervousness and seeing James in his mechanic get-up after so long—making it so she hungers for the rough burn in her lungs. Only when her lungs are burning and her hands are busy, does Lela throw out as smoothly as she can fucking manage with her heart in her throat:

“Yeah, I just came by to see if you wanted to, like, fuckin’ exchange numbers or some shit. I, uh, I got a new phone you can hit me up on….if you want?”

As she stands waiting to hear what James would say, Lela’s mind whirls. She can’t believe James—fucking seven feet of living utter perfection—thought Lela’s raggedy ass was about to fucking shoot him down. If anything, Lela was fully prepared to have walked in here and been completely laughed the fuck out. Whoever could look at that face—carved from stone by the hands of angels—and walk the fuck away was seriously damaged in the head. Not even Lela was stupid enough to back away now.

But, then, she’s greedy like that. She isn’t above reaching for something that was clearly off limits to her.

Grinning, James steps closer, swallowing up the distance between them in two long strides of his thick legs, and tells her, “I’d love to, doll.”

Ignoring the flutter in her chest at the petname and the fucking ugly heat that burned the tops of her ears, Lela digs out her phone and hands it over to James without saying a goddamn word. He takes it, the rough pads of his fingers skimming lightly over Lela’s own. The touch is so small, so gentle, so fucking passing but it still makes Lela burn from the inside out. It serves to make her face burn hotter as she stuffed her cig into her mouth and puffed hard and fast.

Clicking down his number, James hands her back her phone and tells her with a smile, “What time you free, doll?”

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela takes her phone back and shrugs her shoulders, trying for casual, “All day?”

“Send me your address and I’ll pick you up at five, yeah?” James questions with a smile that just would not slip off his face.

Nodding her head, Lela flicks her ash onto the floor and flicks the cherry off so she can slip the half smoked cig behind her ear. Thoughtlessly, Lela dares to take a step back and away. She’s almost at the door, her eyes firmly glued to the man’s face when she mumbles:

“I, uh, I got to get back to work. I got stuck out in the boonies.”
“‘kay,” James nods his head, his brows pinching while his smile ticked just a little wider.

“I’ll, um, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, for our, um, date?” Lela heaves out, noticing in that moment that she’s floundering for anything to say in the face of pure and utter awkwardness.

And it’s meant to come out as a statement, but Lela can hear the way her voice—quieter than she’d like—makes it out to be a question. The way she hesitates by the door, hand on the doorknob, speaks to how unsure she is if James will follow through.

Because Lela’s still not sure if this is real. She’s pretty sure this has all got to be some kind of joke. A joke that’s sure to get a hell of a laugh once it’s all done with Lela sitting in her new place watching five o’clock roll into six.

“See you tomorrow, Lela,” James rumbles, his eyes shinning like full moons as his grin grew wider on his face.

And with that, Lela turns the doorknob in her hand and ducks the fuck out before she can make a real ass out of herself. She’s standing out in the mid-afternoon sunlight by the back exit of the building before she can catch her breath. All her bonds, new and old, swirl and burn beneath her skin. She’s pretty sure all her fear, her anxiousness, and everything else have been steadily running down the bonds. She’s more than damn sure her phone was about to blow the fuck up over it all.

But Lela ignores all that, instead she focuses on pulling her phone out of her pocket again. Phone in hand she stares at the new contact on her very limited contacts folder. James has saved his number under J. And it’s stupid, so fucking stupid, but Lela finds she can’t fight the smile that spreads over her lips.

The smile she wears makes her feel all kinds of fucking gooey on the inside. It makes her cheeks ache as her knees wobbled and threatened to give right on out. The thump in her heart makes her feel entirely too big for the bones she’s made up of.

Clicking on the new number, Lela changes it over to James and types out with reasonably shaky thumbs:

‘Hey, it’s Lela. This is me.’

She’s about to slip her phone back into her pocket—not really expecting a response any time soon—Lela is stopped by the short burst of vibration and a new message.

James: ‘Alright, babydoll.’

Thumping her head back against the hard metal of the exit door, Lela tries not to fucking die of a heart attack over a simple fucking text. Biting her lips, Lela stares at the message for far longer than she knows is fucking necessary, she eventually types back her address and waits.

James: ‘See you there, five o’clock, sharp.’

Feeling like maybe she’s about to fall over from the fact that her blood is rushing straight to her brain, Lela stows her phone away and leans back onto the door. Her legs, for whatever reason, feel wobbly as all shit. Her heart beating a whole new and strange kind of beat.

Slipping her smoke out from behind her ear, Lela strikes up again and lazily walks her ass over to the building she’s been assigned with today. The smile painted across her lips refuses to fucking die the whole way.
It takes a hell of a lot of hard work for him not to jump at every little thing. To not fall into all the horrid fucking conditioning that’s been engrained into the very marrow of his bones. To not see the people around him as targets. To not know—without a shadow of a doubt—about what type of pain he can inflict on a passerby on a single glance. It takes a hell of a lot of hard work, but he thinks, he’s almost there.

Almost alright.

Hell, he’s better than he had been six months back. Fresh out of the whole civil war fiasco. He’s better, he knows he is. He can feel it in the way he pulls in a breath. He can feel it in the way he can sleep a whole night through sometimes and not wake up drenched in a cold sweat and panting. He can feel it in the way that it’s become easier to smile now.

“Hey Buck!” Steve’s familiar happy voice filters through the phone he’s currently got pressed lightly to his left ear.

Even after all this time, Steve still refuses to call him anything but that old nickname. He’s tried to get the other man to stop. To call him anything but that. But Steve was a persistent ass, always had been, always would be. He won’t move on something until someone comes along and gives him a hard enough shove.

So far, neither one of them has met the type of person that could do that. He kind of fears the day he does. He doesn’t want to meet the force that can move a fucking mountain.

“How’s it going stateside?” Steve asks, static filling the empty space between his words.

Steve was using one of SHIELD’s old satellite phones. The kind that had gone obsolete about five minutes into the mass production. But he knows it’s Steve’s favorite, so Steve wasn’t about to let it go anytime soon. He’d horde it until it finally wore itself down or ended up getting busted in a firefight.

For a moment, he thinks about giving the short answer. That he’s fine. That he hasn’t had any kind of broken flashes of memories long forgotten while in the middle of walking. He thinks about skirting around everything else.

But it’s Steve and there’d been a time when the two of them had lived inside each others pockets. Defying all logic, both being alphas, and sticking close to each other like Pack ought to. there wasn’t a thing about each of them the other didn’t know. Even back before the war, they’d had each others back, they’d have stepped in front of bullets in their neighborhood for one another.

So he decides to go for broke. He lays it out as neatly as he can:

“Good, pretty good. I, uh, I got a date?”

“Seriously?” is Steve’s immediate response. The one word ringing with Steve’s disbelief and general dubiousness.

Laughing, he pulls the phone closer to his face and leans his ass onto the work bench at his back, “Yeah punk, I can still get me one of those.”
Sure, hydra had stolen most—if not all—of who he used to be, made him into a completely different person who still wore the face of some forgotten relic, but he’s still human. Or, at least, a solid 75% of him still was.

Laughing long and loud, Steve shouts, “Look at you! Still got the moves, jerk! What’s she like?”

“She’s, uh, she’s kinda like you actually. About the size of a damn chipmunk with a hell of a mouth. Knocked an Alpha clean on his ass just for givin’ her lip. Hell of a spitfire,” he says with a rueful laugh.

The memory of Lela, all five feet of fury, dropping that asshole was a memory he would cherish for as long as he could. The sight of her face, shimmering caramel, twisting as an unholy roar split past her plump lips, did all kinds of things to instincts he’d thought were long dead and gone.

“Ah, sounds like a girl after my own heart!” Steve jokes, his voice happy and bright, like he’s more excited about the whole thing than maybe he was. Which was probably the case, knowing the blonde alpha.

“Yeah, she’s…she’s pretty great,” he mumbles, his eyes falling down and away to his boots.

And she was. Lela that is. She was great. In all the ways that made his Alpha instincts sit up and take notice. There was strength in her dark black eyes. A strength that wasn’t quiet like everyone liked to think it ought to be. It was a strength that roared, raged and burned down anything that was stupid enough to try to push her down. Lela, slim faced, sharp cheekbones, cupid bowed, was the type of girl that could stand tall even if a storm raged around her.

She was beautiful in all the ways a natural disaster were sure to be. Devastating in it’s sheer destruction but a marvel to behold in motion.

On more than one occasion, he’s found himself thinking of the way her dark brows pinched together in thought. The way her lips quirked up into a smirk when she thought something was funny at the expense of someone else. The way her eyes, dark as shadows, gleamed like maybe they were filled with stars uncharted. The way her nose wrinkled every time he vetoed a song she seemed to be a fan of.

On more than one occasion, he’s sat around with the memory of her brushfire scent and whatever nameless thing came with it. For all that Lela seemed to be up of strength and will tempered in hell fire, there was something about the kindness in her voice that suggested there was something soft about her too. It was in the way she bared her scars for him. The way she’d offered to include him when she hadn’t needed to. It was in the way she smiled at him and laughed.

Especially in her laugh. That laugh, it haunted his dreams. The way it dipped down with her usual husky drawl and then high like bells on the wind.

These days, more often than not, he’s dreaming less about Hydra and more about smooth brown skin and eyes made up of shadows.

“Well, I’m happy for you Buck!” Steve shouts, his voice tinged in genuine happiness. And then, on a more serious note, Steve’s voice drops to a quiet, “Hows, uh, hows Tony treating you?”

The question serves to knock him clear out of his infatuated thoughts in one single hit. That question forces all thoughts of plump lips, dark eyes, brown skin and brushfire away.

He and Tony, they weren’t exactly what one would call close. After everything, they wouldn’t be.
Like all else that had anything to do with Hydra, the tape had been manipulated. Someone had twisted and forged to show in ugly light the worst of the Winter Soldiers capabilities. That he was nothing more than a trained mindless beast. A beast that could kill without effort or remorse.

Only he hadn’t. He hadn’t killed his friend. He’d stopped. Call it faulty wiring, but he didn’t take the shot. Something had stopped him and, well, the situation was handled by someone else. Someone who could pull the trigger where the Winter Soldier could not.

Still, the tapes hadn’t shown that. They’d shown him killing Tony’s parents. And for a good long while, that was the evidence Tony believed in—as did he. For there it was, in black and grainy white. The evidence to show he had been—was still—a monster. It’d taken well over the course of the supposed ‘civil war’—as the inner circle has come to call it—for the truth to be revealed by some ex-member of hydra.

For the original tape to be pulled out from the dark and into the light.

By then, the damage was done. Tony had mourned, had grieved and pinned him as the monster he knew himself to be.

Things between them, well, it was rocky at the very least.

The fact that he’s here, working in one of his buildings, was on account of Virginia. That one was a hell of a person to say no to. She took one look at him, fresh off the chopper with Steve and she’d taken him in no questions asked. Called him a POW who deserved compassion instead of the scorn he received on a regular basis. He doesn’t agree at all with that, but he keeps quiet when she levels him with that hard stare of hers.

 Whoever was stupid enough to think Beta’s didn’t have what it took to be any kind of leaders, he’d happily send them Ms. Potts’ way.

Because that was a woman even hell had to heel for. She’d defied her Alpha—Tony—and offered him a job fixing things up where he could.

Six, near Seven, months in and he and Tony hadn’t once run into each other outside of mandatory Avengers briefings or debriefings. They both kept out of each others way. They didn’t speak to one another unless strictly necessary.

He guesses, even with the truth clearing some of his name, Tony wasn’t ready for that yet. Neither was he, to be honest. He still has nightmares that revolved Tony’s horrified expression pointed at him. So he doesn’t begrudge the other Alpha’s wariness and general hostility. It was…he understood.

“No, we keep out of each other’s way,” he says eventually. Tries to sound as casual as he can over it.

“Buck, do you need me to come down there? I can be in a ship in less than five. I don’t mind, I’ll go,” Steve says hard and without hesitation.

It’s almost awe inspiring, the way Steve can go from being a general ray of sunshine one minute to a no nonsense general the next. Less so when all of that no-nonsense is aimed in his direction. Because he doesn’t want Steve’s worry because that worry usually came paired with a sad kind of pity. The kind that made his long dead Alpha instincts come back roaring with a vengeance.

“It’s fine,” he bites out, feels the phantom ache of his fangs wanting to grow long and deadly.
But he’s good at being able to separate himself from his second nature. One of the first things beaten into himself is being able to do just that. It made him easier to deal with. An Alpha in his absolute prime that could bow to handlers that were all usually gammas.

It probably had a hell of a lot to do with that serum of theirs. The one they’d created in an attempt to recreate the one running through Steve’s veins. That mad scientist of theirs, hadn’t been able to make an exact copy, but he’d made one pretty fucking similar. He now had all the strength Steve had, speed and all, healing factors too, but he had none of the heart that seemed to have only been amplified by Steve’s serum.

His humanity had gone spilling out of him, burned out by the red tinged liquid of theirs, the moment it was pushed into his blood. They made him into something that was probably the other side of Steves coin. A darker side that was all predator. All the worst parts of being an Alpha raging in him but none of what kept them human.

“You sure?” Steve asks, like he’s really about to jump into a ship at the first sign of trouble. Like he could give a flying fuck about the month long mission he’s been working on. Like the world would stop only because Steve had to come check up on an old friend.

Huffing out a breath, he tells him, “Yeah, I’m sure. Anyway, don’t need you comin’ round and stealin’ my girl.”

Laughing, Steve teases, “Oh, you know me, I’m a real ladies man these days. Better watch out.”

“I bet, girls throw themselves at yer feet when they see that damn shield of yours,” he jokes, finds himself marveling at how easy it is to do that these days. To not be so bogged down with all the black he’s got running down his hands.

“Yeah, yeah, jerk,” Steve laughs him off. For all that Steve was handsome, a goddamn dreamboat really, the man still was—and could only ever be—that awkward kid from back home.

It makes a smile spread across his face that’s entirely too fond to ever be shown in the other man’s direction.

“Alright, you let me know how that date goes? I gotta get back.” Steve says as the familiar pop of a gun going off fills the background.

“See ya when you get back punk,” he tells him sternly, like that’ll keep the man from doing anything too stupid while he’s away.

“Yeah, knock’em dead,” Steve encourages, and then tacks on at the end because Captain America or not, Steve was still a little shit, “See if she’s got a sister!”

The call ends with a click. Huffing out a laugh, he stares down at his phone until the screen goes black. Not for the first time does he think it’s strange that he’s here and Steve’s out there. He’s fixing cars while Steve dodged bullets. Everything about it rankles an old part of himself. The one that came from having grown up alongside Steve. The side of himself that clawed tooth and nail through the trenches of a war long since won and printed in black and white. The side of himself that still calls himself a Howling Commando says he shouldn’t be anywhere else in the world then right by Steve’s side.

But this is the way things are now. Steve’s out there, fighting the good fight, trying to keep the world from falling into the wrong hands again, standing up for what was good and true in the world, and he was here. Hidden away from prying eye in Starks tower because his mind was no good on the best
days.

He knows he can easily switch himself over into active duty with a simple word. No one would fight it. Well, nobody but Steve. But he’s not in any hurry to ship out now. Not with smirking brown lips, dark black eyes and brushfire haunting his steps. He figures, if he’s ever going to be any kind of selfish, it’s now.

Forcing himself to his feet, he gets back to work. At least four separate work trucks have come in needing repairs. Two of which needed a whole day’s worth of work to get them back in top shape. So he busies himself with that. All other thoughts just slip right out of his head.

The day moves on like that, empty and uneventful, until it doesn’t.

Stowed in his back pocket, his phone goes off with a ping. Stilling in his work, he reaches for it and peers down at the illuminated screen. He’s expecting it to be Steve, or one of the avengers agents currently roaming around, because very few people have this number at all. Fewer still that would send him a message. He half expects it to be something about a mission he can’t turn down. But it isn’t.

The name reads out ‘Lela’ and it makes everything in him still. Carefully, he opens up the message and reads what she’s sent.

“Hey, sorry to bother you. But I was kinda wondering what are we doing tomorrow? I forgot to ask earlier.”

A bullet in the gut couldn’t stop the smile that spreads across his face. Silently, he runs through all the possible answers he can give the girl. But before he can even begin to type another message pops in:

“Again, sorry to bother you.”

And there it was, that softness he’d seen only glimpses of. It was that softness he’d seen this morning. When she’d come his way to swap numbers. When he’d thought she was here to change her mind. When she’d settled down all the fears he’d had with a hard little glare of her eyes filled with determination. The same softness that had her tripping over her own words. The same softness that had her burning up a pretty pink all the way down her neck. The same softness that made her go all wide eyed anytime he called her a doll. The same softness she’d had when she’d asked him out in the first place.

It’s that softness—buried down low, under barbwire and glass shards—that has him as gone as he is. Because he’s gone, so utterly fucking gone he can’t find his feet under him. What little memories of his past he can piece together of sweet-faced dames he’s wooed with a smile that wasn’t his anymore, pale in comparison to the way he feels when he sees her.

There’s a breathlessness in his chest like when he runs miles on end every time she smiles. There’s a swooping in his belly every time she laughs that reminds him of the first times he’d jumped out of a heli-carrier back in the war. The need to puff his chest up and out, to present himself as a viable alpha, every time she looks his way…it feels new to him.

Invigorating, yes, but so damn frightening too.

Carefully, he types out: ‘I was thinking diner and a show, if that’s alright with you doll?’

Contrary to popular belief, despite being a hundred years old, he wasn’t as technologically impaired as Steve was. He did know his way around a whole manner of things. He kind of had to be where
Hydra was concerned.

“K. cool.” Lela sends him. There’s a half second pause where a bubble forms out her next reply then vanishes. It pops up again only to disappear again. It happens at least four separate times. Each time it does, it makes his smile grow wider as he stared at the screen, waiting.

Eventually, Lela settles with a simple, “See you then.”

“Five, sharp.” he sends back to her with a grin that was testing the limits of his lips.

Pocketing his phone, he sets himself back to work and tries to ignore the way the clock overhead drags it’s feet. When it rolls around to eight, he sets his things down and heads out. For the first time in six long months, he heads back to his apartment early. After all, it wouldn’t do to show up any kind of way except properly rested for his date.

It feels like a running theme, he thinks, since he meet that sand colored beauty, that he finds himself feeling lighter and eager to meet the coming day.

*~*

Early morning breakfast’s are always hectic where the pack was concerned. It was a lot of bitching from Clint for the food to hurry up. Tony complained about ordering in. Natasha constantly throwing out hideous suggestions about egg whites only.

Now that Pepper and Bruce were thrown into the mix, it was more so.

They’re all in the third floor, Nat’s, Clint’s and Sam’s because Sam was the only one of them that was firm about starting the day with a decent meal. It’s a whirlwind of energy. Sam at the stove, Pepper mixing something in a big bowl that smelled an awful lot like blueberries and Bruce on the counter cutting up grapefruits. Lela herself is seated on the long white kitchen island with Nat on her right and Clint on her left. Tony is running between Bruce and Pepper trying to snag whatever already made. Each attempt earning a severe look thrown at him by baby blue eyes.

It’s nice, Lela thinks. So very comfortable to be surrounded by all the idiots she’s conned into being a part of her life. Or at least, it would be nice if Lela wasn’t about to squirm right out of her skin.

Huffing out an irritated breath, Lela roughly runs a hand over her face. By Lela’s standards, it’s way too early to be up and about. Way too fucking bright for her to be wide eyed. On any given day, Lela was loathe to crawl her ass out of bed before 12. Seeing how it’s her day off, she’d still be up there right now.

But todays the day. The day she’s gotta go on a date with an actual god.

She’d barely slept last night. Too fucking anxious and scared to rest. So when the text had come in from Sam that breakfast was getting under way, she’d rolled out of bed and come on down.

“You got any plans today babe?” Clint asks as he laid his sleep fluffed head on her shoulder.

Grumbling, but not pushing the man off her at all, Lela tells him, “A bit, yeah. Why?”

“Just wondering, you’re never up this early,” Clint yawns out as he pushed his entire weight onto her.

Rolling her eyes, Lela throws back, “Neither are you, you fucking sloth.”
“Both of you are sloths,” Natasha drawls as she tapped away at her phone. Without glancing up, Natasha asks, “What kind of plans do you have?”

For one wild minute, Lela contemplates not answering or maybe lying. She’s not sure how any one of them is going to react to the news. If they’ll approve or if they won’t. She thinks it’d be safer if she did just in case they try to talker out of it. Because Lela knows she only needs one good solid reason to back track. Even a flimsy one would be enough to snatch up her phone from where it sits on the counter and fucking text out a lie to James.

But then, that part of her that’s been softened up—the one that’s half filled with all the things she’s tried to kill over her lifetime—refuses to let her do anything of the sort.

So gripping tight to what little bit of courage she’s got this morning, Lela opens her mouth and says, “Got a date.”

Three simple words. That’s all it takes. Three simple words that, on their own, are harmless. Three simple words that, if they came from someone else, wouldn’t mean much of anything.

Three simple words, that’s all it takes, for Sam’s rustic barn house kitchen to be plunged in fucking death like silence. Three simple and useless words that still the world completely.

“Whoa, whoa whoa,” Tony starts off, his eyes pulled wide as he spun around from where he was bullying Sam into handing over a sausage. Nine o’clock in the morning or not, Tony was dressed in a flashy suit and tie like he was ready to walk the runway. His tie was a shock of electric blue that made his brown eyes glimmer, “What was that? I thought I heard you say date, kid? Did you just say you had a date? Like a date-date where there’s a certain type of room lighting required. Or a ‘Oh, cool, we’re friends lets go hang out’ kind of thing? Because there’s a difference. A big difference.”

Ignoring the ugly thump in her chest and the heat working its way onto her face, Lela glares at the man and tells him, “You’re a real asshole of a problem in the morning, you know that?”

Moving fast to lower the flames on his stove top, Sam spins around with a wide smile, “That’s great Lela! Where’re you guys going?”

“Yeah! I’m happy for you!” Pepper exclaims with a wide and pretty smile that could shame the goddamn spring time flowers.

“What’s their name?” Natasha immediately questions, her phone abandoned and her eyes narrowed on the side of Lela’s face. The look in her jade green eyes leaving no doubt the she-devil was about to hunt down whatever she could on whatever name Lela gave her.

It’s as intimidating as it is somewhat heartwarming.

“Chill out Nat,” Clint rumbles as he pulled himself off Lela’s shoulder and reached a hand around her back to knock his fist into Natasha’s shoulder. When he’s properly righted, he turns to Lela and says with a warm and gentle smile, “Hope you have a good time babe.”

And it’s so stupid, so fucking juvenile, but in that Lela finds herself growing both small and scared and yet welcomed enough to say it out loud. Roughly heaving out a breath, Lela runs her hands through her hair, her nails scraping over her scalp, as she told them all:

“It’s probably the worst fuckin’ idea I’ve ever had, but yeah, it’s a date-date. I asked a dude out from work who’s, like, way the fuck outta my league. I don’t even know what the fuck I’m doing here which is probably gonna wreck whatever fucking chance I’ve got. And, like, fuck—I’m so fucking nervous I feel like…puking. This is probably a bad idea, the shittiest one I’ve ever fucking had.
After she’s essentially word vomited all over the damn place, Lela clamps her lips closed and tight. She glares at the counter top as she tries to desperately wrangle all the running emotions through her chest. She’s got fear, doubt, fucking anxiousness and just a dash of desperation swirling black and ugly in her. Every thought she’s had since she agreed raging to be heard first.

All her insecurities rearing their ugly ass heads to stare her right in the eye. Whatever kind of hope Lela had been running on the previous day dying under their dead eyed stare. that self loathing she’d almost forgotten about under all the care she’s surrounded by on a daily basis comes back with a vengeance. That particular voice whispers in the dark of her mind. a ghost’s voice. A voice that came with pain and violence.

Her mothers voice rings. Her Ex’s voice screams.

She doesn’t have one goddamn thing about her to be worthy enough of looking at James the way she does. To want him the way that she does. To ache for him in the way she finds herself doing when she thinks about his soft smiles and his rumbling laughter.

The memory of their voices, of all the filth they’d slung at her, makes her flinch back into herself until she’s coiled in tight. There’s a growl deep in her chest working its way out of her mouth. Desperate to get those voices out of her as she tried to build up some kind of defense. Lela can feel the way her shoulders grow tight. The way her body readies itself to both fly away and push through with fangs and all.

Anger grips her then. Anger at herself, hate for all that she is—was, still could be—filling her up like smoke from a burning fire. Her hate is harsh enough that she can feel the way their being fed on down the lines. The way her bonds stretch and pull as they’re bombarded with all the shit Lela can’t seem to deal with.

Bonded or not, pack stable or not, Lela was still fucking hopeless when it came to dealing with her emotions like any other human was born to do.

Eventually, the loaded silence that follows her words is broken by the careful and gentle words of Bruce. He moves quietly as he places his knife down and stands opposite of Lela on the kitchen island. There’s a tender kind of smile stretched out on his pink lips as he pushed his glasses up his nose. His bond—the hand on her left arm—pulsing with this cool kind of pressure that took the sting out of all the insecurities in her chest.

“First dates are always pretty nerve wracking,” Bruce tells her easily. She can see the way he braves her growls with something like kindness as he reached a timid hand out and placed it on her balled up fist upon the counter. His touch, like the bond on her arm, is careful and delicate, like he doesn’t want to push because he’s afraid what it might do to her.

It makes something shake in her chest. Shake hard enough that some of the tension bleeds out of her shoulders and her growl lessens.

Eyes caught in the kindness that seems to make up Bruce’s pale brown eyes, Lela finds herself admitting, “I’m fucking scared. I’m not…he’s too good and I’m…I’m not.”

That seems to be the thing that breaks the levy on everyone else. For her bonds explode, they fucking expand and break apart on how they push into her everything good and warm. It makes Lela seize up with the force of it as Clint pulls her into a rough hug and everyone rushes forward to lay some kind of hand on her.
“Hey, kid, if anyone’s out of anyone’s league it’s him, yeah?” Tony sternly tells her. His eyes hard as if he will not move on this for all that Lela might throw at him.

“Yeah girl, you’re out of your mind if you think that,” Sam agrees. Though he’s smiling, he’s got this look in his eyes like he’s ready to fight her on this, “Whoever it is you’re going out with is the lucky one here.”

Natasha’s hand, which had fallen to clasp tight onto her thigh tightens as if in agreement, as the redhead merely hummed a note in the back of her throat.

“You’re good Lela, so fucking amazing. I’ll kick anyone’s ass that tells you any different,” Clint half cried onto the crown of her sleep rumpled hair. That grip on her thigh growing tighter at Clint’s words. Like Natasha was promises something a hell of a lot darker than an ass kicking like Clint was.

Working her way around Bruce and Sam, Pepper reaches over and grips Lela’s free hand with an encouraging smile, “Whatever happens, we’re here at the end of it.”

And Lela’s not really a crier, never has been, but in that moment with relief rushing through her wild and unbridled, she feels like she might. Only she doesn’t because it’s way too fucking early for that bullshit and she’s not about to ruin breakfast.

Pulling in all the warmth from all her bonds, Lela drags in a breath through her mouth and exhales through her nose. It takes her a hell of a lot longer than she’d like to finally pull herself away from Clint’s too tight hug and all the limbs currently not her own. She manages, eventually, and throws out—in an effort to kill the mood and shift the attention off of herself:

“Something’s burning.”

With something like a yelp, Sam spins around and rushes towards his abandoned food and attempts to salvage it from the flames. Laughing, Bruce helps him while Tony rushed at the unguarded pile of bacon. Pepper swats him hard but it does nothing to temper the smile on Tony’s lips as he happily munched.

For a moment, Lela thinks the conversation has ended. Her crazy and embarrassing outburst forgotten, but it isn’t. She should never have even thought so. Not with the devil at her right shoulder. Shit like this never just stopped where Natasha was concerned.

“So when is it, your date?”

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela shrugs her shoulders and says, “‘round five, why?”

“That’s plenty of time,” Clint announces with a firm nod of his head and a quick flash over to Natasha.

“ Barely, I mean, have you seen what she calls a decent wardrobe?” Natasha drawled dry as desert winds.

“You mean the lack thereof? Every thing she owns has been stolen off you fashion less dorks.” Tony exclaimed as he snagged yet another strip of bacon before Pepper could come down on him.

Confused, properly so if Lela had to admit, she glares at every single one of the assholes talking and asks, “What the fuck are you guys going on about?”

Huffing out a breath that said he was completely put out at having to explain what he thought was
pretty damn obvious, Tony whirls around and points a long finger at her as he announced, “We’re taking you shopping kid.”


Shopping with both Chuckles and Red was always a goddamn chore. The two times she’d allowed them to drag her out of the hotel room, she’d regretted it almost instantly. Between Natasha’s terrifying dead-set determination and Clint’s wild energy, Lela was exhausted twenty minutes in. She doesn’t want to find out how Tony was gonna act.

“Kid, you need to look your absolute best on a first date.” Tony told her as he pulled his phone up and started making calls. In between speaking to whoever he was, Tony tells her, “As the kids say, you gotta *slay.*”

“Oh my god,” Clint groaned, his face twisting up in distaste, “Don’t fucking talk like that dude. You sound like such an ass.”

“Oh, like you’re any better,” Natasha sniped as she took a small sip of her tea.

And that nervousness that had settled underneath all her pulsing bonds whirls back up into motion.

As if feeling it, Sam turns to offer her a warm smile and tells her, “Hey, it’ll be alright. You can go dressed in a garbage bag and you’ll still knock’em dead.”

“Yeah,” Pepper agrees as she slid a plate filled with eggs, pancakes, bacon, hash browns and sausages in front of her. Over the steam of it, Pepper adds on, “But if you’re up for it, I’d like to help you get something for yourself.”

Lela knows she could blow the whole thing off and just rummage through her limited supply of clothes for something that would be passable. She knows she can just ignore it, maybe pick her less worn down pair of pants and just be done with it. But the thought of looking like a goddamn ghoul in front of James makes her fangs wanna grow. Her second natured bullshit rakes it’s nails down her spine at the thought.

Plus, Lela knows half her shit doesn’t fit her anymore. She’s gained weight ever since she started being feed nearly every hour on the hour by at least one of them. All those protein shakes and late night pig outs had filled her out in a way she can’t rightly remember herself being. Her pants felt tighter, the button only closing if Lela fought with it. So regardless of the date, she’s well past due getting something that didn’t make her ass feel like it was being strangled. The one bra she had no longer fit her and all her underwear were being stretched to their limits.

So she merely nods her head as she picks up her fork and starts shoveling food in. She’s halfway done before she dares to say:

“Alright, but I don’t want to be there all fucking day. An hour, tops.”

Groaning, Tony places his phone on the counter and glares at her, “I can’t do anything in an hour! That’s not enough time!”

Rolling her eyes, reaching for the orange juice cup that Bruce slides her way, Lela tells the petulant man, “Tough shit, Jefe. I ain’t standing anywhere for any longer than that.”

“An hour should be fine,” Pepper announces before shutting Tony up with a plate made near entirely of bacon and pancakes only.
In the end, Lela should’ve made it thirty fucking minutes. An hour was way too long of a fucking agreement. Within that hour they’ve gone through an entire store that Tony has personally reserved for the day. Within that hour Lela had been tempted to strangle herself with all the bra’s Natasha had shoved at her to try on. Within that hour, Lela had attempted to escape a hand full of times with Sam when she’d been corralled into a goddamn dress.

“I’m not wearing a fucking dress,” Lela spit as she tossed the material back into Clint’s face.

“Why?” Clint asks, his face pulled into something like slight disappointment as he gripped the pale pink thing in his left hand, “It’s pretty.”

“Chuckles, I swear to god, how many times do I gotta tell ya? I don’t do fucking dresses.” Lela snapped as she tried to pull her foot out of Natasha’s unbreakable grasp.

The shoes Natasha was trying to get her into were heeled and looked like something that went with a sunday school get up. It made Lela want to barf.

“How about this?” Pepper asked as she held up a collection of fancy looking shirts. All of which looked like if Lela wore them she’d be heading to a goddamn job interview.

Clenching tight her eyes, Lela kicks the heel off her foot and growls low and frustrated. She’s about to walk out, boots in hand, and head back to her fucking building when Tony comes rushing at her.

“Come with me kid,” Tony tells her before grabbing her shoulders and strong arming her into the opposite direction of the exit.

Pushing her until she’s standing before a rack of clothes made up of entirely black clothes, Tony waves his hands around and grins at her:

“Whadd’ya think?”

Narrowing her gaze at him, Lela steps forward to run through the rack as fast as possible. About five shirts in, Lela finds almost everything is exactly the kind of thing she’d wear. None of it is flashy, everything is made up of cottony comfort. What few shirts aren’t black are deep colors of plum, navy blue, gray or simple white. Some are long sleeved, some aren’t. Some have graphics on them—punkish and rocker vibed—while others are empty. There’s a couple of flannels—a deep red one interlined with enough black it was dark.

The pants lining the other rack are just like the ones she’s got back in her closet. Only these are newer. The black denim less faded. The material less likely to give seeing as to how it’s fresh off the press.

Over her shoulder, Lela mumbles, “Not bad.”

Ignoring the whoop that Tony issues and the tingle of the boa on her spine. She’s only gonna grab a single shirt, the one made of soft cotton that was butter soft, with a tiger outline in white upon the back, when Lela thinks about her bank account. The one that’s been sitting fat and unused since she started working. The same one Tony had helped her set up. The one she’d used manly for purchasing food, cigarettes and sodas because no one let her buy anything else with it.

If ever Lela was gonna splurge, it was gonna be in this. Smirking, Lela starts pulling things off the rack until her arms grow heavy. She snatches up the flannels, the long sleeves and a couple of the short sleeves. Turning, she tosses it all at the Alpha staring at her and then goes back into the racks.
When Sam arrives, she tosses him all the clothes in her arms and heads back in. She does this again when Natasha gets there too. She’s just about cleared everything out when suddenly Lela spots a leather jacket at the end. Her eyes immediately zero in on the lining inside. It’s a deep burgundy color. It’s heavier, made up thicker than the shitty worn down one in her closet now, with shiny zippers. It’s such a punk rock fucking jacket she’s surprised to find it in such a swanky ass clothes store. Gripping it tight, Lela slides her arms into it and immediately loves the feel of it.

“Oh my god,” Lela groans as she hugged herself tight, “I want this jacket.”

Laughing, Clint goes, “We can tell.”

“If I die, bury me in this,” Lela mumbled as she zipped up the jacket to find it fits her like it was tailor made for her.

“Noted,” Natasha snipped, her tone dancing like she was laughing in that way of hers.

And like they’ve cracked the code Lela didn’t know she had. Everyone starts bringing her things less like they had before and more like the shit Tony had dug up. By the end of it, she’s got two new pairs of boots, three sets of chunky vans, two simple black vans, and more clothes than Lela’s ever entertained herself capable of buying.

By the end of it, Lela is tired but happy as she burrowed in deep to her jacket and allowed Natasha to pick out all her undergarments in whatever shape or form they came.

“Oh, so I’d call this a success, yeah?” Pepper calls out as she held in her hands something that was silky and blue.

“Mmm-hmmm,” Lela mumbled as she watched the employees fold everything into neat piles inside black little bags.

*~*

Running on a shopping high, Lela half falls into her floor with her entire pack at her back. Lela’s arms are heavy with all the bags she’s carried, as is everyone else’s. Throwing her shit onto the floor of her living room space, Lela smiles wide at the stretch and pull of her jacket. She’s almost completely forgotten the reason as to why the trip has happened when suddenly Clint asks:

“Are you gonna get ready?”

Face pinched with confusion, Lela turns to him and almost asks, ‘For what’ when she remembers. Wide eyed, Lela half rips her phone out of her pocket and stares at the fucking time.

4:05

“Shit!” Lela hisses as she kicked off her boots and shed her jacket.

Tossing shit in almost every direction, she runs for the shower. Like hell was she going to show up grimy. Running the water as hot as it’ll go, Lela jumps in. She’s scrubbing her hair like maybe it needs to pass some inspection when the wild thought hits her that this was really happening. Heart hammering, she lathers, rinses and conditions with all the fancy little soaps Natasha has pushed onto her. She’s about to hop out when she spots her razor.

Wide eyed, Lela glances down at her legs and thinks about all the things she hasn’t had any reason to think about before. Pinching her lips tight, Lela grabs it and runs it over her legs. Not because she’s planning to go fuck James but because…well, because…a girl had to be all kinds of prepared. Right?
Jumping out of the shower, Lela wraps a fluffy charcoal gray towel around herself and sprints out the door. Half sliding on the brand-new tile, Lela stops in front of all her pack. Ignoring the way Bruce sputters and turns read over it, Lela digs through the bags until she finds a bra and underwear. When she finds some, black laced and pretty, she runs back to the bathroom and changes. Everything fits like a glove, her somewhat bigger tits, ass and all. Leaving her towel there she runs back out again and demands of her wide eyed pack.

“What do I fucking wear??”

“Kid, where’s your damn towel?” Tony growled, his eyes averted upward.

Sam, who was looking out the window, mumbled, “How about a robe?”

“Uh, Lela,” Pepper tries, her face flaming as she gripped Bruce’s shoulder.

Scoffing, Lela placed her hands on her hips and glared, “I’m fucking wearing panties assholes. Not like I’m fucking naked-naked.”

On any given day she might have had some kind of qualms about standing half naked in front of all of them. But seeing how her scars are fading—courtesy of whatever magic cream Natasha had given her—and she’s about to throw up her own heart, she doesn’t really care. Maybe later she’ll have half a mind to feel embarrassed. But not right now. Not when she’s got less than thirty minutes to get dressed.

Laughing, Clint rises to his feet where he’d been sprawled over the deep gray carpet before the couch. Grabbing hold of a bag he up ends it and says, “Whadd’ya feel like wearing?”

“I don’t know! I, uh, fuck! He said something about going to a show or whatever. I’m not even sure what the fuck that means. Is that like a fucking concert or something?” Lela tries as she flailed her arms about and stomped forward.

“He probably meant the movies,” Natasha helpfully answered her from where she’s stepped out of Lela’s kitchen. She’s got a black mug in hand with something steaming up out of it.

“My pop used to call it a show,” Sam supplies, still staring out the window like he was thinking of running out to the fire escape.

Growling something that felt like frustration and dismay all tangled together, Lela grips her still wet hair and glares at the whole of them. She’s about to spit curses when Clint throws her random bits of what she’s just bought. Catching them with only a hint of trouble. Lela finds they’re a pair of high waisted denim shorts and that soft black tee with the white tiger outline on the back.

“It’s summer time,” Clint tells her, his eyes shining gold, “Only time you’ll get to use those babe.”

Gripping tight the shorts, Lela pulls them on, buttons them and then slips into the shirt. The material both hugging her torso and falling carefully over her. Head popping up to stare at everyone, she notices Tony and Sam are finally looking her way.

Faster than she thinks she’s capable, Lela catches the box of solid black vans—chunky platforms and all—that Natasha flings her way without once spilling a drop of tea. Clint is the one that tosses her the socks. Wrestling to get everything in it’s place, Lela stands before them and holds of her hands as
“What are you going to do about your hair?” Natasha questions as she sunk into the navy blue part of Lela’s couch.

“Um, nothing? Should I do something with it?” Lela immediately asks.

“Maybe dry it?” Clint helpfully tells her. A small kind of childish grin on his face.

Rolling her eyes, Lela runs back to her bathroom and fights to get the brand new blow dryer plugged in. With it roaring, she barely hears Clint and the way he muscles his way inside. Glancing at him in the mirror she asks, “What?”

“You thinking about doing your makeup?”

Shaking her head, she lowers the roaring machine in her hand and tells him, “Not really, god, should I?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Clint walks over to her limited supply of makeup and starts rummaging through it. Going back to blow drying her hair, Lela stops when it gets to a damp enough level where the hot air won’t frizz up her waves. She’d learned the hard way that over doing it made her hair turn all kinds of fucking unmanageable.

“Here,” Clint says as he thrust in her direction a simple black eyeliner pencil and waited expectantly.

Lips pinching tight, Lela grabs hold of it and sets herself into attempting to do a cat eye with shaky hands. She manages making small wings with barely there sweeps. Wordlessly, the eyeliner gets taken out of her idle hand once she’s rimmed her bottom eyelid. And before she can ask, a lipstick is given to her. It’s a shade that is dark like red wine and definitely doesn’t belong to her but she doesn’t ask questions. Lela just runs it over her lips and hopes for the best.

When she’s done she looks herself over in the mirror and finds…well, she finds someone looking back at her that isn’t someone she can recognize.

The girl looking back at her, blinking owlishly and mouth open, looks…she looks nice.

Gone is the harsh sunken look to her eyes. Gone is the gauntness of her cheeks. Gone is that ugly washed out shade of her face. Gone is the dead eyed look. The person she was then isn’t who she looks like now.

The girl in the mirror looks healthy, young and happy. Her skin is a warm brown shade that glimmers under the light above her sink. The girl in the mirror has a face that is rounder now where she’s filled out. Her body too is thicker—prettier—than the stick she’d used to be. This girl is shaped in all the ways Lela had held out hope looking like. The girl in the mirror, though her black waves are wild, are soft and reminiscent of all the girls Lela used to grow up envying.

It takes her far longer than she’d like to admit to understand that the girl in the mirror is her. That Lela is that girl.

For one wild moment, as her eyes run over her lips, the bow of her nose, and the waves around her face and she remembers early memories of her mother. Of when her mother hadn’t been a drunk and a violent woman. Lela thinks she can see her mothers face on her own. And the thought had always frightened her when others had made the comparison. But not right now. Not with her pack so close at her back.
“You look perfect!” Clint happily announces. His hands falling to Lela’s shoulders and steering her back out into the living room.

When they’re back in the living room, everyone’s eyes on her, Lela watches as smiles explode across everyones faces.

“Oh my god! Kid, you look like a real girl!” Tony shouts as he rushed towards her.

“What?” Lela immediately says, shaking off the thoughts she’d had while standing before the mirror, “What the fuck did I look like before?”

“You looked like a certified—— Whatever Tony’s about to say gets cut right off as Sam pushed him out of his way and grinned down at Lela.

“You look good girl, real pretty.” Sam told her as he ran his fingers through her hair.

“It’s not too much?” Lela asks, glancing down at her bared legs and rethinking mindlessly putting them on.

“It’s perfect!” Pepper agrees from where she sits with a smiling Bruce.

“Did you moisturize?” Natasha prompted from where she was sitting, her eyes never once leaving Lela’s face.

Hissing out a curse, Lela rushes back to the bathroom and pumps angrily at the cream the redhead had bought some ways back. She’s lathering it over her legs, arms and neck when someone calls out her name. Hands still running over her forearms, Lela heads on back.

“Hey kid, someone just pulled up outside.” Tony tells her from where he’s peering out and down at the window. As an after thought he mumbles, “Nice car.”

And oh shit, Lela thinks, he’s here. Oh fuck, her mind screams as she runs to the window and plasters her face to the new glass. Looking down, down, she spots that familiar mustang and feels her heart plummet to the pit of her belly. Pushing past too many bodies all looking down in interest, Lela scrambles for her phone. She finds it in Natasha’s pale hands being held out.

In a mad scramble, she unlocks her phone and reads the message sent by James:

“I’m here. What floor are you on?”

Queasy, that’s the first and foremost feeling she has as she reads the message. Fucking out of her mind nervous is the second. Slowly and carefully, she sends him, “Fourth. Use the stairs.”

She’d have told James to use the loft. But seeing how there’s an open door policy with just about everyone where the lift was concerned, she doesn’t want to step on anyones toes.

Aching to fucking undo the last week of her life, Lela spins around and stares wide eyed at all of her pack.

“I can’t do this.”

“Yes you can,” Clint tells her immediately. His hands reaching out to grip her face as he smiled in that impossibly soft way of his. It’s a smile he’s always given her, since the day they’d met. A smile that makes Lela always feel like she’s ten feet tall and about two inches tall all at the same time. It’s a smile that constantly makes Lela feel like exploding and crumbling inward with the intense need to
fucking cry.

“I really, really, fucking can’t.” Lela huffed, her hands gripping tight onto Clint’s wrists.

For all that Lela’s prided herself as being the toughest bitch on earth, in the end, all she was was a fucking coward. She can feel it clawing it’s way up her throat. Choking her and making her knees weak. Her belly feels tight as she dug her feet into the ground.

“Yeah, you can babe.” Clint repeats as he brought her into a hug. His arms wrapping around her like he was trying to protect her from the worst parts of herself. His silk ribbon bond growing wide until it swallowed up whole all of her torso.

“What if I fuck it up? What if I—“ Lela whispers into his chest.

“Lela,” Natasha’s voice calls out to her somewhere close to where Clint and Lela stand. Pulling her face out of Clint’s chest, Lela looks over to Natasha and waits for whatever it is she’s going to say. Only when she’s looking at her does Natasha continue, “You’re going to be fine. You’ve kept yourself alive, head held high, through all that you have. Never once did you back down from an alpha challenge when maybe you should’ve. You can do this.”

The metal band on Lela’s right wrist thumps heavy like a drum. Strength seeps from Natasha’s bond like she’s trying to fill Lela up with it and keep her steady.

“Yeah, come on girl, you’re just gonna go out, have a good time and come on back.” Sam says, running his hand through her hair again, “If this asshole makes you feel any kind of way that ain’t good, you kick his ass to the curb, yeah?”

“We’ll be here when you get back,” Bruce braves the words from where he sits on the turquoise part of Lela’s couch.

Grinding her teeth together, Lela opens her mouth to say something when suddenly there’s a knock on Lela’s door.

“Oh fuck,” Lela wheezes out, her eyes running to the door that isn’t used by anyone since the cleaning crews.

Faster than she’s ever seen him move, Tony half sprints to the door, throwing a, ‘I’ll get it’ over his shoulder as he goes.

And Lela knows she’s feeling all kinds of fucked up at the moment, but she knows a bad idea when she hears it. disentangling her limbs from Clint and pushing past Natasha, she runs after Tony. She doesn’t get there on time because Tony’s already opening the door with his signature shithead smile on his face.

When the door opens it reveals James and all his gorgeous—god-like—glory. He’s dressed simply enough. A simple dark navy blue long sleeved henley with the top two buttons undone. A pair of dark washed denim jeans with his boots on his feet. His dark hair has been pulled up though, in a half up half down type thing, leaving his dark scruff lined face looking all kinds of delicious.

The smile he wears on his pink lips is pretty enough to kill Lela on the spot for all the three seconds it last. Because the moment those stormy gray eyes of his flash over to Tony he grows all kinds of cold and dead eyed. Void, that’s the word, James face looked as void of life as a living person could get without actually being dead.
“Bucky.” Tony says the name like he’s running on automatic. Like he’s turned robotic in the three seconds it took to open the door and look out of it.

“Stark.” James says, sounding just as detached.

Brows pinching, Lela glances between the two and sees a hell of a lot of cues she’d never thought she’d read off of either one of them. Two Alphas standing ready to rip into each others faces if one wrong move was done. Ignoring the fact that Tony’s just called James a name that she doesn’t know him by, Lela can feel the air grow thick with hostility. It didn’t take much of a brain to guess there was something between the two that was as dark as a grudge could get.

The sight makes Lela forget all about her nervousness. She feels an old kind of something settle into her limbs as she widened her feet beneath her. Her hindbrain, her second natured asshole, finds itself in a bind. Seeing as to how it wants to comfort Tony, chase away the dark look in his eye while aching to reach out and defend James from whatever it was that was about to happen.

Magically appearing behind her, Clint asks, “You’re James?”

“Should’ve figured,” Natasha said on an exhale of a sigh.

“Shit,” Sam cursed as he came to a stop behind Natasha.

Grinding her teeth, feeling like she already knows the answer but is forcing herself to ask anyway, Lela pulls in a breath and tries not to growl as she asked, “Let me guess, y’all assholes know each other?”

“That’d be putting it mildly,” Natasha, the bitch that she really was, unhelpfully drawled.

Running a hand through her loose waves, Lela turns on her heel and heads for her pile of clothes. She upends nearly every bag until she finds that red and black flannel she’d just bought. When it’s in her hands she dips into the kitchen where she’d left her smokes and then retrieves her wallet from her jeans in the bathroom.

when she’s back at the door, she knocks her shoulder into Tony and effectively gets her eyes on him. Only when he’s looking at her does she ask, “This gonna be a problem?”

What Lela doesn’t say is that she’ll fucking close the door if it will be. What she doesn’t say is that as much as she fucking likes James—and she really fucking did—Lela will walk away if it’s gonna make anyone member in her pack feel any kind of way.

But it’s heard regardless of the fact that she doesn’t say it.

It takes a while for Tony to answer. His lips are tight as he jerkily shook his head and mumbled, “No, kid. It isn’t.”

Quirking a brow up at him, Lela huffs out a breath and goes to step out the door but before she can do that, she’s stopped by the three different types of threats that follow her as she goes.

The first is Sam’s, which really rocks the shit out of Lela’s goddamn world. He says, “One word Barnes. I hear one word and I’m kicking your ass black and blue, you hear me?”

The second is Natasha’s, though Lela isn’t sure what the hell it is considering it’s in a different language. But it’s in her tone and the way it looses all of it’s fucking humanity.

“Если ты сделаешь ей больно, я поймаю тебя и убью. И это не будет быстрым.”
Last is Clint. His threat is all kinds of fucked up seeing as how he says it with a laugh and an air of a loose joke. He says, “Nah, he won’t do anything, right Barnes? He’s a gentlemen and he knows how a gentlemen should act, right?”

It’s weird, so very fucking weird, so Lela finds herself gaping at the whole exchange. Wide eyed, she turns to stare at the four at her door and asks:

“Are you fucking threatening my date?”

“Nah babe, just letting him know you’re packs got your back in case he gets any funny ideas,” Clint tells her. His hand reaching out lightly knock her chin in that overly playful way of his. And for all that he’s smiling, Clint’s eyes are more green than they are gold, so Lela knows it’s not being said just for shits and giggles.

Pinching tight the bridge of her nose, Lela huffs out a breath and tells them all, “If this is gonna be a problem then I’m going to climb back into my fucking bed and just fuckin’ forget about it.”

And before any of them can say anything, it’s James who speaks up and says, “I wasn’t…I…I understand.”

Glaring at them all, Lela grabs hold of James forearm and drags his ass over to the lift. Ignoring all the sets of eyes on her back, she pushes the man in and closes the gate before punching the number to the first floor. Only when they’re out in the street, barely off the front steps, does Lela whirl around and demand of the man:

“You got beef with just Tony, or all of them?”

Quiet, hands in his front pockets, James looks completely different from all the times Lela’s seen him. He looks smaller despite his immense size and width. Like he’s caving in on himself as he ducked his head down and stared at the tops of his boots.

It’s an ugly sight. One that makes Lela burn in a way that she’s never known herself to catch fire with. It makes her want to race back upstairs and shake the fucking truth out of someone. Because James looks broken now. Hollow in a way a person who’s felt the worst kinds of pain can look. He looks shaken, like the life was stolen from him right from underneath his feet in a cruel kind of jerk.

Stuffing the cry of her second nature away with a cruelty all her own, Lela digs through her flannel and unearths her smokes and lips on up. Uncaring if the lipstick on her lips is the kind that’ll fall away at the action. When smoke is billowing out of her mouth she says:

“They’re my pack, all of’em. So if you got some kind of beef with them, you kind of have it with me too.”

Lela means for it to come out as hard as she can make her words be. But they come out twisted and bent. they sound too frail and too delicate the moment they fall from her lips. That hope to not fuck shit up breaking clear in half because she wasn’t lying to Tony. She’ll fucking wall away from anyone—gorgeous as they were when they smiled, beautiful as they could be when they laughed, haunting her in her dreams as he did—if it meant keeping her band of idiots together.

Her pack…there’s very little she won’t do for them. The realization of that fact rocks Lela back a step as she fumbled to keep her cig from tumbling out of her hand.

“I, uh…I don’t have any problems with them. There’s…there’s a history between us all.” James tells her, his eyes looking dark as if readying himself to be sent packing, “None of it is very good.”
Smoke pinched between her lips, Lela demands of him, “I need you to be straight with me here man, I don’t wanna go in this shit blind.”

“You know who Natasha is, right?” James asks, not bothering to step off the last step of stairs leading up to her building. “You know what she is,” when Lela nods, James continues on, “I was a part of that program. I trained her.”

Mind whirling with the information, Lela stares at James. She tries to piece together the image of James in his mechanic uniform with a shapeless image of the monsters Natasha had been built by. She tries and she fails because it doesn’t make any sense. Natasha said she was a bad guy and James couldn’t be a bad guy. He was…he was too good for that. Too fucking pure like the glow of the moon.

“You defected too?” Lela questions, feels a hell of a lot like she’s hoping that’s the answer.

A smile filled to the brim with hate all aimed at himself, James nods his head.

“I wasn’t…I wasn’t myself when I was under their care. I was…I was mindless. I followed orders and didn’t question anything. I didn’t even have a name with them. I was Soldier and while I was their soldier I was asked to do something to Tony’s family. I didn’t do it. But, for a really long time, Stark thought I did. That’s why…that’s why he looks at me the way he does.”

Ignoring the aching need to unpack that loaded answer entirely, Lela settles for the simple truth of it. She takes it for the grain of salt it was. If Tony really did think James was the monster he thought him to be, Tony wouldn’t have said it wasn’t a problem. So she moves on.

“And Sam?” Lela asks because she’s never seen Sam frown—or heard him offer even a shred of violence—in all that she’s known him. Sam was as happy as they came. And yet he had threatened right along side everyone.

A rueful kind of smile stretches on James face as a brittle laugh escaped his lips, “I kind of kicked his ass on three separate occasions. He’s, uh, he’s still pretty sore about it.”

Pulling a lungful of smoke, Lela tosses her head back and exhales. Clenching her eyes shut, Lela regrets ever asking for a good reason to not go on this date. She regrets it because here she has it in spades. Fucking popping up around her like weeds reluctant to die.

“This is a fucking mess dude,” Lela admits as she brought her head down to look at the man.

“Yes,” James agrees, his eyes all kinds of sad.

Clicking her tongue, Lela pulls in a puff off her smoke and flicks it away as she turned to the car and said, “Well, come on. I didn’t fucking loose my mind all goddamn day for fucking nothing.”

“Wait,” James calls out for her, his steps following her as she opened up the passenger side door, “You still…you still want to go?”

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela nods her head and says, “I mean, I’m not done fucking getting answers out of you. But I figure we can do that shit over a fucking burger or something. Shit’s too fucking heavy any other way.”

Smiling like Lela’s caught a falling star and handed it over to him, James breathes out a haggard laugh as he nodded his head, “Yeah, we can do that.”

When Lela slides into her car her eyes immediately flash over up and over to her floor. All along the
windows, she spots the faces of her pack. She tries not to feel like a complete and utter asshole for sitting in James’ car as they look at her. When she grabs hold of all their bonds she finds not a single one of them is bleeding out anything but the usual thrum of warmth they usually are. So she tries to bite back her emotions and focuses on the man seated beside her.

“I was kind of hoping to take you to a restaurant, but, we don’t have to if you’re not comfortable with that,” James rumbles as he started his car but remained firmly parked.

Wobbling her head in a ‘so and so’ type of way, Lela heaves out a breath and asks, “I don’t have a problem getting a burger from that truck like last time. Do you?”

Nodding his head, James shifts into drive and pulls out into the road. Her building quickly vanishes from view in less than five minutes. Lela tries not to think to much after that. She tries to focus only on what’s lying in wait for her. A long complicated story and a burger that was actually a lot better than she let on.

It’s a shitty start, but Lela’s not so fucking worried about it like she was before.

_____________________

what Natasha said in russian:
Если ты сделаешь ей больно, я поймаю тебя и убью. И это не будет быстрым.

If you hurt her, I’ll hunt you down and kill you. And it won’t be quick.

I don't know dick about russian so if the translation is off blame google.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys don't hate me
I know you all hate cliff hangers and I'M SORRY!!!!
But I'm gonna post this on the off chance my life gets to be really hectic. I'd rather you guys have a little taste than nothing at all.
I'm working on the next scene so don't worry!!! It's on it's way!!!!

I hope you guys liked it!
Thoughts and suggestions always welcomed!!!
Date - Pt 1

Chapter Summary

A little distantly, she knows what maybe a sane person might do. A normal person might just get up, wash their hands of the whole thing, and walk away. A normal person would head on home and just forget about getting any type of close to James and the self proclaimed killer he used to be. A normal person would have flown away the moment James had admitted he’d killed people at all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Tony?” Pepper calls out to the man as softly as only she could. Her face pulled into concern as her eyes took in his motionless body.

In total, Lela’s been gone about thirty or so minutes and in all that time Tony hasn’t moved a single step away from the door. Every line of his suit clad body speaking to the way he wishes to run out the door and track down their missing packmate. His fingers twitching as if he’s about to call up his suit and shoot his way out of the building.

“She’ll be fine,” Natasha says from where she’s lounging in one of Lela’s plum colored singles. She’s got this lazy kind of sprawl to her long limbs despite the way her eyes look as hard as steel. The tight line to her lips, a tall tale sign to those that knew her well enough, said she was stressed despite her words.

Those words seem to push Tony into motion as he whirled around in place and glared at the redhead beta, “You don’t know that. You can’t know that.”

Running a hand over his dark hair, Sam shrugs and offers the angry Alpha a simple, “Tony, Barnes is a lot of things, but he isn’t an asshole like that. He’s a socially challenged, emotionally stunted bastard but…he isn’t gonna hurt her.”

“Yeah, he knows better,” Clint reassures the man as he dropped down between the wide sprawl of Natasha’s legs. He wiggles around on the carpet until he finds a comfortable enough spot and lazily begins folding all the clothes strewn about.

“He’s…he’s a good man,” Bruce tries as he twirled his steaming cup of rose tea. His eyes are fixed on his drink but his words are firm in his belief. For all that Bruce wasn’t the type prone to violence
—despite the other guy beneath his skin—he wouldn’t have sat back and allowed Lela to leave with
the other man if he’d had his doubts. He’d have put himself between the both of them. He
would’ve….done something.

Lela was pack now and Bruce would do all he could to keep her safe.

Face twisting like he’d bitten into an especially sour lemon, Tony glares at the gathered whole and
spits out, “Am I the only one that remembers this man is fresh out of hydra’s mind control? We don’t
know what he’s capable of! What’s to say something triggers him and he goes all killer mode while
she’s there?!?”

“Don’t be an ass, Tony,” Pepper sternly tosses out as she crossed her legs and glared at her alpha.

“I’m just stating facts here Pep!” Tony defends himself, his hands firmly being placed on his hips,
“We can’t just…we can’t just let Lela go anywhere with him!”

“Last I checked, Lela does what she wants, whenever she wants,” Clint remarked, his hands deftly
working on a pair of dark washed skinny jeans. A certain kind of tightness to his jaw like he was
holding himself back from spiting curses.

“Yeah, man.” Sam agrees, his face growing stern at the mere implication of Tony stepping in Lela’s
way, “And she asked you if it was cool or not. You said it was.”

Floundering for a moment, his mouth opening and closing wordlessly, Tony angrily growls, “I was
on the damn spot!”

Rolling her eyes and huffing out a dry laugh, Natasha runs her fingers through Clint’s blonde hair as
she said, “If it was such a big problem for you, you should’ve told her. She would’ve understood.”

Narrowing his gaze into an angry glare, Tony bites out through his stretched thin lips, “Kid was
looking at me with her too big damn eyes! I couldn’t tell her no!”

At that, everyone shares a laugh in one shape or another. But it’s Sam who braves the words they’re
all thinking:

“You’re surprisingly a push over man.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Tony refuses to blush over the statement and hisses out, “Oh like
you’re any better? Weren’t you the one throwing threats back there?”

“Of course I was,” Sam defends himself easily with a simple shrug of his broad shoulders. Moving to
sit beside Natasha on the open single, he adds on, “I’d’ve threatened whatever asshole was standing
there. Anyone who can make our girl feel the way she was feeling all day deserves to get the shit
scared out of him. It being Barnes got’s nothing to do with it.”

“Yeah, next time I see him, I’mma make it real clear what happens if Lela ever sheds one goddamn
tear over his ass,” Clint easily says. The careless way he throws out the threat going to war with the
violence barely being held in check in his green eyes.

Running her pink tongue over her lips, Natasha smiles wide and dangerous and simply mutters,
“Ditto.”

Not liking the tension currently hanging heavy in the air one bit, Pepper waves her hands as if that’ll
still everything in it’s place. When all eyes are on her, Pepper attempts to be the voice of reason:
“Everyone needs to calm down. It’s a date. Lela isn’t marching off to war. She’s on a date. Bucky—James is a good man. He’s not going to hurt her. He’s too much of a gentleman to do anything like that. Whatever we may feel about this—” at this her baby blue eyes cut over to Tony, “—we have to put it aside for her sake.”

It mollifies most, but not all.

“But—“ Tony starts, his mouth filled with all the reasons in the world for her not to be out there with that man. Everyone can see the way he’s gearing himself up into a renowned Stark tirade. It’s in his dark eyes, in his frown and the way he tightens his arms across his chest.

He doesn’t get a chance to say any of it when Bruce opens his mouth and states, “She likes him Tony.”

That seems to take the wind right out of Tony’s sails. He curls into himself like all the air has been punched out of him. Lips pulling into a frown, he glares at the tops of his feet. For all that he’s known to talk his way out and into the biggest of troubles, he can’t find a single word now to push that fact out of his face.

Because Tony knows—as do the rest of them—just how much Lela liked the other Alpha man. It’d rung through her bond. Her bond had pulsed wild and intense when she’d seen him. Lela liked him and her bond had sung for him. It had rattled him enough that when Lela had pinned him in place with her big dark eyes, Tony hadn’t known what to do.

For as much as everything was screaming in him—both his alpha instincts and everything else—to scoop the girl up and hide her from all other eyes. Lela was…she was…to Tony—she meant everything. And the thought of her going with another—Barnes, an alpha, an alpha who was dangerous—had made him want to rage.

But her bond was pulsing. It was crying in a way that her bond never did. When she’d asked him, not for permission, but if he’d be okay with it—her eyes growing hard as if she would slam the door shut if he did—Tony hadn’t known what to say. Only…her bond had twirled up again. Growing small like Lela was hiding herself for the pain she’d feel from Tony’s negative.

Tony would rather brave Natasha’s knives sans suit than ever be the one to take the fire out of that bond. So he’d watched her go despite his hands aching to reach out and keep her where he could watch over her.

“She likes him and we should respect that,” Bruce repeats with finality. He may be known for letting his Alpha push him around in almost all things—to fucking weak against the man’s smile as he is—Bruce could stand his ground well enough. Gamma or not, Bruce could be a bulwark for Lela now.

“It’s her life,” Pepper says, her hand running down to wrap itself around Bruce’s. Her frown turns into a soft smile when Bruce entwines his fingers with hers, “We’re her pack and that means we’ve gotta support her through all of it. Even if we don’t like who she’s going on a date with.”

Clenching his teeth tight, Tony nods his head and refuses to budge from where he stands. He’s too keyed up to even think about settling himself down onto the couch as easily as everyone else was.

“He doesn’t deserve her,” Tony grumbles out, refusing to acknowledge the petulance in his own tone. Because a goddamn king and sultan could come ‘round and he’d think the same about them too. No one deserved Lela and the heart she carried with her. Not even he himself. And like that, Tony is filled to the brim with all things he found lacking in Barnes.
“Did you see him though? Dressed like he was some kind of fucking hipster? Ugh. And his car! Fucking pretentious ass. He’s a hundred years old! Who the hell does he think he is asking Lela out? *Unbelievable!*”

Laughing, Sam leans back in his seat and throws at the man, “I’m pretty sure the first words out of your mouth was that he had a nice car.”

“No I didn’t,” Tony growls out. When everyone sends him a look he adds on, “Okay, well that was before I knew who it belonged to.”

Snorting, Clint kicked his legs out so they tangled with Sam’s and teased, “You’re fucking childish bro.”

Pursing his lips up tight, Tony tries for an insult but ends up saying, “Whatever.”

 Laughing at his expense, the gathered pack falls into a companionable silence. One that isn’t weighted and as dark as it had once been. Each and everyone of them knows it has everything to do with the girl that’d strung them all together.

Squirming until he found enough space, Bruce waves his alpha over until the man relents. Only when Tony is seated tight against him does Tony abandon his cup on the wooden coffee table and reaches a hand out to Tony. Lacing his fingers through Tony’s tense hand, Bruce tells the man:

“You should tell her about how you feel and you should tell her why.”

Pulling in a breath he didn’t know he’s been holding, Tony practically melts against his gamma and his touch. Their once mangled bonds humming with all the care that came with Bruce and all the kindness that made Pepper up. Boneless, he lets his head roll back until it thumped on the backing of Lela’s questionable couch. Glaring up at the ceiling, Tony feels brave enough to admit:

“I’m not…I don’t blame him, you know? He didn’t…he didn’t kill them. I saw the film. He drove them off the road but he didn’t…he didn’t kill them. I know that. I saw it.”

“But you mourned them, twice and you blamed him for it,” Pepper softly interjects. Her eyes twisting up in the memory of Tony and the wreck that he’d become after it all.

The way old grief had stirred to life like a monster and swallowed him whole between jagged spiked teeth.

“Yeah,” Tony says, his voice a breathless rasp, “I don’t blame him. He was—I know what they did to him. He didn’t have a choice. He was…”

“They burned his memories right out of his head. He wasn’t himself. He was a gun to be shot and put away when the job was done,” Natasha states coldly. Her Jade colored eyes gaining this far away look as her fingers ran mindlessly through Clint’s soft hair. Noticing the slight downturn of her lips, Sam reaches a hand out and lays it gently upon his forearm. Through his touch Natasha feels something like gentle care pulse between them. In Sam’s gaze sits nothing but acceptance and affection. It’d startle her if she hadn’t seen it on his face countless times before when he laughed in her direction.

It still winded Natasha no matter how many times the beta man looked at her.

“I know.” Tony growls, his mind whirling with all the information he’d dug up on the procedure Barnes had gone through every time he’d entered into a mission and returned. Tony knew every step of it in painful details. Pulling his head up, Tony admits with open honesty, “I don’t blame him. I
I’m not sure how we’re supposed to move past it. Shit, I mean, do people get passed this? I thought he’d murdered my mother and father. And then all the shit that happened after Sokovia, with Rogers and everything? I almost killed him…I would’ve killed him if Rogers hadn’t been there. I…I don’t know…”

“Look, I may not know the dude as well as Cap, but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t blame you for for the way you reacted and I’m pretty sure he ain’t waiting around for an apology from you,” Sam states as he leaned his weight onto his knees and peered over at Tony. There’s an immovable confidence radiating in his eyes that bleeds into the firm line of his shoulders. It’s a confidence that Tony finds himself marveling at and envying in the same breath. Because Sam was noble in all the ways a man could be. He stood tall and would not bend or compromise his morals for all the world.

“No one’s asking you to apologize either man,” Clint slips out, ignoring the way Pepper looks like she might suggest otherwise, “All you gotta do is put your shit to the side. For Lela. We gotta look out for her and whatever it is that makes her happy. ”

And there’s no doubt in Tony’s whole body when he thinks, he’d move the entire world for that little shit. He’d force the world to spin in the opposite direction if ever the girl asked for it. He’d do anything if only to keep her smiling that strange little thing she got when she found whatever he’d said funny. Looking around, without bothering to chase the echo of their bonds running down to the Lela and connecting them all, Tony knows every single person here would do the same.

By the look in her eyes, Natasha would burn the worlds to ashes to keep the girl safe.

By the look in his eyes, Clint would paint the streets crimson without a thought.

By the look in his eyes, Sam would happily take bullets to the chest to keep Lela whole and hale.

By the look in her eyes, Pepper would rather cut off her arm than ever try to pin the girl down with anything except love and care.

By the look in his eyes, Bruce would happily turn over his whole self to the green guy to keep all the evil in the world away from those dark eyes.

Slowly, Tony pulls in a breath through his mouth and exhales. He’s quiet for a long time before he nods his head. He doesn’t agree out loud that he’s going to try to push the dark parts of his past aside. He doesn’t say it but everyone seems to understand because everyone loses some of the tension in their frames.

And maybe because he’s always been the king of pettiness, Tony mulishly says into the open air, “Still think she could do better than him.”

Groaning, Bruce squeezes his hand and threatens, “Tony, don’t start.”

“I’m being serious! I mean, off the very top of my head? He needs a damn haircut!” Tony argues, ignoring the way everyone seems to be openly laughing at him.

Rolling her eyes, Pepper reaches behind Bruce and knocks his shoulder before mumbling, “You’re horrible.”

“He looks homeless!” Tony gripes as he leaned into Pepper’s hand and into Bruce’s body.

Laughing, Clint lays his head on Natasha’s lap, “You realize you sound like a disapproving dad right?”
Turning bright red, Tony sputters and half jumps out of his seat that the accusation. His heart is hammering in his chest as his Alpha instincts puffed up in silent pleasure.

“I just think she could do better! Lela’s too pretty for him!”

And like it was so perfectly normal—like all that had happened between all of them falls away—everyone begins to joke at Tony’s expense. Every insult sent his way making him grow redder in the face despite the smile that stretched wide.

None of them move from their spots in Lela’s level regardless of the fact that they have separate floors and perfectly good couches in every single one of them. Something about the brushfire, wilted flowers and burnt sugar hanging in the air making tea stay glued to their spots. They’ve got no doubt, even if Lela never openly said so, she wouldn’t have minded them staying up here while she was out. Every inch of her place was theirs to have as much as every inch of who they were was her’s to have for as long as she wanted them.

They were pack after all.

*~*

At this point, Lela is genuinely regretting her entire life. There’s an old forgotten hate for herself that say’s she must be an especially stupid kind of girl. For her to be constantly walking into shit with her pants down, she was sure as shit a special type of stupid. That or she was cursed from the moment she opened her mouth.

The world couldn’t be that small, could it?

Whatever odds she’s beating she really wishes to stop. This was getting fucking ridiculous.

When she got back to her place, she was gonna wring every single one of those assholes necks until a list, printed in black and white—official and shit—of every single person they had fucking issues with. Lela’s tired of making nice with someone—fucking getting in tits deep—and then finding out they’re sworn fucking enemies with half her pack.

Maybe if she had some kind of running list, she wouldn’t feel so fucking blindside as she is now.

Glancing up and over at the man seated across from her, Lela tries to work it through her mind why she’s seated here. She has, in no uncertain fucking terms, enough of a reason to walk away. To just ditch this shitty idea of hers.

Whatever kind of issues James had with Tony they seemed to run a little deeper than the shit between Nat, Clint, Bruce and Pepper had had. Though, she’s starting to suspect, if she ever gets that list more than half of it would be from Tony’s side of things. That man, him having fucking problems with people seemed like a running theme here.

Either way, she stays seated because she’s always been shit at making decisions for herself.

Licking her lips free form the sugar of her soda, Lela tries to be brave as she said, “Look man, I really don’t wanna ask, but I feel like I gotta.”

At that, James—who hadn’t bothered to order himself anything besides a simple bottle water—looks over at her and readies himself for whatever’s about to fall from his lips. He’s got this look on his gorgeous face like he’s resigned himself to the solid conclusion that whatever was between them was over now.
And, for however much it hurt her to see that sad expression and to entertain the possibility that it might, Lela stuffs it down with a steady determination. No matter how much her second natured bullshit disagreed, Lela wasn’t about to fucking risk all that she had with her pack over whatever it was she had with James. No matter how hard her heart thumped and her chest ached when he looked her way.

They were—every single one of them—they meant the world to her. And Lela would be damned to hell and back if she was ever gonna let a single one of them out of her greedy little hands. She’d fight hordes of Alpha’s in a rut to keep them at her side. She’d carve out the part of her that went gooey and stupid for James in an instant if it meant never stretching her bond to Tony even an inch.

“What’s your deal with Tony?”

Carefully slow, James’ eyes run over the whole of her face before they drop down to his hands. His left hand sports a black glove covering the gleam of his onyx prosthetic arm. Lela’s not sure why, but, that fact rankles something in her chest. That James had felt the need to cover it up on their date. For a moment, she wonders if it’s because he’s embarrassed over it or because he hadn’t wanted her to see it.

That last part makes Lela regret wearing a short sleeve. So she wordlessly slips her flannel on and covers the fading scars on her arms. Hiding her wounds as much as he was.

“I told you I was in the war,” James starts off. His rumbling voice all kinds of deep and broken. The rich timber of it spilling down her spine and making her head go all screwy, “I, uh, I got caught behind enemy lines and got taken in as their prisoner. They, uh, they performed experiments on me while I was theirs.”

The way James says the word—*theirs*—sounds insidious and soul consuming. Like he was a thing to be picked up, claimed and owned. Like James—with his soft and sad smiles—was not a person at all. It makes Lela feel some wild and angry type of way. Her second nature turning violent and aching for her her to sink her teeth into the man and wash away the filthy thought from his mind.

But Lela does none of that because her mind sticks on a word. *Experiments.*

“It’s how I lost my arm and how I got the one I do.” James tells her, a strange type of emptiness crawling into his voice as he continued to dredge up the worst parts of his past, “They—they did something to me, turned me into something that wasn’t human. They took all that I was and just emptied it out of my head. And when I was nameless, faceless, they used me.”

Lela’s breath catches in her throat as she listens. All that she is, all that she’d been made into being, whirling together into something that was dangerous and scared. *Used me.* The words echo in her head. Something like compassion, understanding—if only a little—thumping in her head. Memories of a time she’s desperately trying to ignore, flood her until she’s choking on it.

Of hands gripping her tight. Of bones breaking. Of violence and cruelty. Of heartbreak and despair. Of hopelessness and fear. Of all that she was fading with every breath she took.

Ignoring the way her fangs grow long and deadly in her mouth, Lela refuses to fly out of her seat the way her instincts whisper for her to do. She stays in place and keeps her mouth shut because she’d opened this particular can of worms. She’d forced James to go through the worst of his past and the least she could do was fucking listen.

“It’s how I met Natasha, I was tasked with training all of the балерина. I trained her, twisted her until she broke and then kept twisting.” James informs her, his eyes still firmly glued to his bottle water.
“But,” Lela starts only to fail when his gray eyes flash up to meet hers. Whatever bit of confidence she’d had to come here waning under his twisted up eyes, “She left. She defected.”

Nodding tightly, James admits, “I was only part of her training. When it was done, the memory of it all, was erased.”

Despite how much it boggles her mind and how much everything in her wishes to ask, Lela doesn’t fucking dare do it. Some cold part of her doesn’t want to pull the details out of James mouth. Selfishly, Lela thinks she doesn’t have the fucking heart to hear it. To ask how memories could be ripped out of a persons mind like that.

“When I was their soldier, I was tasked with carrying out a mission. December 1991, I was ordered to kill Howard Stark and any and all who happened to be there. He had something that they wanted. Something they were willing to kill over and I was sent to retrieve it.”

Lela knows that name. She knows it because there was a page in a magazine the other day. One that celebrated some charity shit that belonged to the late man. It was where Lela learned that had been Tony’s father. Some kind of genius too. A man that had helped shape the world in more ways than Lela really understood. So she knows the name. Not because Tony’s told it to her, but because she’d learned it on her own.

Tony, like Lela, never opened his mouth about the people who helped make the grimy monsters they were now. Lela never asked because it wasn’t something she thought she’d earned enough to demand. What lay in each others past was there to rot. It had nothing to do with who they were to her now.

Mouth dry, Lela tries not to fucking stutter as she rasped out, “Did you?”

Clenching his jaw tight, hard enough that the tendon on his right side jumps, James stares at her. His gorgeous face, a face that could be so heartbreakingly beautiful, was all kinds of sorrow filled it didn’t resemble the man Lela’s slowly gotten to know. The self loathing James wears pulls at his lips. It deepens the small crows feet around his eyes. It makes him look older in a way that maybe spoke to all the death the man had seen and been personally responsible.

Whatever his answer is, Lela knows—with bone aching clarity—she can’t be here if turns out James killed Tony’s dad. Whatever Tony felt for his dad, whether Howard had been a good father or not, that was Tony’s fucking dad. For all the shit her own mother had lashed into Lela’s back, she knows she’d feel some type of way if one of her pack got chummy with her mothers killer.

So whether it felt like she was slowly pushing her fingers through rusty dull nails, Lela has to know.

“No, I didn’t. I—I couldn’t, I wouldn’t.” James says, his eyes growing dark like despite the fact that he didn’t do it, he still blamed himself over it. Like he saw that blood on his hands regardless of the fact, “When I didn’t, they brought someone else in that could.”

Confused, Lela asks, “But, why does—why did he think you did?”

“There was footage of their death. A security camera. It showed me killing them,” James offers through short clipped words. Every line in his body looking like he wants to stop talking but a hard determination in his eyes that says he’s not about to. “It was doctored. Edited to show that I was the shooter when I wasn’t. The second tape showed I hadn’t. But Stark had seen the first one and he… he’d…”

Pinching her lips up tight Lela nods her head. From what she knows about Tony Lela knows where
this is going. Tony was a fucking hot head on the best of days. Barely thinking his shit through before he was running off. Lela can’t count how many times she’s found him doing something questionable as all shit and having to stop him because the flimsy excuse of ‘I dunno, felt like it’ never fucking cut it. She can’t imagine what he’d done; Lela only understands it must have been all kinds of over blown and insane.

Pushing her empty plate, Lela rummages through her pockets until she unearthed her smokes, she lights up. If she was gonna keep pushing through all this bullshit, she’d need nicotine to do it.

“There was a fight, between Stark and I. One that dragged a lot of people into it. It, uh, it…” at that James looses his voice. His face twisting up like he can’t quite put it all into words.

“It complicated the shit outta it, huh?” Lela offers through a cloud of smoke. Her lips twisting into a sarcastic thing.

Nodding his head once, James continues on, “When he found the second tape, the damage had been done. He, uh, he still can’t look at him and I don’t blame him. If I hadn’t run Howard’s car off the road, if I hadn’t done what I did, they’d still—”

“I’mma stop your shit right there James.” Lela growls, hating the fact that James was blaming himself for something he literally had no control over. If ever there was a valid excuse for things it was being brainwashed. So she says as much, “You weren’t you when you did that. Plus, you stopped right? You didn’t fuckin’ kill’em. What happened after that, it wasn’t your fault. It was the assholes that had you. Plain and simple.”

For all the confidence she puts into the words, Lela doubts it is. It’s probably a hell of a lot more complicated than that. But what the fuck else was there to say about it? James hadn’t pulled the trigger and she’d fucking get into it with Tony if it ever came up. James wasn’t the one who should have that shit laid on his back like his own personal cross to carry.

It wasn’t right where Lela was fucking concerned. Anyone who said differently would get their faces caved the fuck in.

Ashing her smoke, Lela exhales and tries to leave that mad tangled mess alone. Searching for a relatively safer subject, she decides to ask, “Why’d you kick Sam’s ass?”

Looking like it pained him in ways Lela can’t begin to understand, James states, “Not a lot of my memories came back to me but I knew I wasn’t supposed to be with them. That they were evil, as evil as people could be, so I burned down what part of them I could get to. And when it looked like it was me—not the soldier that I was made to be—an old friend of mine went looking for me. Sam helped him.”

“I take it you didn’t wanna go with’em when they found you?” Lela questions, figures that to be the case.

“I didn’t recognize my friend at first. Took me a while to remember who he was. But then I got these flashes of some scrawny ass little punk with a mouth that got him in all kinds of trouble he couldn’t handle. I remembered, but I still didn’t go with him because I wasn’t…I wasn’t sure I could trust myself. I didn’t want to hurt him. So I kept running. But…my friends as obstinate as a mule. He kept chasing after me ‘cause he wasn’t about to give up. And Sam, he helped him the whole way, no matter how many times I knocked his ass into the dirt.”

“Sounds like him,” Lela remarks, finds herself grinning at what she knows to be Sam’s immovable determination when he thought something was worth saving. It was the same determination she’d
first met him. The one he’d worn in his eyes every time Lela came running to him hoping the man could unravel the mess of her mind.

“He’s still pretty sore about it, I guess,” James says with a laugh that did nothing to lighten his eyes.

In all, it’s a lot to digest. Too much, really. Way too complicated to just be done in a simple talk. It’s the type of shitty situation that Lela knows for a damn fact she’s got no business being in the middle of. Because Lela’s a lot of things, but she ain’t equipped to deal with this.

Pulling in the last drag off her smoke, Lela flicks the butt away and says on exhale, “This is some heavy assed shit, James.”

It’s the same words she’d used with Bruce and Pepper. The same one’s she’d offered because she hadn’t known what else to say.

Nodding his head, looking like he’s ready to get on up and run, James agrees with a simple, “Yes.”

Quietly, Lela thinks about all that’s been given to her. She thinks about James and all he’s endured. She thinks about the sick fucks that saw a man that was good and pure and had twisted him into being nothing more than a fucking tool to deal death out. She thinks about the pain he inflicted against his will. She thinks about the lives that must have been lost because of him. She thinks about the pain James must have been given under their rule.

A hell of a lot starts to make sense about the man. Lela understands now why James always had this damned kind of look in his eyes. Like he was riddled in sin and was waiting for the day the devil came round to drag him into the pits. Like James was just ready to run into the fire for all that he blamed himself for. It made a hell of a lot of sense but did nothing to ease the uncomfortable feeling she’s got running through her.

It solidified the hell out of her previous thoughts though. James was a goddamn fucking angel. A fallen one, one whose wings had been scorched and laden with soot, but a fucking angel none the fucking less.

Lela thinks of Tony too. She thinks about the pain he must have felt. The anger that must have consumed him. His Alpha rage demanding vengeance enough that he had hunted James down. Lela thinks about all of and wonders what the fuck she’s supposed to do now.

A little distantly, she knows what maybe a sane person might do. A normal person might just get up, wash their hands of the whole thing, and walk away. A normal person would head on home and just forget about getting any type of close to James and the self proclaimed killer he used to be. A normal person would have flown away the moment James had admitted he’d killed people at all.

But Lela’s born wrong. She’s been assembled with spare parts. Her mind barely held together by bonds that were new to her as much as her face was. Lela’s not right in the head, in her heart especially. She’s also bonded to two certified assassins. Two assassins that had admitted, day one, that they hadn’t always been on the up and up. Lela’s also bonded to an vet who must have had some kind of blood on his hands too for a war that he didn’t agree with but had still fought. Lela’s bonded to a billionaire who had amassed most of his fortune fueling wars all around the world with the weapons he produced. Lela’s bonded to a man who—when he’d transformed into a creature he calls his own—had leveled buildings with people inside.

So, Lela stays in place. She keeps on looking at James and tries not to fall a little deeper into his storming gray eyes.
Right or wrong, Lela still found herself growing all kinds of stupid for those eyes. Right or wrong, Lela still felt hunger deep in her belly for those pink full lips. Right or wrong, Lela can’t find enough strength to get on up and leave.

Because it’s still James. James who smiled at her. James who sent her all kinds of breathless. James who made her heart race with a laugh. James who Lela was still completely fucking crushing on. James that looked at her and kept on staring even if everything on her was caked in shit.

Tugging on the ends of her flannel, Lela asks the man, “So, what’d we do now?”

Face pulling in confusion, James offers up, “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Lela shrugs, her mouth opening and closing where she’s not sure where to go with this, “What are we supposed to do now? Like, you know Tony, Nat and Sam are my pack, right? You still wanna be here on this date thing with me?”

Eyes growing wide, his mouth opening on a silent word, James stares at her with growing shock. Eventually questions, “Wha—wait, you still want to do this?”

Heart twisting in her chest, face growing hot and uncomfortable with the question, Lela bites out with no subtle hints of irritation, “Well, not if you don’t wanna asshole.”

“Lela,” James starts off with, a slow smile spreading wide on his face as a look of clear disbelief worked it’s way into his eyes, “Of course I want to. I just thought…I didn’t think you’d want to be here with me anymore. Knowing all that you do.”

Ignoring the way her heart clenches tight in her chest at the way he says her name. Like it’s something to say with the utmost care, Lela shrugs her shoulders and says, “We all got a past James. Like you said, we all gotta lay our demons down sometime.”

Despite the honesty in her words, the clear frankness of her tone, Lela can see the way James doesn’t really believe. Despite the clear fact that they’re his words to begin with. The ones he’d given her not a week back. The words Lela had found the courage to chase him with and ask him out in the first place.

And that burns her. It makes her angry because what kind of dick spit shit out like that to her but didn’t fucking take his own advice?

Because if Lela’s ever thought someone might deserve a second chance at life—a fucking do over that was all encompassing—it was James. He could wear that damned expression in his eyes all he wanted, but Lela firmly believed he was worth fucking saving. Lela would knock anyones teeth into their fucking stomach who dared say he didn’t. And if Lela, who really didn’t deserve the shit she had now, had what she had then fucking James deserved the fucking world.

He’d earned it hadn’t he? Fucking paid for it in pieces of his flesh and bone. Fucking carved out his soul for it. Ripped himself from the claws of demons because he was a good man underneath it all. He didn’t deserve shit, James was fucking owed it and Lela felt it down to the core of who she was. She’d sink her fangs into a thousand necks to defend that belief.

Gritting her teeth tight, Lela slips a smoke from her pack and forces the words out of her mouth:

“I ever tell you what I did before I started working up in Tony’s tower?”

Lela knows she hasn’t, wouldn’t. She’d rather fucking drop her suppressors into the Hudson than ever tell James that in passing. But, James had laid himself out. Bared the worst parts of himself for
Lela to look over and cast judgement. As if Lela was fit to stand judgment over him from where she was kneeling in a pool of her own fucking sins.

But Lela’s still running on that belief. The one that said James was owed a hell of a lot more than the hatred he held for himself.

When James shakes his head in the negative, Lela lights her smoke and forces her tongue to work over all the things she was hoping to be buried with.

“A few years back, I was…I was with some asshole. One that I couldn’t get away from because, where the fuck was I supposed to go? I was just some kid, didn’t have a single thing to my name. I had no family, no one that cared if my face was black and blue ‘cause he got a little angry. He…he used to smack me around some. He took all that I was and fucking broke it. He broke me right in half and didn’t give one single fuck. Took a while for me to get away from him. When I did, I…I did the only thing I could think of to keep from fucking starving on the streets.”

Lela’s hands don’t shake. Her tone never dips or wavers. But her heart hammers in her chest as she puffed desperate and angry at her cig. For all that she’s putting herself out there with open honesty, Lela doesn’t dare touch the fact that she is what she is. Lela’s not ready to go around admitting that part of herself to anyone outside of her pack. She doesn’t want James to look at her differently on that simple fact. Lela would rather he look at her with disgust for what she’s done rather than what she is.

“I was a hooker. Woulda stayed that way until I kicked over if Pepper hadn’t found me when she did. I helped her out of a rough spot with some Gamma’s that wanted to fuck her shit up. When some john of mine fucked me up bad enough that I was bleeding from every hole I had, I came crawling Pepper’s way. And Pepper, she’s too fucking nice for her own good. She helped me out. She patched me up some. When I came to, I ran. So Bruce sent Nat and Clint my way.”

“They cleaned me up, got me sober. Because I was pretty much an avid junky at that time. Not a fucking drug out there that I wasn’t fucking myself up on to get by. And they…well, they fucking saved me when I sure as shit didn’t want any saving. Then I met Sam and…you know Sam. He took one look at me and fucking didn’t let me go on the way I was. And then fucking Tony happened. He knew what I used to be, all of the shit that I’d done, and he never once treated me like I was something to be cast aside.”

Lela hates that the words keep on coming, that they show no sign of slowing despite how everything in her mind is aching to jam her fist into her mouth to just stop.

“They’re my pack, all of’em. A bunch of dumbasses, all of’em. Shouda run the other way when I snatched them up. But they hung around. Keep giving me shit like I’m worth it. Gave me a fucking place to stay. Fucking moved on in with me like I’m worth keeping close. Fucking idiots.”

By the end of it, Lela’s smoke is gone. So she flicks it away and reaches for her drink. She uses the excuse of that to keep from looking up into James face.

Every inch of her is afraid to see any kind of disgust on his face for all that she’d resigned herself for it. Every inch of herself is prepared to have the man pull away and leave her where she sits. For him to not want anything to do with her because she’s fucking damaged goods. Dirty and worn down. A thing that was bought and paid for her services. A thing that had gotten on her knees in dirty streets. A thing that had been bent over and fucked into by nameless assholes.

Every inch of her is ready for that. What Lela isn’t prepared for is the way James voice goes cold and fucking dangerous. The way it seems the life has been zapped right out of it. The way his rumbling
voice sounds like the heavens breaking open and threatening to spill out the vengeance of god himself.

“What was his name?”

Caught off guard by his tone and then his question, Lela glances up and over to the man. The expression she finds sitting on his face dangerous enough to make Lela want to fly right out of her seat. Something like a cry of fear and a growl born out of fighting off Alpha’s twice her size sits high on her chest. Her neck aches to roll to the side underneath the sheer power of his alpha voice while everything else that was abuse born wanted to rip into something to prove she wasn’t fucking weak like she’d once been. But that mess of noise never spills because Lela’s never come face to face with an angel that looked ready to brave the world with a flaming sword.

For all that James was an alpha, with a musk she could not scent for however much she looked for it, he looked like one now. Like vengeance and death incarnate, James shamed all the stories of winged creatures and demi-gods alike.

It takes a long moment for Lela to work her jaw and ask, “Wha—who’s?”

“Your ex’s. What’s his name?” James repeats, his body still in the only way a coil sprung tight could look. His muscles bunching up under his stretched henley like they were aching to be pushed into motion.

The look James’ got in his gray eyes not even bothering to hide the way he’s gearing himself up to dole out violence.

It takes Lela a hell of a lot longer than she’d like to admit to work out why James might be asking that. But when realization dawns on her she feels the way she cranes back in shock. Because she might’ve been expecting a lot, but it sure as shit wasn’t that.

For there sat James, in all his gorgeous deadly glory looking like he was ready to cross the ocean to settle a debt that wasn’t his. There he sat, across from her, looking like he was prepared in two seconds flat to make the skies rain blood for her and her alone.

And despite that thought making everything in her go all squirrely, Lela thinks of all the reasons it shouldn’t be on his face at all. As much as that rat bastard deserved to have his dick blown right the fuck off, Lela wasn’t about to put that on James. He wasn’t about to put anymore blood on that man’s hands. Not for her.

Never for her.

So she waves the question away like she hopes to wave away that deadly expression on his face, “Don’t matter.”

“He hurt you,” James intones, a solid enough statement that the absolute worst and most fragile parts of her writhe, “It matters.”

“Why?” Lela spits at him, her eyes growing hard as she tried to not fly out of her seat to defend herself. To pretend she hadn’t been a fucking puddle of weak useless shit at her ex’s feet. To pretend she hadn’t once laid awake bleeding, broken, used and fucking wept for it all.

At that, James grows quiet. Well, at least his mouth remains unmoving. But his eyes rage on. Darkening like the skies before a hurricane, they bordered on black. As black as Lela’s own. Lightning flashing and ever ready to strike someone down.
And where Lela might have thought she’d back the man off enough, James opens his and tells her with all the damn surety of the world, “You didn’t deserve that.”

Clenching her teeth tight, feeling the ache in her jaw, Lela glares at the other man. The rational part of Lela knows that. She understands that what had happened wasn’t fair. That it wasn’t right. But that ugly thing in her, the one her mother had made through her hate, rebels against the idea. It whispers black words in her ear. Tells her she deserved then and deserves no better now because she was born wrong. Born the worst thing on the fucking planet. That she deserved it because of the dynamic that says she’s little more than a pet to be owned. A thing to be mounted and bred until she wasted away and ceased to exist.

Wrenching her gaze away, Lela settles her gaze onto the green grass around her and spits out, “Whatever, man. It was a long time ago. Shit don’t matter no more.”

A silence settles on them then. A long stretched out thing that is weighed down by all the things Lela can’t say and all the things James won’t. It’s a hideous thing. One that reminds Lela that this might not have been the greatest of ideas.

Desperate to settle all the things she’s said back down at her feet, Lela asks, “This usually how first dates go?”

Slowly, like he was working to unwind himself after being coiled so tight, James gently says, “Not from what I remember. I pretty much screwed it up from the get.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela turns to settle her glare on James and bites out, “Pretty sure we both had a hand in fucking this shit up good and plenty, yeah? So lets call it a draw.”

Nodding his head, looking like he doesn’t agree one single bit but wasn’t about to fight her on it, James carefully goes, “Did you…did you want to head back?”

Lela’s not really sure how dates are supposed to go so obviously she’s not entirely sure how they’re supposed to end. But she’s pretty sure it ain’t supposed to end in what she’s feeling now. Like she’s swallowed down a bucket of rotten milk. Like she’s gotten punched in the gut and couldn’t find the fucker that did it. Like she’d been slapped awake and told she was losing her room. Like…well fuck, it felt a hell of a lot like rejection.

Something small and stupid breaks and withers all at the same time. Something nameless and ancient—entirely too young and not old enough—makes her feel like all her worst fears have come true. That she’s been told all her fears all at once were real.

In all her long life, Lela’s been punched, kicked, had her ass royally handed to her, stabbed, her bones broken, tased and at one point she’s gotten run right the fuck over. But without a shadow of a doubt, she thinks, this feeling she’s got pinching up her chest feels a hell of a lot worse. It felt like every one of those feelings sucked, made babies and this was all of their combined rotten off spring. In this moment, Lela would rather get stabbed in the left tit then feel what she’s feeling now.

All her bonds, every last one of them grows cold and distant. Like she’s been sitting on her hand for the last three hours, the feel of them fades into a static hiss. An echo of a thing she’s gotten used to being able to grab hold of without effort. She can’t feel their reactions because something cold and ugly swells in her chest. It slips out of the center of her and on down to the ends of her fingers and toes. Her lips tingle from it like she’s had them lying on ice for longer than was safe.

Omega, back alley dog—Her, curls up because she expected this hadn’t she? She’d accepted it the moment she opened up her mouth and spewed out the utter horse shit that was her life.
She’s about to agree, something like a yes sitting on her tongue when suddenly, before she can make sense of it, something whizzes over her head. It’s a ball of some kind that gets tangled up in the branches and leaves of the tree they’d been using as shade. Surprised, Lela stares at the tree and then at the group of running teens all shouting curses in one form or another.

“I freakin’ told you Jess! I told you, you can’t play ‘cause you don’t know how to throw a damn ball!” One of them shouts, his arms flailing like that alone will get his point across if his words wouldn’t be listened to. His riot of dark black curls bouncing with each swing of his head.

“Mom told you I had to be on the team, Mike!” the only little girl in the group shouts. Her little foot stamping hard as she glared at the screaming boy. Her cocoa colored skin tinged with something like anger and embarrassment.

“You don’t know how to throw a ball! How’re we supposed to win!” the boy yells—Mike, Lela guesses—at the girl.

Sneering, another boy, fair skinned and beady eyed, says, “Girls don’t know how to play sports. Girls only know how’tta play with dolls.”

“No they don’t,” another says, his soft brown face twisting up like he didn’t like that thought one bit, “My sister plays football in school. She’s the best player!”

“Your sister’s an alpha,” the beady eyed kid remarks like that alone settled everything.

“Whatever Justin, you don’t know how’tta throw a football either,” the kid with the alpha sister announces. His words earning a snicker all around.

In a mess of overlapping conversations, the kids round the table and head over to the tree their ball was stuck in. They’re all arguing, spiting accusations in one form or another at the girl for getting it stuck up so high.

Considering Lela’s always been a selfish person, she stops paying attention almost immediately. That do-gooder feeling everyone seems to be born with—the kind that made them help out those around them—was never something Lela had housed in herself. So she pulls her eyes away and settles them on James. What she finds sitting on his face is surprising enough that Lela can’t help the small bit of a smile that spreads on her lips.

For there was James—Mr. Cursed and Forsaken—looking over at the gaggle of pre-teens like he wanted to get up and help them. James had this twist to his brows that said he was trying to work himself up and out of his seat. the frown on his lips said he wasn’t gonna do it though. A strange shade of hopelessness settling into his eyes like he didn’t trust himself to go out and help like he wanted to.

Heaving out a sigh, hating herself the moment the thought solidifies, Lela slaps her hands on the table top and rises to her feet. Wordlessly she makes her way to the group of noisy kids and watches as their third attempt to climb the tree fails.

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela asks, “You little fuckers need any help with that?”

And sure, maybe her words could’ve been better, but cursed fucking lesser dynamic or not—Lela didn’t know shit about kids. She didn’t particularly like dealing with them in all honesty. Hated to be caught in their gazes and in their general vicinity. Distantly, she knows calling kids ‘little fuckers’ isn’t exactly the way to go about things.

But all of them had to be at least thirteen, minus the little girl, so they’d probably heard a hell of a lot
worse. Either way, Lela doesn’t really care. She doesn’t even really want to help. She’s only doing it because James was looking all kinds of stupid ways and it was a nice distraction to that ugly feeling she’s got in her.

Face twisting up, the brown skinned boy—the one with the alpha sister—turns to level her with a stern glare, “You can’t cuss at us.”

Grinding her teeth, Lela quirks up a brow and drawls as sarcastic as possible, “Sure as shit can, little fucker. I can do it all goddamn day.”

Wide eyed and mouth gaping, the little girl—Jess—stares at her like Lela’s pulled her tits out and flashed them all.

Trying not to grin at all the shocked expressions she’s been given, Lela crosses her arms over her chest and tries to be a decent person, “You need help getting that shit outta there?”

For one long minute, one where all four kids glance at each other and then at her, nobody speaks. They stay all quiet and dubious like they’re sure Lela’s that monster they’d all been warned about since they could walk and talk.

Eventually, the beady eyed kid glances back at where James remains seated and asks, “You gonna make you’re Alpha boyfriend get it?”

Lela’s not sure what part of that question makes her burn the most. If it’s the implication that because she’s a being looked like a weak little thing with wrong parts or the fact that the stupid little asshole thinks Lela’s automatically gonna force James to do something for her where she can’t. Maybe it’s all of it.

Lips pulling into a sneer that showcased her long fangs, Lela growls out, “The fuck you tryin’ ta say there little dude? You sayin’ I can’t get that fuckin’ ball out?”

The way they all seem to jump and huddle into one little tight group at her growl strokes the very worst parts of Lela’s ego. That dark part of her still smiles wide at the way she can send people skittering away with one well placed growl.

“N-no! It’s just—you’re a girl, you’re prolly gonna get your alpha to do it for you,” the kid squeaks out from behind the brown skinned kids back.

Running her tongue over her teeth—fangs and all—Lela takes a few steps back and sets into a run. Pushing herself off the ground, she reaches up and catches the lowest branch she can find. With her hands on the branch—her palms burning with the rough scrape of the bark underneath—Lela hauls herself up. Her arms aching as they stretched, pulled and coiled tight with the act. Lela’s never been fit but she’s gotten by well enough.

Hooking her right leg onto the branch, she hauls her body up and onto the branch so it sits underneath her ass and between her legs. Letting her eyes roam the branches around her, she searches for the ball. She finds it wedged as high up as humanly possible. Huffing out a breath, Lela gets to her feet—balancing herself on the branch—and starts moving further up.

When she was younger, all knobby kneed, starry eyed and stupid, Lela had always had an affinity for climbing the trees around her neighborhood. she remembers braving the long and delicate branches of the naranja and toronja groves. She remembers the way she used to line her shirt front with them and jump down. The way all her little friends had always come running to her because she was the only one who could climb a certain tree to get the sweetest naranjas.
It’s been years since she’s done it. But it comes second natured to her. Lela guesses, she’s taken far too many tumbles for her body to already know how to bend and twist without her consent. To keep her safe and sound as she went about getting up to no good.

When she manages to dig the ball out of the tangle of leaves and branches, Lela glances down to the ground. She moves around a bit so as to not fucking drop down from too high up and then lets herself slip right down. With a small thump she hits the ground with both feet. Her knees bending to keep from breaking anything.

Pulling herself up straight, Lela glances at the group of kids. Her head tilting to the side as she spun the football in the palm of her hand. She’s quiet as she tosses the ball to the brown skinned kid they all seem to be hiding behind.

Carefully slow, the kid mutters, “Thanks.”

“Prolly coulda done it a lot faster if I had a dick between my legs, you know, me being a fucking girl and all,” Lela spits at them all. Her anger and indignation coloring every inch of her voice.

Face twisting like he doesn’t like what he’s hearing, the brown skinned kid with the ball in his hands tells her, “Sorry. Justin’s a…he’s a little stupid. Believes all the crap his dad tells him.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela crosses her hands over her chest and glares them all down. She’s not about to stand here and fucking lecture anyone about shit like that though. No matter how much everything burns in her. so she settles with:

“People that run that kinda shit always end up missing their teeth.”

Looking all kinds of cautious, the kid with the ball nods his head and offers a closed fist out with a simple, “I’m Hector.”

Knocking her closed fist with his, Lela throws back, “Lela.”

“We’re playing a pick-up game over there.” Hector says, his pale hazel eyes flashing over Lela’s face and then to where he’d lead the group from, “Wanna play?”

And, again, Lela’s never been a real big fan of kids in whatever shape they came in. But there’s something about the one standing in front of her that had her smiling. Carefully, her dark eyes run over the kids sharp as shit fade, his clean cut plain white tee and his ethnically inclined face. something about the set in his eyes, the slope of his nose and the brown fullness of his lips calls up memories of friends she can’t really remember the names of.

“I dunno man, wouldn’t wanna show you dipshits up.” Lela states with a wide smirk.

Laughing, Hector runs a hand over his head and throws right back, “You that good?”

“I’mma fucking all-star bitch.”

Glancing back at James, Lela calls out:

“Yo, James! You down to play ball?”

Awkwardly ducking his head, Looking like he’s about to run in the opposite direction, James shakes his head and says, “Uh, I—I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Brows pinching, Lela turns and heads over to where she’d left him. When she’s looking down at
him, she demands, “Why?”

“I… I don’t want to hurt anyone,” James admits, a bone aching sadness stretching his lips into a frown.

Honestly, Lela thought, the man was a fucking enigma. A fucking walking talking contradiction. Wasn’t he the one dead set to hunt down some part of her past and spill blood? Now he was sitting there worried because he’s afraid a fucking game of football might kill him if he ended up hurting some snot nosed kid? Lela didn’t understand one fucking bit of it.

But it makes her heart twirl up. Her hindbrain thumping like she’s both pleased and fucking sad for it all.

“Hey man, I’m pretty new to this whole dating thing, but,” Lela starts, her arms crossing tight over her chest as she widened her stance to put up a fight if need be, “It’s supposed to be about having a good time.”

It takes a while before James can answer her. In that time, his eyes roam freely over her face. They settle themselves on her eyes like they’d rather never want to be anywhere but there.

“You want me to play a game of football with you?” He asks slow and careful like he doesn’t want to misunderstand a single thing.

Ignoring the heat that explodes on her face, Lela asks her tongue and cocks her hip to the side and gruffly tells him, “Well yeah, wouldn’t be fucking asking you if I didn’t.”

A slow smile works it’s way over his lips as James softly nodded his head.

Ripping her gaze off the man, Lela turns to the kids waiting at her back and calls out, “Alright, you little fuckers, where’s this game at?”

And like that, Lela forces James to follow her as the kids lead them back to wherever they’d come from. when she glances back at James, wearing an impossibly soft smile that only he could sport, Lela tries not to trip over her feet.

It’s a hell of a bad start but, if Lela’s track record was anything to go by, she’s got a bad habit of making those stick whether she’d like them to or not. Every inch of her hopes that’s the case this time around.

балерина - Dancers, billarenas

It's what James calls Natasha and the girls from the red room. Again, if it's wrong, I blame google translate.
OUFFFFFFFF GUYS!!!!!!!

Okay, so I did y'all dirty again. Left it on a cliffhanger, AGAIN!
But this felt like a small stop for me. The next part is already in the works so don't worry.

What the hell kind of first date was this??????
Fucking emotionally constipated assholes, both of them. I wanted fluff, fucking romance. But they went and slit their wrists open for each other to run their fingers through the blood. I was like what the fuck is happening?!

But, I guess I liked the way it turned out, somewhat.
Bucky is a precious baby and must be protected at all costs!!!!

BTW, I'm not a religious person--like, at all--so IDK why Lela gets all biblical when it comes to describing Bucky. She just does. It flows right into the chapter. I'm sorry for that but Lela's half in love and doesn't want to fucking admit it!!!

The whole kids showing up was not part of the plan. But then it happened and I couldn't write it out. It's a good break from all the angst if nothing at all. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

I hope you guys enjoyed this scene.
As always, thanks for those of you who read and enjoy!!!
I hope to hear from you down below!!!

ANDDDDDD I can't thank you enough for those of you who have wished me luck on the publishing thing! I'll try to do us all proud!!!
**Date- Pt 2 - Pomegranate and Wine stained mouths**

**Chapter Summary**

Looking at him now, bathed in the bright light of the sun, surrounded by greenery and kids he didn’t want to get too close to because he was afraid of what he might hurt, Lela feels her heart ache. Looking at him now, carefully speaking to them like they’re walking talking diamond encrusted creatures, Lela feels herself grow warm and soft like. Looking at him now, smiling because Jess is jumping to get his attention, Lela feels her stomach grow all tight and knotted. Looking at him now, trying to win a game that shouldn’t be so fucking important to her, Lela finds that crush explode in a heat she can feel all the way down to her toes.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gritting her teeth, ignoring the ugly thump of a knot she’s got at the back of her head, Lela glares down murder from across the impromptu field. Her fangs are bared as she dug her feet into the ground and tried not to fly into a rage. The aggression she’s got running high on her making her face twist up in familiar snarl.

“Lela?” a voice calls out to her. It’s a soft voice, so entirely light and gentle, it jars Lela instantly.

Flashing her eyes down, Lela takes in the half frightened face on the girl at her side. Jessica—Jess she’d insisted from the get—with her too big eyes and pinched dark brows. There’s concern on her face that’s directed at Lela despite the way her knee bleeds freely from the scrape she has there.

Rolling her pursed lips, Lela gruffly demands, “What?”

“We don’t have to play anymore if you don’t wanna,” Jess tells her.

The football game, that was stock full of kids about to head into high school, was supposed to be a simple little thing. And for the first part of it, it had been. But then more kids had piled in. Older kids, older siblings. It’d turned the shit into a far more fucking violent thing than Lela had been expecting.

Not that she was complaining. Lela’s few bumps and bruises didn’t fucking matter. What mattered was the fact that half her fucking team was heavily outmatched by the opposing. The kids on the
other side looked like full grown ass teenagers. They had no fucking business trying to tackle scrawny assed babies.

She may not like at least half of the little shits she’s playing with, but something in Lela’s hindbrain thumps ugly and angry every time one of them hits the floor. All of them stinking of that weird scent kids had before they presented.

“Never said I didn’t wanna,” Lela bites out, an angry growl slipping off her tongue as she turned her face to the rest of her team.

Calling it a team felt like a little much. Most of the kids Hector’s team is made up of can’t fucking walk into a PG-13 movie without someone holding their hands.

Huffing and puffing after he’s just run for a ball that never came his way, Hector plants his hands on his hips and declares, “We’re losing.”

“No shit,” Lela growls as she pulled her hair into a messy knotted thing upon her head, “Fucking 10 to 16.”

“Maybe if someone could throw the ball,” Justin, the little asshole of a dick eater, sniped. His eyes cutting over to Lela as he greedily gulped down water from his bottle. Something like disdain painting his beady little eyes.

Glaring at him, Lela bites out, “Can’t fucking throw the ball if I keep getting sacked asshole. Learn how to plant your fucking feet!”

“No, have you seen’em?” Justin screeches as he waved his hand to the other team, “They’re huge!”

Mike, who’s mostly quiet outside of yelling at his sister to get out of the way, pipes up in a half hopeful voice, “Is your boyfriend gonna play?”

James had only played long enough for three passes. When he figured out it was less of a touch football type situation and full on contact, he’d sat his ass on the sidelines. Pretty fucker hadn’t moved a single inch from where he was watching underneath the shade. His eyes had hung heavy with something Lela couldn’t name. Like he was way too fucking soft hearted to play against anyone.

Whatever James was afraid of within himself, Lela wasn’t gonna push him. It wasn’t right.

Head almost snapping right off her head, Lela growls at the kid, “He ain’t my boyfriend.”

“But you’re on a date with him, right?” Jess slips in from where she’s shaking her leg as if that’ll chase away whatever pain she’s feeling. The girl was probably a solid two or three years younger than those around her. By far the smallest here and the most tackled out of everyone standing. Every time the girl hit the floor Lela had fucking burned over it.

Jess, who was way too young for it, had been completely gone over James the moment she’d set her too big eyes on him. Her face going all kinds of stupid every time he had looked over at her. And, honestly, Lela didn’t blame the girl. Lela was pretty sure that dumbass look the girl got was the same one she wore.

James in his too tight henley throwing a football, the afternoon sun gleaming in his hair, his scruff littered face lighting up in a soft smile when one of the kids caught the ball? It was all kinds of lust inducing. Lela’s pretty sure she almost swallowed her damn tongue when James had pulled out his tie and shook out his hair.
That man was too fucking good looking to be real. Lela was waiting for the moment he vanished into the air and ceased to be. A fucking hallucination of Lela’s broken mind.

“Pretty sure that means you’re girlfriend and boyfriend,” Marco tosses out as he tried to fix his now crooked glasses. His blonde hair littered in pieces of grass. Marco had come late to the party, so he hadn’t really had an issue with Lela. Even when Lela cursed at him, he always just laughed it off and followed her lead.

Twisting her lips up into a purse, Lela wobbles her head in a so and so manner before she answers, “Yeah, but I’m pretty sure it ain’t gonna happen again?”

“How?” Hector pants out as he wrestled Justin’s bottle out of his hands.

Slipping her flannel off her shoulders, Lela ties it tightly around her waist and tells the gathered mass of children, “Pretty sure I fucked it up between us.”

That cold awkwardness between them all had faded around the time giants had joined the opposing team. Getting knocked into the dirt together seemed to solidify whatever camaraderie real athletes formed. Lela’s tongue was a little looser around them. Whatever kind of fear she’d’ve felt admitting this out loud to someone her age fading. There was a safety, Lela supposes, in that the kids being too young to really understand most of what she was feeling.

It made it so Lela was comfortable enough to admit what she has.

“Nah, he’s still here right?” Hector asks, turning half around to spot where James sits up on the far right side of the field, “He likes you.”

Something in his tone makes him sound older and wiser than his young little face let on.

“I wouldda left a long time ago,” Justin throws at her with narrowed eyes. Whatever the fuck it was about Lela simply existing rubbed the kid the wrong way.

“Hey,” Lela starts with a sharp smile, “Fuck you too man.”

Before it can slip further into dirtier and meaner shit, Hector calls them to heel. He starts running down all the list of plays he knows. The balls out of their hands now so they’re running defense. With a stern nod of his head and a single clap, Hector leads them back out into the field.

Sweaty and a little fucking past angry, Lela gets into place as the teams safety. Her job is to catch the fucker running past her with the ball. She’s supposed to pin the fuck out of him and try to run it back to get them away from how close they are to the end goal.

Lela’ll be the first to admit, she’s not good at defense. She’s shit at it. She could make strides in offense though. She could run the shit out the ball whenever it landed in her hands. But for whatever reason, Hector’s the RB and Lela’s been pushed into QB when they ran offense. It ain’t working as well as everyone likes to pretend it is and it’s bringing the absolute worst out of her.

She’s always been a sore loser. Even back when she was a kid. Hated having to walk home the loser.

With a snap and a yell, the ball fires off into motion. Eyes running over the field, Lela spots the ball and rushes forward. Uncaring of the fact that she’s probably about to bring down a kid probably four or five years younger, Lela hits him with everything she has. Her shoulder aching as she tumbled into the floor.
The brown ball sits untouched for a solid five seconds before everyone rushes towards it. Scrambling to get her hands on it, Lela barely manages to fight off the arms that wrap themselves tight over her waist and try to keep her down.

Snarling, Lela kicks her way out of it and hops up to run in the opposite direction. Blood pumping hard and fast, Lela pushes herself into a dead run. Ducking and twirling to keep hands from catching her, Lela runs. She jumps at least once over someone who full on dives at her. In the air, she can hear the way her team roots for her and the way they shout for her to keep on running for a win. The smile that spreads across her face is wild as she keeps on running. She’s so close to the line she misses the body that comes barreling into her.

Blindsided, she’s hit from her left and goes down in a mess of limbs that were both hers and not. Pain wraps her up as her face gets pressed into the green grass below her. When she manages to get up, pushing the body upon her off, Lela notices she’s fucking scored regardless of the hit. It makes her grin wide as she scoops up the ball.

She’s still smiling when her team rushes her. All of the screaming in excitement at the fact. Even Justin—the dickhead—is whooping like Lela went and knocked over building. It makes something in Lela swell. Her hindbrain twirling and slipping wide as pride sang in her chest. Only their faces loose their smiles when they see her.

It’s Hector that shouts, “Your lips bleeding!”

Confused, Lela pulls up a hand and runs it over her mouth. When she pulls her hand back, Lela see’s the bloom of crimson on her fingers. Tongue running out, Lela can taste the tang of copper and iron blood was fused with. She can feel the way it coats her teeth so Lela spits it out onto the grass and shrugs her shoulders without care:

“C’mon, balls ours,” Lela states as she tossed the ball into Mike’s fumbling hands.

“Nah, man, you should sit down!” Marco tells her like he’s about to pull up a chair and push Lela into it. His green eyes all kinds of wide behind his glasses.

With a purse of her busted lips, Lela growls at them all, “It’s not like I broke a fucking bone. Shit happens.”

Shaking his head, Hector calls for a Time Out. He says it so firmly that the other team turns to take notice of the way Lela’s gushing blood out her mouth.

And before Lela can make heads or tails of the situation, James magically appears in front of her. He stands tall, dwarfing all the little fuckers that are surrounding Lela. Gray eyes zoom onto her face as James’ gorgeous face twists into something that is both deadly and beautiful.

Slowly, like time had screeched into a halt, the very spin of the earth just slipping to a halt, James reaches out an ungloved hand towards her. Lela grows still, like a petrified tree, she stands solid as she feels the roughness of his fingers catch her chin and tilt her face upward. Breathless, a mess of nothing and everything, Lela stares up into those slate eyes and finds her heart stilling too.

His touch, Lela thinks, is like nothing she’s ever felt. It burns in a way she’s never known. Shivers race down her spine from the spot on her face that he’s got in his hands. A strange kind of tingle that makes her want to vibrate right out of her skin. It makes every part of her, hindbrain or not, just explode with want. With a need so fierce Lela feels deep in her chest.

Distantly, Lela realizes, James has never touched her and she’s never touched him. Distantly, Lela
realizes, it’s something she’s been craving to do since she’d first seen that stupid soft smile of his.

All the things she is, Omega and everything else, can feel the gentleness of his touch. The way he touches her like he thinks she’s made of glass. Like she is a thing to be held only with care. Lela can feel it radiating out of his fingers and running down to the very core of who she is.

It scares her as much as she marvels at it.

Because Lela’s been touched all kinds of ways—by her pack and a hell of a lot more people than she wants to think about—but she’s never been touched like that. Her hindbrain—the dirty rat bastard it was—was coiling up a goddamn cry that lodged itself tight in Lela’s throat. A cry and a plea for more of that gentleness.

“You’re bleeding,” James states, his voice a low rumbling thing that reminds her of thunder rolling. His fingers running up to graze her bottom lip and leaving trails of fire where he cupped the left side of her face with his right hand. The wideness of it, the sheer size of it, making Lela feel all kinds of small and strange.

This time around, Lela finds the firmness in her words escaping her as she forced the words out, “I’m…I’m fine.”

“You…” James starts, his words tangled in his stern stare.

Lela’s pretty sure there’s some kind of sentence on James’ tongue where he’s about to tell her to quit before she spills anymore of her blood. So Lela glares. She sets her jaw tight underneath that strange touch of his. All the fucked up gooey shit she’s got in her chest forced down by a ragged hand as she squared her shoulders and widened her feet beneath her.

A busted lip wasn’t shit. She could handle it and she wasn’t backing down over it.

Dark brows pinching tight on his face, James lets his fingers fall away. A determined set to his jaw, James turns to Marco and asks for the ball. He’s quiet as he grips the tan ball in his hand and asks her with a strange type of steel in his voice:

“You want the win.”

Grinding her teeth together, Lela nods her head tight but says nothing else.

With that James nods his head like he’s about to head into war. Every line of him speaking to how he’s dead set to destroy the opposing team of teenagers. When he leaves back to the middle line, he takes with him half of the team. Justin, Mike, Marco and Jess chasing after him like little lost puppies. It’s Hector who ends up staying behind with Lela and all her frozen bullshit.

Slowly shuffling his feet, Hector huffs out a laugh and knocks his elbow into Lela’s own. When Lela turns to look over at him, Hector smiles, his hazel eyes gleaming as he snickered:

“Nah, he likes you.”

Working her jaw tight, ignoring the flare of utter fucking mortification that floods her at realizing the whole fucking touching her face had had an audience, Lela glares at the little fucker, “Shut up.”

Despite herself, Lela feels the fragile twist in her heart at the kids words. That James might like her. That he might care, even a speck, the way she did for him. She can feel heat burning the tops of her ears and the rise of her cheeks. It makes her feel entirely too young and feeling for bonds of those not here.
What she wouldn’t give now for Natasha’s cool strength. For Clint’s sunny wide encouragement. For Sam’s gentle comfort. For Tony’s snark that could push through solid walls. For Peppers warm care. For Bruce’s carefully placed smiles and touches.

Laughing, Hector grins up at her and states with all the sure of the world, “You like him too.”

something too hot like embarrassment makes Lela reach out and push the kid at the shoulder. Hector nearly falls over but catches himself with a laugh he throws her way. Glaring, Lela spits at him, “Pinche cabron!”

Smiling this shit eating thing, Hector rights himself and jogs away to the huddle James has around him. Slow and careful, Lela follows. Her body feeling all kinds of strange as echoes of that touch still crawled over her skin. Her heart thumping a strange rhythm that makes her head swirl. Her head sticking to the things a snot nosed kid has just thrown at her.

And while she should be paying attention to the play James is saying like he’s organizing a goddamn mission, Lela’s lost in her head.

There’s a small part of her—a very small and delicate little part of her—that gets stuck on Hector’s words. She liked him?

Liking someone, caring about them in that way, feels like something that’s so out of Lela’s reach she might as well reach for Pluto. What she does know is that stupid crush she has is moving, growing. Like a living thing that was like a disease of some sort. It was swallowing her whole so fast Lela couldn’t fucking make heads or tails of the shit. Every time the dude looked at her, Lela felt everything in her still. Every time he smiled at her, Lela felt her heart trip and run all at once. Every time he laughed, Lela felt something ring in her.

Looking at him now, bathed in the bright light of the sun, surrounded by greenery and kids he didn’t want to get too close to because he was afraid of what he might hurt, Lela feels her heart ache. Looking at him now, carefully speaking to them like they’re walking talking diamond encrusted creatures, Lela feels herself grow warm and soft like. Looking at him now, smiling because Jess is jumping to get his attention, Lela feels her stomach grow all tight and knotted. Looking at him now, trying to win a game that shouldn’t be so fucking important to her, Lela finds that crush explode in a heat she can feel all the way down to her toes.

It hits her like a runaway fucking train that’s been caught on fire. She fucking likes the asshole.

Holy fucking shit, she fucking likes him and while it should scare the ever living shit out of her, all Lela can feel is…excitement. Because she thinks—hopes—James might like her back.

Glancing at her, James tells her with this unwavering determination in his eyes, “Stay open.”

Wordlessly, Lela nods her head and tries not to fucking crumble because she started all this shit—both the game and the fucking date—and she’d fucking rather die than falter now. Push came to shove, Lela was gonna see it through.

*~*

It takes no more than thirty or so minutes after James joined the game for them to win. James, it seemed, was a fucking force to be reckoned with. Never once did he fumble a ball. Never once did he get thrown down. He always managed to get the damn ball into the air and into Lela’s hands. And Lela always did her level best to get the shit as far as she could. They’d swallowed up that gap without issue. In between the mad scramble the kids did to create utter fucking chaos, they kept
Dirty and sweaty but grinning from ear to ear, everyone shouts happily as they surround both James and Lela. The kids are all screaming over one another. A mad jumble of things that would’ve set Lela on edge on any given day but is sure as hell welcomed now. Even Justin is screaming like they’ve won the super bowl.

Joining in their laughter, Lela feels brighter and lighter than she’s ever felt in years. All the black and grime of her life slipping away under the rush of winning a stupid game. She feels all kinds of confident, like she’s won a fight against an alpha and hadn’t gotten a scratch on her, when she turns to James. When he smiles at her, a soft and impossibly beautiful thing, Lela feels like she’s fucking flying.

“We won!” Jess screams, her eyes bright as she gripped Lela’s arm and shook her hard.

“Fuckin’ told you we would!” Lela laughed out, she she hooked her arm over the girls shoulder.

“That was insane!” Marco shouts, his head whipping back and forth from James and over to Lela, “I can’t believe it!”

It takes a hell of a time for all the kids to eventually simmer down. For the rush of the post game adrenaline to wear down. When they eventually crash, somewhere around the time the sky has streaks of indigo, they all gather themselves up and head off on their way. But not before each and everyone of them make promises to play again sometime. For James and Lela to meet back here in the future to play another game.

When they leave, Lela’s firmly seated on the grass beside James. Both of them staring at the shrinking backs of kids they don’t know. Of kids they probably won’t ever see again despite all the promises that were wrangled out of both of them.

Silence settles on their shoulders as they sit there. A silence that isn’t strained or bogged down. It’s a simple thing, half peaceful, despite all the things Lela’s just realized a few minutes earlier.

Bending her legs so she can rest her elbows on her knees, Lela softly remarks, “You’re pretty good with kids.”

Huffing out a breath, James tells her easily, “So are you.”

Face shrugging, Lela shakes her head and admits, “Not really. Fucking can’t stand’em half the time. Never know what I’m supposed to do with’em.”

“Only child?” James asks, his face turning so it’s facing Lela as opposed to the empty space before them.

Nodding her head, Lela turns to James and tells him, “Far as I know. You?”

James eyes, that had been so bright after the win—glittering with star light—dim at Lela’s question. Something bitter like loss lines his pretty face as he softly told her, “I had a little sister.”

Even without the way he says the words and the fact that it’s all in past tense, Lela can feel the fact that his sister is gone. Buried but not forgotten.

“Sorry,” Lela mutters, feels like shit for bringing this string of conversation up. As if the fucking date thing needed anymore bullshit laid on top of it.
Lela’s pretty sure if there was some kind of competition for the worst first dates ever, Lela would fucking win hands down.

“It’s alright. She’s been gone a long time now,” James says, resignation in his voice.

And maybe because she’s just that hungry for self destruction, Lela feels her mouth open and the words spill out of her mouth.

“What was she like?”

There’s an ugly itch under her skin that makes Lela want to dig into all the fleshy parts of James and pull from him all that she could. To learn every bit of him he was willing to share. It’s an ugly desperate itch that both comes from her chest and that broken part of her that housed all her second dynamic bullshit.

A laugh escapes James lips as an old kind of smile spread lightly on his face, “She was…I—I don’t remember much, but I remember her smile. She was…she was always smiling. Every time I opened the door, she always smiled up at me.”

Lela’s not sure what she’s supposed to say to that so she stays quiet. Her mind working on the fact that James memories—of his life, of his little sister—was gone on account of some monsters that had sunk their fangs into him. It makes her heart ache because it isn’t right.

“Do you—Do you know how she, uh, how she passed?” Lela finds herself asking.

Kicking his legs out, James drops his hands into his lap and says, “She got sick, couldn’t beat it. Passed in her sleep, is what they tell me. She was 17.”

And damn if that doesn’t fucking make Lela’s stomach clench up tight. It twists up her face because that’s a fucking kid. Too young to have been snuffed out like that. Her mind can’t help but trip back onto all the faces on the little fuckers she’s been entertaining all day. She thinks about anyone of them dying that young and it makes her heart ache.

Leaning back to rest her weight on her elbows, half laying down on the grass, Lela ignores the flare of pain running up her back and probes a little deeper, “You got any other family?”

Moving so he was sprawled out completely beside her, James stares up at her from where his head lies on the green grass. His chocolate hair fanned out all around him like a halo.

“Not really.”

Heart thumping at the beautiful sight he makes, Lela wrenches her eyes away and says, “Me either. Moms died when I was a kid. Never knew my dad and my mom didn’t have much family on her side, so I got kicked into the system. Been on my own for a while now. Well, until I met my pack.”

“They care about you, your pack,” James states like he doesn’t for once doubt the people she’s surrounded by. His voice dripping with it.

Huffing out a dry laugh, Lela straightens up and pulls out her crumpled pack and lights one up as she mumbled, “Told you, idiots—all of ’em. Feel like I struck the end of a goddamn rainbow. Never been this lucky before.”

She’s not entirely sure why she’s saying what she is only that she finds herself all kinds of loose tongued now. Whatever kind of distance they had when they’d walked into this shit show fading after everything that’s been said and done.
That realization of hers thumping wildly in the back of her head.

There’s an ache in her to push as much of herself out there for James to pick up and hold. For him to know her, whatever part of her he deemed worthwhile.

“No,” James starts, his tone growing firm despite how low it drags down Lela’s spine. When she glances down at him, “They’re the lucky ones doll.”

Frowning, Lela stares at the man and dares to ask despite how much her heart hammers in her chest, “Yeah? How’d you figure that, James? They’re fucking superheroes and I’m… I’m just some stray they picked up off the street.”

Dark brows pinching up tight, James frowns at her and says simply, “Because, they see what I see when I look at you.”

Heart in her throat, Lela opens her mouth and has to push the words out of her suddenly dry lips, “And… what do you see?”

“I see,” James starts slow and careful, his eyes roaming over her face before settling upon her eyes once more, “I see you. Someone who’s only ever known the cruelty of the world and still stands tall. Someone who holds her head up where others have dropped to their knees. Someone who has no reason to be kind but still is. Someone who is good and gentle at heart. I see you.”

They’re so simple, James’ words. So fucking simple and yet, they make Lela’s entire world tumble to a halt and upend it upon it’s egg shelled head. Lela can almost make out the echo of a crack ring in her head over it. The way her heart stutters and stops like it’s run out of gas. Lela can feel the way her lips fall open on a wordless noise.

Something entirely too fragile and too delicate to be hers slithers out and over her. It coats her, from head to toe, and makes Lela feel like she’s just been stabbed in the gut.

That realization from earlier picking it’s head up and roaring with a fury. Something intense swirls in her veins. Makes it so Lela aches to do something stupid and reach for the angel laying beside her. For her to touch him, run her fingers through his hair, and lay whatever scent she had on him. To make him hers because that coal colored thing in her chest was his.

And Lela realizes there’s no way on this fucking planet that she can be as gone as she is for him but she knows she is. She hungers for the man. Everything in her wants to wrap that man up and keep him close. To chase away all others that may lay their undeserving eyes upon him and try to steal him away. Her heart wanted him as much as every other part of her did.

Wide eyed, Lela pulls her gaze off of the man and stays quiet.

Gritting her teeth, Lela tries to be brave. She sinks her nails into the palms of her hands and tells him, “I— I, uh, I see you too, James. You aren’t the man you used to be. You aren’t the monster you think you are. You’re too… kind. I mean, look at you, you don’t got a bad bone in you.”

And yeah, Lela gets that she’s just played a rough as fuck football game. One that had forced her leg to move faster than Lela was comfortable with. But Lela knows for a damn fact, that flighty feeling in her chest, the one that makes her feel like she’s about to jump off the top of a too tall building, has nothing to do with that fact. It had everything to do with the man sitting next to her. The one she’s fucking spitting these things to. The one she’s desperately trying to slide up next to and convince him she’s worth keeping around.

Blinking his eyes, something like surprise and disbelief sing in James eyes as he stares up Lela. He’s
got this weird funny looking kind of thing in his eyes. Like he thinks Lela went and hung the moon all by herself. Like he thinks he’s the one trying to convince Lela to keep him around. It blows Lela back, makes her grow hot in the face. Because there sat that look on his damnable angelic face.

That expression that said James thought he was beyond saving. Like he was falling, falling down so low, he didn’t wanna take the risk of reaching his hands out. Like he thought he might scorch Lela with all the flames swallowing him up.

Tsking her tongue, hating that damn look for all that it was, Lela lays back onto the grass and tries not to scoot her ass further away. She wills herself to be some kind of brave and not be overly self conscious of the fact that James is only a palms width away from her. She chokes on the heart in her throat and keeps herself still.

Eye’s on the mess of violet, indigo and pink sky over head, Lela softly tells him, “You know, when I first saw you, I never thought you were… I didn’t for once think you were some lost cause. Your smile…” here Lela falters, can’t seem to find the right words to chase that look off his face, “Your smile it’s too… soft for whatever the fuck you think you are. I’ve met a lot of people in my fucked up life. Almost all of them were fucking monsters man. So trust me when I tell you, monsters don’t smile the way you do.”

It’s a hell of a long time before James decides to say anything after all. A silence stretches between them that’s so heavy and soul crushing that Lela almost turns to look to see if the man hasn’t faded into nothing. when he finally does speak, James voice is all rumbling gravel and mountain slides: “I thought the same about you.”

And as much as that makes her heart clench, Lela feels a weary kind of self deprecating smile stretch over her lips. For however much her pack and maybe even James thinks otherwise, Lela doesn’t think she deserves half of what she’s got. Something in her—too broken and worn down—aches like a bone that’s set wrong.

Eye’s full of a setting sun sky, Lela huffs out a long breath, and drawls slow, “Yeah?”

As if hearing the kind of doubt Lela has on that, James continues on, his voice raking down every inch of her as it went:

“Like you said, Monsters don’t smile the way you do. You’ve got too much light in your eyes to be anything other than good, doll.”

Chancing a glance over to him, Lela feels her breath hitch at the smile that greets her eyes. It’s too damn pretty, that smile. Too damn gorgeous to ever be directed Lela’s way. But damn if Lela doesn’t feel greedy enough to want to soak up the shine that comes off it. Eyes stuck on that smile—bathed in violet, indigo, and gleaming pinks—Lela finds her mouth opening and admitting the dumbest shit she’s ever thought possible.

“I—I think… I like you… and I’m not entirely sure where I’m supposed to go from here. I’ve never… I don’t remember what I’m supposed to do with this, with you… with us.”

Fear tangles up Lela’s stomach so tight she thinks she might puke up on the grass. Because she’s being honest here. She doesn’t know what she’s supposed to do. The last person she ever felt any kind of way about had been her ex all those years back. The last person she’d went and dove head first for had wrung her neck and broken her heart. Lela’s not sure how this might end, she’s not even sure how she’s supposed to start it, and it makes her stomach twist up.
His smile, which had been already beautiful, erupts into something that damn near blinds Lela’s eyes. Like the parting of clouds and gods holy light shining through, his smile could burn shadows up. It stretched wide over his face and made his eyes glow like stars rushing through the infinite dark sky. It burns Lela’s dark eyes up.

But Lela doesn’t mind if that smile is the last thing she ever sees. She’ll toss her fucking eyes into the flames if that’s the case.

“I like you too,” James admits, no dip or waver in his voice. No ‘I think’ in his sentence the way it’d been in hers. Carefully slow, his hand reaches out and runs it’s fingers over the side of her face. Chills race across her scalp as fire dips low into her tightened belly. Before she can really put any thought into it, Lela finds herself leaning into his too light touch.

“I don’t really know what we’re supposed to do either, baby-doll.”

At that, Lela huffs out a ragged laugh, one that shakes the roof of her mouth and makes James eyes dance with something she’s never seen in them before. No more than in that single moment does Lela think they’re both a pair of useless assholes. Two people a hell of a lot chipped at the ends, made up of tangled frayed strings, burned where others couldn’t afford to get hurt. And all that stomach wrenching nervousness of it all melts at the thought.

Whatever James might be, Lela was almost sure he would never hurt her the way she knows men can. The way others have done. James eyes was too kind for that. James eyes were too soft for that. James…James was too good to do that.

That smile hanging on his lips the only insurance Lela would ever need.

“We’ll take it as slow as you need to,” James tells her, his thumb running over the swollen jut of Lela’s bottom lip.

Mouth dry, Lela shakily asks, “You…uh, you cool with that?”

“Baby-doll, I’ll be here for you for as long as you want me to,” James rumbled a small laugh as he twisted his body so he was laying on his side and all his attention was on the face he was touching, “We can do this however you want.”

Silence falls on them after that. A silence Lela can’t begin to think of how to break. The sky hanging over them darkening into a deep navy blue littered in the stars. This time around when James asks if they should head back Lela isn’t filled with that ugliness of before. When James pulls himself up and offers a hand down to pull up, Lela finds herself reaching without thought. Her hand slipping into his and finding everything in her settling in the way they slot together without effort.

When James hand falls away, everything in Lela aches to chase it back. To snatch up that too big hand and keep it in hers. Something flaring in her mind saying her hands good for nothing else but to hold his in hers.

Slow and careful they work their way back to James car. A peaceful kind of silence following them even when the engine is running and the car is moving. In no time at all they’re back at Lela’s building. Quietly, she slips out of the car when James cuts the engine and steps out too.

Standing at the her porch steps, Lela feels her heart kick up and her nervousness seep back into her belly. Awkward, Lela tries to find a way to call to end something she’s not sure really happened at all.

Leaning up against his car, his legs kicked out in a carefree kind of way, James smiles at her like he
doesn’t mind waiting on her at all. Like he’s just happy to be there at all, looking at her like he is. This too damn perfect lips of his making all kinds of way race through every inch of her. Eating her from the inside out, her hindbrain kicks with hunger.

Lela thinks about all the reasons she shouldn’t want what she wants from him. She thinks about all of the damn mistakes of her past and thinks she should take it all kinds of slow. She thinks about the promise James had given her. That they’d take it whatever kind of pace Lela wanted. She thinks about that and…and…she thinks to hell with it.

Caught up in that stare, heart thumping in her chest, emboldened by that strangeness in her veins that aches for this man. Lela finds her courage.

“Fuck it,” she curses and pushes herself into motion.

She moves before she can makes sense of what she’s doing, before she can think twice and talk rationality into her mind. Lela rushes up to him and grabs hold of the front of his stupid too tight red shirt and hauls the pretty boy down. Hand fisted into the material, James goes far too easy. his body bending down for her to do whatever she wished.

With hunger screaming in her mind, Lela lays her lips onto his. That split she’d gotten earlier flaring with pain but easily ignored over all else she feels.

James’ pink lips are soft, like satin and the softest silk. They’re warm too in all the ways a too hot stove might be. The moment Lela places her own to his all of her racing thoughts fade away. Her whole point of focus—her very center of being—zeroed into the fact that James’ lips are on hers and how utterly beautiful the sensation was. All of who she is, all that she’s ever been, burning with the heat of his lips on hers and the large hand that grips her left hip.

Her chest grows too tight and small for all that she feels explode up in it. Lela’s got no fucking doubt that everything she’s feeling must be being fed down the wire. That the insane amount of happiness is vibrating down everyone of her bonds because she’s fucking kissing James.

And the kiss, it’s no more than the meeting of two lips. It’s as tame as a fucking kiss can be. But when Lela pulls away, regretting her whole life, one of James’ hands comes up to cup the right side of her face to still her and tilt her head back into a new angle. Surprise makes Lela’s mouth slant open which allows James lips to slide like sin over her.

It feels like heaven and hell combined, Lela thinks, to kiss James. Her eyes flutter closed as their lips move against one another. Her knees grow weak when her tongue darts out to dip into his open and willing mouth. Their lips, she thinks for one wild minute, slot together like they were made for each other.

A strange heady taste of pomegranate and the darkest of wine Lela’s ever had the good fortune to ever sample explodes upon her tongue. A groan slips past her lips as her greedy hands pulled James body closer to her as she chased that taste down. The chest beneath her hand rumbles low and dangerous as James drank her groan down. His tongue tangled with hers as Lela lost all ability to hold herself up on her own two feet. But it doesn’t matter, Lela distantly realizes, because those too big and entirely too warm hands of James’ hold her up just fine.

For all she knows, a whole month could’ve passed since she dragged James down into the kiss and she wouldn’t give one good goddamn. Lela only knows that eventually the kiss burns down and stills until it ends the same way it’d started. With Lela’s lips on his.

Leaning his forehead against hers, James pulls away from her lips to release a ragged breath. Slowly,
Lela opens her eyes and briefly wonders when the hell they closed. When she looks at James she finds his face darkened in all the hunger Lela was currently running with. His gray eyes half lidded as he looked at her and offered a wobbly smile.

“What happened to slow?” James shakily asks, his voice a deep baritone that made Lela’s toes wanna curl up in her shoes.

Huffing out a breathless kind of laugh, Lela thumps her forehead against his and tries to sound confident as she snarked with a rasping voice, “This isn’t slow?”

The hand that cups her face moves gently. His thumb swiping carefully under her eye as he pulled back and stared at her face completely. That gentleness in his touch is still there. Like James thought he was holding a glass figurine instead of the bag of bones Lela actually was. It makes Lela’s knees all the much weaker. James wears on his face a wide entranced kind of smile as he shook his head and told her:

“I’m gone for you baby-doll. So gone.”

His words make everything in her burn up. Like she’s a lit match and she’s wearing gasoline lined clothes. She catches flames with one swing.

Finding her tongue all kind of stupid past her kiss swollen lips, Lela tells him, “Good, ‘cause I’m pretty gone for you too.”

Grinning, James swoops down and lays his lips on hers again. And despite how hard Lela fights to keep her eyes open, to stare into those gorgeous eyes of his, they flutter close on their own. Just like before, the kiss is all kinds of slow. Embers slowly being kicked up into a low burning fire that was steadily working its way up into a roaring bonfire. And just like before, Lela’s mouth explodes with that pomegranate and dark wine taste.

Like they’ve got a mind of their own, and their own kind of hunger, Lela’s hands move. they untangle from the shirt they’re caught in and slip up over those sinful broad shoulders of his. They wander further until she’s got her arms wound around his neck. They slip into those entirely too soft chocolate strands he has. And god, Lela thinks, hair should never feels so damn soft the way his did.

Lost as she is with the lips on hers, the tongue slipping over hers, the hair wrapped up in her fingers, and the firm as all hell body she’s pressed up against Lela almost misses it.

With a bang, a door flies open and crashes into something.

Jumping up and away from James, Lela whirls around to the source. Tangled as she is in arms that were too wide and far too muscle bound, she almost falls face flat onto the concrete floor. It’s only by the grace of James sure hands that she doesn’t.

Wide eyed she turns to the front door and spots Tony and Sam standing shock still there. It’s Sam that comes rushing at her as Tony spit out:

“HEY! Lover boy! What the hell kind of first date etiquette you got!”

Sam’s gentle hands slip in between the space of Lela and James body and pushes them two apart. Face as stern and severe as Lela’s ever seen it get, Sam bites out, “What kinda bullshit was that?! You had your tongue down her throat Barnes!”

Lela’s entirely too fucking shocked that she doesn’t fight the hands that corral her up the step. It’s only when her feet snag a little that she’s able to get her bearings. When she does, she’s not entirely
sure what she feels first. Mortification and anger swirl to be the top contenders though. They explode outward until she’s slapping both Sam’s hands and then Tony’s.

Growling savagely enough to still all the bullshit right in it’s tracks, Lela glares at her Packmates until they grow silent. Eyes glaring bloody murder Lela bites out, “What the fuck!”

“Kid,” Tony starts, inching towards her despite the growls slipping past her throat, “He was getting handsy!”

“Oh my fucking god,” Lela spits out because she doesn’t know what the fuck else to say. she settles instead for growling hard enough to challenge at least every alpha in the general vicinity for their territory Lela demands of them both, “Fuck off, now.”

Wearing two different kinds of shocked and betrayed expressions, both beta and alpha scurry their way back into the building. Though Lela can tell they stay inside the empty first floor. Narrowing her glaring eyes through the glass, Lela dares the two fuckers to try to step a damn toe out the door again.

All kinds of embarrassed, Lela slowly turns back to James and offers a soft, “Sorry, they’re…”

Shaking his head James offers her a one shouldered shrug coupled by an incredibly beautiful smile, “They’re your pack. Just looking out for you doll.”

“They’re fucking idiots,” Lela calls out loud for the assholes at her back to hear. She’d deal with their asses later. Right now she was being smiled at by a gorgeous ass man she’d just recently kissed. Twice.

Laughing, James wobbles his head like he’s only half agreeing when he says, “A bit, yeah.”

Growing an uncomfortable amount of both fucking shy and nervous, Lela pulls her smokes out her back pocket. It’s banged all to hell on account of all the hits she’d taken that day. But her smokes are still sitting straight and unbroken. Slipping one onto her lips she lights it up and uses the smoke over her face as a shield.

“Um, I, uh, I had a good time,” Lela says and hates her for it almost instantly.

Grinning, James nods his head and walks up to the last porch step. From where she stands on the third, James and her are evenly tall. It makes it easy for James to look at her and she at him.

“She’s your pack. Just looking out for you doll.”

“Me too doll.”

Running a nervous tongue over her lips—feeling pomegranate exploding on her tongue once more—Lela forces herself to ask, “That mean we get to try this shit out again sometime?”

“Name the time and place, sweetheart,” James adamantly tells her like he’s about to take her by the hand right then and there and lead her back out again.

Ashing her smoke, Lela pulls in a drag and tries to keep her smile from looking too fucking dopey. But she knows it’s a bust as she told him, “I got next Saturday if you’re down?”

Reaching his hand out to cup her face once more, James catches her gaze and looks at her. And never more did that gaze of his feel whole encompassing than it did now. Lela can feel the way it burned down to the very marrow of who she was. Looking past all the shit she’s laid onto him today. It felt, Lela thinks, like James saw her the way he’d told her.
“I’ll be here,” James whispered as he laid his lips on hers once more.

The kiss is so brief that when James pulls away Lela finds herself chasing after it. Her face following his. Half jerking in place Lela watches as James grins from ear to ear and walks backwards to his car. Only when he’s in his car and driving away does Lela pull in a breath she didn’t know she was holding in.

All kinds of shaky, Lela stands on her porch steps in the dark and smokes her cig down to the filter. Only when it’s absolutely dead does she gear herself for the absolute bullshit waiting for on the inside.

When she pulls the door open Lela fully expects to find only Sam and Tony there. But she doesn’t. Everyone is standing at the lift, all of them wearing some kind of guilty kind of expression on their face. Well, everyone except Natasha because the devil could never be any kind of repentant.

“So,” Clint starts, grinning like a mad bandit, his hazel eyes glimmering like the little shit he was, “how’d it go?”

Heaving out tired breath, Lela grumbles at him and ignores his question as she headed for the stairs. She’s hoping to leave them all behind but shit was never easy for Lela. They fucking follow her like the assholes they all were.

“I’d say pretty good. Did you see how deep into each others throats they were?” Natasha drawls from where she’s three steps behind Lela.

“Please, shut the fuck up,” Lela snapped but never once turned back. Her face was burning too hot for it and she’d never live it down if the redhead saw it.

“I’m gonna kick his ass,” Sam announces from somewhere further back.

“Not before I do!” Tony hissed from even further back, “The fucking nerve! I thought he was old school?! What kind of shit was that?!”

“Tony please!” Pepper bit out, her tone all kinds of exasperated, “You shouldn’t’ve gone down there in the first place!”

“Pep! He was mauling her face with his face! I had to save her!” Tony shouted, his voice bouncing in the stairwell.

Eyes pinching closed, Lela tries to keep her words held back between her clenched teeth. She’s not gonna fight with any of them. She’s not about to spoil her own mood.

Lela knows there’s a hell of a lot she needs to go over with Tony, with Natasha and Sam too. But she’s feeling all kinds of selfish right now. All she wants to think about is the feel of James’ lips on hers. All she wants to think about is the sight of his smile. All she wants to hear in her head is the way James had said he’d liked her and that he was gone on her in that breathless way of his.

It’s selfish but Lela just doesn’t fucking care because her lips are still tingling and her mouth is still filled with the taste of pomegranate and wine.
Okay, I'm not even gonna lie. I hate the way this turned out. Idk why. I just do. It started off all kinds of wrong. But I'm hoping it ended on a good note.

BTW, I was writing the kissing scene on a shit ton of love songs and break up songs so I was a fucking emotional mess. And seriously, Lela kissing him. It was not planned. Or at least not the way it went down. It was supposed to be sweet and gentle but then Lela and James took the wheel out of my hands and told me I didn't know shit about life. Tony and Sam breaking it up should've been expected guys. Those two are crazy over protective.

I hope you guys don't hate this entirely.

Please drop me a line and let me know what you think. Let me know how badly I screwed it up!!!
Counting and Adding Up

Chapter Summary

In a mad tangle of limbs they tumble into the grass and roll. That deep throaty laughter of his echoing in Lela’s ears as she pinned him down under her and pulled pomegranate and wine into her mouth. Her heart singing as she tried to choke down all the things she’s been wanting to say to him for a while now.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so fair warning guys. There’s a sex scene in here. This is my first time writing smut like this and so I'm not sure how it turned out. I hope you guys don't get whiplash from it all. I'm genuinely afraid to post this. But you guys are so fucking amazing. I love every single one of you so damn much. so here goes nothing.

(PS ALWAYS PRACTICE SAFE SEX. They didn't here because they aren't REAL and one of them is a fucking super soldier. But ALWAYS PRACTICE SAFE SEX when you're bedding down on new dick!!!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

4

*~*

“Look, I’m not asking you to, like, fucking hold his hand and go to the movies with him,” Lela starts as she attempted to wrangle her hair into two neat braids, “I’m just asking you not to fucking act like a douche-bag.”

“Ouff, might as well ask him to suck face with him the way you do babe,” Clint laughed out from where he was sitting on top of her kitchen counter. Lela’s box of lucky charms in he hands he was reaching his grubby hands into and eating by the fist fulls.

Shooting him a dark glare, Lela snarls at the blonde and does her level best not to blush. Dark
skinned or not, a blush still showed on her face just as easily as on any light skinned face. And she was really getting tired of Clint and Natasha laughing at her like jackals over it.

Since her date, the man had been an insufferable little asshole. Every other word out of his mouth was a dig in James direction of some sort. He’d actually written down a running list on all the reasons Lela should not be with him. Pen to fucking paper, the fucking works. Most of them had something to do with the fact that James looked like a hobo. Not Lela’s words, Tony’s.

Of course, Lela had asked the alpha if he’d be cool with the whole thing—Her seeing James. Tony had refused to budge on the fact that he was anything but ice cold on the matter. But every time James came round to pick her up, Tony wore this kind look on his face like he’d rather run on a treadmill for an hour straight than let Lela go out.

It was a fucking mess, but seriously, what part of Lela’s life wasn’t?

“He’s just so, ugh, you know,” Tony starts, waving his arms about in a flailing flap of angry limbs. The worn down supermario shirt he has riding up his waist as he dropped onto one of Lela’s red kitchen chairs. He’s wearing a borrowed set of gray sweatpants Lela knows came from Bruce. On his feet are pink fuzzy bunny slippers that were entirely Tony’s.

All three of them—Tony, Pepper and Bruce—were out of their goddamn minds if they thought they were being slick about anything. Lela knows for a damn fact they’ve all been staying in Tony’s level.

Narrowing her eyes, but not stilling in her work, Lela growls out, “No, I don’t. He’s what?”

Mouth opening and closing, Tony’s sleep deprived face twists up in displeasure as he grumbled, “He’s too—he’s too old for you!”

Blinking in a surprise, Lela’s working fingers do stop for that, because, what?

“Pot? Remind me to introduce you to kettle one of these days,” Natasha calls out from where she’s seated on Lela’s couch.

Lela’s not entirely sure why Natasha has chosen her couch to get a pedicure but there she was. Sam sitting crossed legged on the carpet trying his best not to mess up a single bit unless he insured a harsher punishment from the redhead. After his little stunt, Lela had been so pissed she hadn’t wanted to talk to any of them. Natasha had taken it upon herself to settle the debt by forcing Sam to do all manner of weird shit. Today it was a pedicure.

“I am not old!” Tony hissed out, his head whipping around so he could glare at the redheaded beta.

“You’re turning 35 in December,” Pepper throws out from where she’s getting her nails done by Pepper’s expert hands.

“LIES!” Tony shouted with a pounding fist to the counter top, his unruly fluff of hair trembling with the movement, “I am and forever will be 25 years young!”

Scoffing, Bruce breezes past his raging alpha and pulls the screeching kettle off Lela’s stove top. He’s in the middle of pouring himself a steaming cup when he lowly snarks, “Yeah, and I’m a damn leprechaun when I get angry.”

Snorting out a laugh with a too full mouth, Clint unhelpfully tells Tony, “You know, Barnes is technically only 31 right? So, he’s kinda younger than you are.”
Caught off guard at the simple statement, Lela chooses to remain quiet. 31 or fucking 51, James was still hot as all shit. And if he was looking like that at 31 Lela was sure he’d keep aging like fine fucking wine.

“True,” Natasha drawls without once picking up her head.

“Still too damn old for her,” Sam grumbles and earns himself a harsh flick to his forehead from Natasha’s free left hand.

“Exactly! Thank you Sam, my good lamb!” Tony bites out, regally extending his neck like he wasn’t just pounding his fist in anger over being called old. Straightening up his shirt, Tony turns to her and says, “Why do you even like him?”

Tying off her braid, Lela pushes it over her shoulder and tries not to take a swing at someone she’s bonded to. Lela tries to remind herself she likes the damn insufferable idiot. Pulling herself up to her feet, Lela walks her ass over to the window the opens up to her fire escape. It’s a roomy little spot, one Lela knows for a damn fact Tony fixed up for her to smoke out there in comfort. When the window has been pushed open, Lela lights up a smoke and mumbles:

“He’s nice to me.”

“That’s not really a—“ Tony starts only to still when Lela’s eyes cut over to him.

Twirling her smoke through her fingers, Lela tries not to dig into the worst of her memories now. Not when she’s about to head out. Not when she’s so damn tired of having mud caked beneath her nails. Everything in her aches to never have to shift through the rubble of her past. She wants so much to dump quick setting cement and never see it all ever again.

“I’ve never—Last dude I was with, he wasn’t so nice. Like, before the whole fucking whoring myself out jig. I, uh, I was with someone who was…he was mean.” Lela tells Tony, tries to be honest because he is—they are all—her pack. And Tony had asked so the least she could do was answer. After all, she was going out on yet another date with someone who Tony had a serious issue with even when he said he didn’t.

“I told him what I was,” Lela admits, her back to the whole of her pack all sprawled out in her floor, “That I was stupid fucking thing I am. I told him and he…he put a fuckin’ chain around my neck for it. Claimed me like I was a dog. He hurt me whenever he wanted cause he said it was his right. And I—I couldn’t do fucking dick about it. I ran from him when I got the chance. Went into the fucking life I did because I would rather’ve fucking died than go back.”

Silence rings behind her, heavy and ugly, but Lela ignores it because if not her pack than who the fuck else is she supposed to say this shit to? If not her pack then who?

Desperately, Lela stuffs all the ache in her chest down. She swallows back the phantom pain she feels on the side of her neck and prays it doesn’t bleed into all the bonds she’s got.

“James is…he’s nice to me,” Lela says and hates how small the words sound in the silence, “He…he’s too nice to do anything like that.”

And Lela may not know him the way they all seem to, but she knows that much for a fact. James could be a lot of things, but he wasn’t that kind of man. His smile was her promise.

Half jumping out of her skin when arms wrap her up, Clint lays his lips onto the crown of her head and purred deep and loud. Leaning into the embrace, Lela smokes and hopes to chase away the bitterness on her tongue. When her cig has been burned down to the filter, Lela tosses it into the
small bucket of sand someone has put out on her fire escape.

When she turns to face the rest of her pack, Lela finds every single one of them looking over at her with such intensity that she regrets ever opening her mouth at all. Gritting her teeth, Lela holds her head up high and fucking dares anyone of them to say a single damn word over it. She hadn’t said what she’d said to get any of their sympathy, pity or anything else.

Tony had asked and she’d answered.

Slipping out of Clint’s hold, Lela walks back into her kitchen and heads for her fridge. She’s pulling out a soda when Bruce tells her:

“Buc—James is a good man. He…I’m glad it’s him.”

Popping open the tab of her drink, Lela looks over at the gamma man and tries not to squirm underneath her own skin. Nodding her head tight, Lela shuts the fridge door and leans against the counter.

Looking like he’s got a mouth full of lemon juice, Tony mulishly admits, “I’m—I just worry about you kid.”

“I know,” Lela says, because she knows Tony is, can feel it down in that boa shaped bond of theirs, “But, you said it was cool and you’re not acting like it is. And it’d be real cool if my fucking pack could have my back over this.”

Looking like Lela’s just slapped him, Tony rears back. His eyes go all wide as he stared at her.

Half flying out of her seat, Pepper comes scrambling into the kitchen. Her baby blue eyes are all kinds of twisted it up like she’s just been shanked. The bonded hand on Lela’s upper right arm flaring with unease and anxiousness, Pepper reaches out to lay a hand on Lela’s face.

“Hey, we’ll always stand with you no matter what,” Pepper tells her like she’s about to pull out a contract to solidify it before the eyes of the law and god alike.

Slowly, Lela’s lips twitch up into a smile as she nods her head and tells the blonde beta, “I know.”

A soft hand slipping over her forearm, Bruce mumbles, “Yeah, we’re pack.”

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela nods her head and carefully slips out from beneath both sets of touch. Moving to her living room space, Lela drops heavy beside Natasha and tries to ignore the way Tony’s boa is tangled into knots. Leaning all her weight into the side of Natasha, Lela watches as Sam looks over her face.

“You know, I don’t really have a problem with him,” Sam confesses like he’s trying to absolve himself of whatever sins he thought he was guilty of. His dark brows are pinched as he scooted closer to her and pulled her feet into his empty lap. With his big hands wrapped around Lela’s bare ankles, Sam continues on, “He’s just—I gotta make sure he knows if he ever thinks about breaking your heart, he’s gotta answer to me about it.”

Faster than she can make sense of, Clint jumps over the back of the couch and drops hard beside Lela. Like an ill mannered cat, he throws his entire body over Lela’s lap and settles his head half onto Lela’s lap and Natasha’s.

“Yeah, I mean, he’s gotta know you got a pack of people who’ve got loaded guns underneath their pillows.
Feeling a strange kind of warmth explode in her chest, Lela huffs out a laugh and genuinely asks, “You have guns underneath your pillows?”

Running her hand over the neat tightness of her braids, Natasha hums at the back of her throat and mumbles, “Guns, knives, explosives, honestly depends on our moods.”

“That’s not safe,” Pepper announces as she entered into the living room and settled beside Sam on the carpet floor. In her hands she grips a dark maroon coffee cup that smelled of whatever tea Bruce had cooked up.

“What happens if it accidentally goes off?” Bruce questions before seating himself in the spot Clint opens up by moving his feet.

Shrugging, Clint sagely states, “We’re professionals Bruce. Our shit doesn’t go off unless we want it to.”

“Oh really?” Natasha drawled, her green eyes dancing with mirth as she opened her mouth and simply stated, “Prague, ’07.”

“You shut your beautiful mouth Nat! I hadn’t slept in over a week and I swear to god that raccoon was genetically altered!” Clint growled out with a fury as he glared up at his beta.

At that, everyone laughs. The tension Lela had thrown into the room, slipping out and away. Carefully slow, Lela lets her body melt into her couch as all her bonds thumped with warmth and softness. Lela’s never known wholeness and safety like she does now. Amid her pack, tangled up in their limbs and each and everyone of their scents in a home they’ve all built together, Lela feels whole and safe.

It swallows her up and threatens to smother her.

She’s about to close her eyes and settle into a cat nap when suddenly, Tony says somewhere close to Lela’s left ear:

“If he makes you happy, I won’t stand in the way.”

Propping her head up, Lela tilts her head back and meets Tony’s eyes. He’s got this sad kind of veil hanging over his eyes. Like he’s just been told all the world’s worst news at once and was forced to get up and walk either way. Like he was about to head into open heart surgery without any kind of drugs to help with the pain.

Wetting her lips, Lela forces the words out of her mouth, “He told me about what happened. About what they tried to make him do. About your parents.”

Jaw growing tight, Tony nods his head and squats down so he can prop his chin on the couch back. His right cheek brushing against Lela’s as he spoke, “I don’t blame him. I just…I thought he had, you know. And I…I know he didn’t but I tried to kill him when I thought he did.”

“Pretty sure he doesn’t hold it against you.” Lela tells him, sure of her words because of the look that had hung in James’ eyes that day, “He blames himself for it too. Fucking riddled in guilt, that dude. Thinks he’s fuckin’ damned for it.”

Grumbling something that sounded like ‘idiot’ Tony remains quiet. His face propped up next to hers as he stared at some distant point on the wall.

Huffing out a breath, Lela says, “I’m not asking you to fucking forgive the dude or even to fucking
apologize, I’m just asking you to not be a douche when you see him.” and because Lela’s never been above not playing dirty, she adds on, “Do it for me man, just put your shit to the side.”

Cutting his brown eyes over to her, Tony stares for a long while before he mulishly mumbled, “Fine.”

And Lela knows, because she fucking knows Tony, that it’s probably gonna be a hell of a struggle. But it’s something. So she presses her face to his as thanks anyway because he’s at least willing to try. Despite being all kinds of peevious, Tony presses his cheek into hers right back and the boa on her spine sends electric shocks over it.

Lela’s about to say something dickish to kill the mushy vibe but before she can do that, a solid knock on the door rings out. Wide eyed, Lela’s head snaps up. the reminder of where she’s supposed to go and with who hits her hard. All wild limbs, Lela tries to push the body laying on top of her off. But Clint, the dick head he is, doesn’t budge an inch.

“Hmmm, I wonder who that could be?” Natasha drawls like the demoness she was. Refusing to lend a hand as Lela fought to get up. Red could be a fucking shithead herself when she felt like it.

“Fuckin’ move asshole!” Lela growls out as she punched at Clint’s shoulder. Lela wasn’t even halfway ready. She still needed to pull on a pair of pants and a decent shirt. Her feet were still sans shoes.

Getting ready had been railroaded by the fact that the entire pack had migrated up here like they were dead set on making her late.

“I got it!” Tony shouted as he flew to the door. The ears of his fuzzy pink slippers bouncing all the way.

With a hand on the door knob, Tony pulls open the door and reveals all the gorgeousness that was James in dark denim jeans and a simple white v-neck. Face filled with confusion, James stands there, his gray eyes peering into Lela’s floor like he’s not sure what’s going on. And like the utter fucking perfect person he is, James stays rooted to his spot as Lela struggled against the asshole that was Clint.

Eventually, with a solid elbow to the stomach, Lela manages to get onto her feet and scrambles to the door. Jumping over Sam and Pepper’s bodies she skids to a halt in front of James. Her body firmly placed between him and Tony.

“James!” Lela calls out, breathless and a little fucking stupid.

Offering an impossibly soft smile, James says simply, “Hey baby-doll.”

Ignoring the flare of heat across her face and all the noises at her back—that are filled with aw’s and groans alike—Lela tries her level best to not melt into a puddle of goo.

This has got to be the fourth date now—and yes, Lela was fucking counting—and Lela still couldn’t get over the way James threw pet names at her. Four whole dates before this one now, and Lela still couldn’t fucking handle the way those smiles were always directed at her. Four whole dates before this one and Lela still couldn’t get over the fact that she’d kissed this man and he’d kissed her back.

“Ugh, gross Barnes,” Tony groaned out as he crossed his hands over his chest.

This time around Lela jams her elbow into Tony’s stomach and relishes in the pain filled exhale he throws out.
Grinning down at her, James gently asks, “Ready to go?”  

Blinking, Lela pulls her eyes off the perfection that was James and down to what she’s wearing. She’s still wearing the same deep plum colored long sleeve she’d stolen off of Clint the night before. Underneath that she’s got on a pair of faded loose boxers that came from Sam and a pair of entirely too big socks she’d pilfered out of Tony’s drawers. None of which is any kind of decent to be standing in front of James in.  

Feeling all kinds of embarrassed, Lela rushes out, “Ah, no, not yet! Can you—can you give me like two seconds? I—fuck, I kinda lost track of time!”  

Nodding his head, James places his hands into his pockets and cocks his head to the side, “I’ll wait for you here, baby-girl.”  

Lela’s about to ask him in, to wait for her inside as opposed to standing at her door, when she thinks that might not be such a good idea.  

But, as if knowing how much of a chicken shit Lela is, Natasha calls out, “Come in James. Lela’ll be just a minute.”  

“Yeah, pull up a seat big guy, we don’t bite,” Clint tossed out from where he was now sitting upright between Bruce and Natasha. His hazel eyes dancing like the little dick he was.  

Waving her hands out, Lela finds James eyes and tries to reassure him that he didn’t have to come in if he didn’t need to. But then Pepper’s standing beside Lela and she’s ushering the man in with a warm sunny smile and gentle words:  

“Come in James, make yourself at home while you wait.”  

Jerking his head in a small nod, James steps through the threshold and follows Pepper’s lead. He bypasses the unmoving statue that Tony has become and steps into the entirely too full living room space Lela has. All kinds of stoic, James settles himself into an empty violet single seater.  

Cutting her eyes over the whole of the group, Lela tries her hand at silently threatening people without actually saying anything. She thinks she manages by the simple way Clint puts his hands up like he’s as innocent as a five year old. When that’s done she turns to the alpha at her side and both threatens and pleads as lowly as she can manage:  

“Be nice.”  

“I’m always nice,” Tony peevishly snapped out as he crossed his arms over his chest and put up his nose.  

Rolling her eyes but Lela doesn’t to push the man lest he actually decide to be a douche-monger. Turning and catching James eyes from across the way, Lela sheepishly smiles and says, like a promise, “Two seconds, then we’re outta here, ‘kay?”  

Lela waits for the three long seconds it takes James to nod his head and then bolts for her bathroom.  

*~*  

When Lela leaves, a hush falls onto the room. A hush that is not unlike the one that fell onto the trenches before bullets went flying. It tightens up his spine, makes it so he can’t lean back into anything resembling a comfortable position.
Carefully slow, he surveys the room. He clocks Natasha where she leans against the arm of the couch. She’s dressed in simple skin tight black leggings and a deep navy blue muscle shirt. The long strands of her crimson colored hair pulled up into a high pony tail. Natasha’s Gamma sits at her side with his arm overthrown behind her head and a lazy kind of look in his hazel green eyes. He’s got on a simple graphic shirt on with some kind of candy printed on it. Sam sits on the dark carpet before the couch with his back firmly leaning between Natasha’s legs. He’s got on a pair of gray jogger pants and a white undershirt on with socks on instead of his usual trainers.

Bruce sits at the other end of the wide couch with a cup of some kind of herbal tea in his hands. A nervous kind of look on his face where his brown eyes flutter through the whole of the room. The doctor is sans his usual slacks and buttons down. Instead he’s wearing a soft long sleeve that was a size too long by the rolled up ends around his wrists. Pepper herself sits on the couch arm dressed in simple basketball shorts and a faded red shirt with MIT written over it.

Where Stark stands, still at the front door, he’s dressed as down as he’s ever seen him. The fuzzy pink bunny slippers the man’s got on throwing him for a loop.

“So,” Natasha starts, her green eyes pinning him down like the many knives he knows the beta has on her despite the limited storing space she has, “What’s on the agenda today, James?”

Opening his mouth, a well constructed answer already sitting on his tongue, James is waylaid by Pepper’s voice.

“Nat,” in that one word, he can hear the slight censor it comes with.

“We’re just curious,” Clint says with a laugh as he leaned forward and sent him a charming smile, “I mean, he is taking our girl out. Again.”

It isn’t lost on him at all the clear emphasis that is placed on the our of the sentence. It’s screaming in the way Sam is holding himself. It screams in the way Natasha looks at him and the way Stark is still standing so far away.

He’s just walked into pack territory. A pack that was willing as all hell to go to blows for the girl that he was so gone for. And while it settles something ancient in his Alpha instincts—that his girls got a worthy pack for her—it makes him want to prove he’s worth holding Lela’s dark eyed gaze.

He doesn’t think he deserves her—not one bit—he knows it. But damn if he’s not willing to try to prove that he was. Because theres a hell of a lot that he’s willing to do to keep his girl smiling the way she did.

“Movies.” he says, his voice gruff in the way it slips past his lips.

“A movie?” Tony repeats the word. The way his face twists up says he’s got an issue with it even without the tone he uses.

“Tony,” Bruce starts, his eyes pinning themselves onto the other man’s person. A tight furrow forming between his brow as he stated easily, “You promised.”

Huffing out a frustrated growl, Tony roughly ran his hand through his hair and stomped over to the group. The ears of his slippers flopping about with the rough movement. When he’s standing on the carpet, Stark narrows his eyes and states, “I don’t like you Barnes, you know that. But Lela likes you—I don’t know why—but she does. And I swear to god, if you ever, for one second think about putting your grubby hands where they don’t belong I’ll—"

“Tony!” both Pepper and Bruce growl out the name stilling the alpha right in his tracks.
Growling, frustrated things, Tony flares his hands out and pinches his lips up tight. Clenching his eyes tight, Tony pulls in a deep breath and exhales through his nose. Only when it seems like he’s got his bearings again, does the man say:

“Look, I—I don’t blame you for what happened. Hydra killed my parents, not you. So, I don’t blame you. Not for that and not for anything that happened after. We—I…it could’ve been handled better.”

Shock still, he listens to the man’s words. It’s not an apology—it sure as hell isn’t worded like one—but it feels like it might be. As close to an apology as the other man could get. It makes him sit still and silent. Not even daring to take in a breath.

“I’m not—my issue isn’t with you, you get me? Not really. I just…you’re taking the kid out and mauling her with your face! What are you like forty?! She’s a kid!”

“Ou, you were doing so good!” Clint laughs out as he leaned further into Natasha.

“Points for effort,” Sam said around a grin.

“Oh shut up, assholes,” Tony grumbled as he kicked at Sam’s socked foot.

Laughing, eyes gleaming like wide open summer skies, Pepper tells him, “Tony’s just being over protective. Don’t mind him. He thinks Lela should be taken out to eat at five star restaurants and nothing else.”

“I don’t think that,” Tony defends himself, pulling himself up and adopting that usual Stark confidence, “I know she should be!”

“Try talking her into another Red Bell and I’m pretty sure we’re gonna have to fit you for a coffin,” Bruce mused where he sipped from his cup.

“Plebeians,” Tony accuses each and every one of them with a single finger, “All of you.”

Half skidding from how fast she comes tumbling out of a closed door, Lela enters the open space of her loft. Dressed in a flowing white sleeveless shirt with a skull drawn on it, black skinny jeans and a pair of thick heeled biker boots Lela looks around at all of them. And where he’d thought she’d looked beautiful when she opened the door, fresh faced and dressed in what was clearly her sleep gear—she looked more so now with black rimmed eyes and deep maroon smeared on her lips. Hand gripping a black leather jacket, Lela narrows her gaze at Tony and demands:

“What’re you assholes talking about?”

“Wha—nothing! Well, we’re talking about your utter lack of taste in culinary arts,” Tony supplies easily with a shrug of his lean shoulders.

“I’m not eating at fucking Red Bell, shit was gross as fuck,” Lela spits out with a disgusted noise and scrunch of her pixie nose. The tension that had filled her shoulders slowly bleeds out as she tossed her braids over onto her back.

“Nothing beats a good burger,” Clint throws in like he enjoys watching a fire burn.

Smiling, like she too was an arsonist, Lela winks at the gamma and agrees, “Exactly, fucking shit looked like martian food.”

“I cannot believe I have been cursed to deal with all of you,” Tony declares with a shake of his head.
His eyes shine to brightly for him to mean that even a bit.

Rolling her coal lined eyes, Lela walks over to him and pinches her lips between her teeth. Looking entirely too pretty, so damn pretty, she cocks her head to the side and asks, “Ready?”

Wordlessly, he rises to his feet and distantly notices that the boots on her feet have given her a solid four inches. None of which really helped her considering how utterly short his girl was. Following her to the door, he ignores the fact that his back is completely bared to a whole mess of people that were entirely too deadly for their own good. When they’re at the lift Lela hitting the button with one black naied hand voices filter over to them.

“You two kids have a good time!” Clint laughs out.

“Be back before 11!” Tony shouts.

“Use protection!” Natasha’s voice rings.

“God’s watching you guys!” Sam throws out. Like he's the pastors son.

Blushing a pretty red, Lela nearly chokes as she fights to close the gate and screams out, “Fuck all of y’all!”

And despite himself, he laughs. Enjoying every bit of the way Lela’s blush grows deeper and slips down her neck.

Yeah, he knows he doesn’t deserve to be anywhere near his girl but he was gonna prove that he was somehow. Anything for the eyes that flash over him and look at him the way they do.

*~*

She’s gonna kill them, every single last one of them. Pack or not. When she got back she was gonna pull out all the guns they kept underneath pillows and riddle them with holes. Lela doesn’t care who or what they thought they were, but you didn’t shout bullshit like that at someone!

*~*

7

*~*

“What, seriously?” Lela laughs as she walked side by side with James. Her eyes firmly fixed on his smiling face underneath the early afternoon sun.

“Course I am, doll,” James tells her with a shrug of his shoulders. His beautiful lit up with the smile he sports.

Every inch of her aches to kiss that smile off his face. To taste that heady tang of pomegranate and wine his mouth always seemed lined in. To drink him down so she can savor it throughout the day.

But since that first kiss on their first date, they haven’t really done anything of the sort. James, for whatever reason, had backed off around the time he’d been sat on Lela’s couch with her pack surrounding him. It was all careful touches now with ample enough room for Lela to slip through if she wanted to.

It was confusing as much as it was maddening.
Shaking her head, Lela tells him, “Bullshit, you did not take fucking art as your major.”

“I’d never lie to you doll-face,” James teases, knowing full well that Lela can’t handle—like, at all—the way he throws endearments her way. The gleam in his gray eyes completely making Lela lose all her breath, “I didn’t pay much attention in it, to be honest. I signed up with a buddy of mine. Took all the same courses cause we figured it’d be easier to swap answers between each other.”

“Figures,” Lela snorts, not even bothering to hide her smile.

James had picked her up, bright and entirely too fucking early because he’d found some street fair close to Lela’s building. One held on the streets with vendors of all kinds. Lela had agreed only because James had promised her there’d be some kind of food here. So far, Lela’s eaten her entire weight in glazed donuts.

“I, uh, I also got swindled into it for the promise of naked ladies,” James admits, with a sheepish laugh as he stuffed his hands into his jean pockets.

Barking out a laugh, Lela teases with a mocking scandalized tone, “James! You perv!”

“I was a kid!” James defends himself with a wry smile. His long locks twirling in the breeze that passed them by. When they still, in front of some kind of flower shop, James questions lightly, “How ‘bout you?”

“What? Was I a perv when I was a kid?” Lela tosses back, her smile wide on her face as she watched a fine dusting of pink bloom on James high placed pale cheeks. Only after James has laughed, Lela answers him, “Nah, I didn’t go to college. I didn’t even finish high school.”

Confused, James looks over at her from the bushel of roses he’d been eyeing, “Why?”

Pulling her eyes down, to the white petaled flowers in front of her, Lela shrugs her shoulders and tries not to feel any kind of insecure about her shortcomings. She kind of fails, but that’s par the course, Lela’s got a lot of shortcomings.

Fingers reaching out the the nameless flower, Lela mumbles as careless as she can make the words seem, “I was pretty much knee deep in my bullshit even then. I dropped out. Didn’t see the point. Life don’t stop being fuck all hard just cause you got a paper with your name printed on it.”

Quiet, James follows her as Lela continues to run her fingers over the rest of the flowers that have been put up under the pink tent. Stilling, to scent a couple, Lela switches topics and idly remarks, “Tony’s been trying convince me to enroll into some kind of GED program so I can take some college courses. He says I can do most of it online if I don’t wanna go into a school, like all legit and shit.”

From where he’s pulling flowers out of their bundles, James simply asks her, “Do you want to?”

Frowning, from both the question and the nose full of rose, Lela shrugs her shoulders and mumbles, “I don’t know. I, uh, I don’t think I’d be any good at it. I mean, I’ve never been any kind of book smart. Barely know how to fucking do simple math.”

Catching her eyes, James hums out low and careful before he tells her, “I think you could do it, sweetheart. Think you could do whatever you put your mind to. Too much of a hell raiser to not get what you’re going after.”

And, god, how the simple words make her burn. Lela can feel the way her face grows too hot and something entirely too dangerous floods her chest. James had this way about him, Lela’s come to
realize, to turn simple words into something built to ruin all of Lela’s heart and soul.

Ducking her head, into something that looked like jasmine, Lela grumbled out, “Anyone ever tell you, you’re a real fucking smooth talker?”

Huffing out a laugh, James continues to pull pretty and hugely ruffled flowers out of place to grip in his left hand. His pretty gray eyes running over the large bundles and pulling a select few into his hands. Like he didn’t want a single one of them he deemed unworthy.

When he turns to her, he shoots her this incredibly beautiful smile when he says, “Only for you, doll, only for you.”

Rolling her eyes, because James could be a real sweet talking ass when he wanted to be, Lela follows him around the rows of flowers. She’s half confused as to what’s happening when they get to the register and Jame’s bundle is wrapped up in butcher and twine. The girl that hands the entirely too huge bouquet wears a dopey expression she directs at James and James alone.

And Lela’s found something out, in the short time she’s been seeing James, she’s a gross kind of jealous person. Every time she spots someone, anyone, getting that starry eyed look on their face when confronted by James pretty face—all of Lela burns. Everything she is, omega or not, wants to pull James away and hide him.

Every time James sends a smile to someone that’s not her, a growl lines her throat. Every time someone tilts their head for him and an encouraging thrum slips from peoples mouths, Lela feels her fangs grow long.

Every time it happened, Lela felt the shittiest she’s ever felt. She’s never had any reason to be jealous—to be that kind of person. Having gone what she’s gone through, Lela’s never wished to be that kind of person. But damn if everything in her, her hindbrain and her chest, don’t thrum ugly and mean in separate rhythms to keep all hands off that man. To litter him in a scent she keeps killing with her suppressors and H-blockers. To sink her teeth into him so that everyone knew he had someone and that someone was hers.

It’s an ugly feeling. One that riddles her with an awful kind of slimy thing. One that makes her feel undeserving of the gentle smiles James sends her because he is unaware of the monster lurking in her veins.

Narrow eyed, Lela glares at the girl and follows James out of the flower shop tent. She’s halfway into being pissed when suddenly James turns to her and hands over the bundle in his hand. Looking all kinds of soft and incredibly gentle, James gives over all the flowers he’s just picked.

It’s only then that Lela realizes what he’d been doing. It’s only then, hands full of flowers, that Lela realizes he’d been picking them for her. It’s only then that Lela sees the bouquet for all the vibrant beauty it is. It’s colorful, exploding in delicate and entirely too big blooms. And it’s hers, picked for her by James.

Heart clenching in her chest, Lela takes the bundle of flowers and says the only thing she can think to say, “Thanks, I, uh, I’ve never—no ones ever given me flowers before.”

What she says is true. Lela’s never been given flowers before. One because there’d been no one around to give them to her and Two because she just figured she wasn’t that type of girl. But hand full of flowers, heart in her throat, Lela can pretty much make that out to be a damn lie. Because there she is feeling like she’s got liquid gold in her hands when it’s just fucking flowers. Because there she was about to explode on the damn spot because James had given her flowers.
Brows pinching tight, James declares like he has no doubt in his mind of it, “You deserve a hell of a lot more than flowers.”

Chewing on the inside of her mouth, Lela wobbles her head in a so and so manner before gripping the stems tight in her left hand. She doesn’t believe that the way James does. The way his eyes are going all stormy like he’s about to turn around and make into law. But she feels like maybe she might start to because Lela’s running on a lot of hope these days. Pulling on all her courage, Lela does the only thing she can think to do in the face of that.

She grips the man by the front of his shirt and hauls his too tall ass down to her level. And then she plants her lips on him because she’s been wanting to do that since she saw him this morning at her door. Whatever kind of respectable distance James had been steadily building up comes tumbling down in the middle of a busy fair lined street.

Without any kind of caution or care, James wraps his arms around her and drags her close. He pulls her tight against the hard line of his body and kisses her like Lela might fall away with a single breath. James kisses her like Lela is the single person on the earth to be kissed.

Mouth full of pomegranate and wine, Lela pulls away and chances a smile up at the half lidded man staring down at her. Running her tongue over her lips, loving the way more of that taste explodes onto it, Lela breathlessly mumbles, “Thanks.”

Unwinding his arms carefully slow, like he wants to do anything but that, James nods his head and rumbles out, “Any time, doll.”

This time around, when they set out to continue walking down the entire length of the street, Lela’s hand stays in James own. Their fingers gently laced like they’re both afraid of losing the other.

When they step into a tent lined with tables of books, Lela watches James pour his eyes over every faded book back. Seeing how she’s never been much of a reader, Lela just goes along for the ride. Her greedy eyes drinking in the way James gaze roams in search of whatever he’s looking for.

Four books in hand, they both walk over to the register and wait to be rung up. Out of the corner of her eye, Lela spots someone sizing her up. It’s an older Beta, by the smell of her. Her salt and pepper hair pulled into a knot filled with thick dreads. Her cocoa faced lined with age and a life well lived. The beta’s dark eyes roam over Lela’s face, then down to the flowers in her hand and then over to James.

Something like old wisdom sparks in that lady’s face as she continues to stare. On a date or not, Lela’s about to flash her fangs in agitation when suddenly the lady twirls around and rummages through a sloppy pile of books. By the time it’s their turn at the register, the old comes rushing over to them.

Half shoving something at Lela the old lady says without prompting, “Here.”

Brows pinching up tight, Lela takes the thing being shoved into her chest with a growl, “The fucks this?”

Running a shifty eyed stare over to James and then down to her, the old beta woman tells her, “A gift.”

Glancing down at the book in the hand she’d been holding James with, Lela reads the title and grows all kinds of confused. ‘Language of flowers’ the book says with pretty flowers painted across the front.
“Why—“ Lela starts only to get interrupted by the old lady’s steadfast:

“You should read it, for what you’ve got in your hands there.” At the old lady motions to the bouquet in Lela’s left.

Confused—properly so—Lela takes the book and lets James lead her out.

“You hungry doll?” James asks as he effortlessly pulled the book from her hand and slipped his hand into her now empty one. His eyes only briefly glancing at the cover back before dropping it into his bag.

Completely forgetting the weird exchange, Lela nods her head and tells the gorgeous man beside her, “I’m always hungry.”

When the date ends—long into the night—with her heart all kinds of floaty, Lela’s lips kiss swollen and her mouth sitting heavy with wine and pomegranate, does Lela pull open that book she’d been given. Figuring she’s gotten the fucking thing because of the flowers sitting in a vase by her bedside table, Lela goes about reading it.

It’s harder than all fuck trying to identify the fucking flowers. More than three times she’s sure she’s gotten it wrong. But, the proof is in the flowers and in the running list she’s written out on a pink kitty cat notepad. (She’d stolen from Clint.)

Wide eyed, she stares at all that she’s found out.

Blue, purple and white Aster. It means love and daintiness.

Pink and red Camellia. Pink standing for longing. Red meaning the flame of one’s heart.

Red and White petalled Carnations. White meaning sweet and innocent love. Red meaning admiration.

White rimmed Pink Gloxinias. It meant love at first sight.

Blue Violets with yellow stained centers. They meant faithfulness and truth.

Bright Magenta and brilliantly pale White Zinnias. Lasting affection the book claimed over the Magenta ones. White standing for goodness or pure of heart.

It’s a hell of a thing for flowers to mean. A hell of thing for James to have meant to give her. So Lela thinks, he might’ve not meant that at all. He might’ve just given her random pretty flowers. But…but Lela thinks about the way James had looked when he’d picked it all out. When he’d carefully arranged it himself. The care he’d put into it like he was determined to not get a single flower with so much as a damaged petal.

Burning up from the inside out with things she cannot name, Lela pulls up her phone and shoots the man a text:

**Lela:** The flowers you gave me, they supposed to mean anything?

**James:** Yes. Everything.

Tossing herself back into her bed, Lela stares wide eyed at the twinkling lights hanging over her too small bed. She tries to find the answers to her life up in them because she’s not sure how much deeper into the rabbit hole she can afford to fall. There’s this weird weightlessness in her limbs and a
throb in her chest.

That steady feeling she has for him snowballing into something Lela’s too afraid to name.

*~*

16

*~*

“You promised!” Lela grumbles, refuses to acknowledge that she’s practically whining at this point. “I did no such thing!” Tony throws back at her as he continued to plant his damn feet on the ground.

Pushing at his unmoving back Lela huffs out a breath and pants out, “I told you I was gonna watch a movie with him! I fucking sent you a text that I needed my floor tonight!” “It’s a movie, kid. Why can’t I stay to watch too?” Tony cries like he’s five years old and he’s asking for ten more minutes before bed time.

“It is not movie night!” Lela throws back angrily, giving up on pushing the asshole out and running around to grip his arm to drag him to the lift. There’s a lot she’ll do for securing a date with James, but blowing off Movie night with the pack was a straight no go. Designated Pack Movie Night was next week and it was Bruce’s turn. Which probably meant there was gonna be some kind of weird informative documentary on the ocean life or climate change.

Not that Lela minded, Lela was totally gone on Jellyfishes and Octopodes.

“What are you guys gonna be doing anyway that I can’t stay?” Tony probes, his eyes growing narrow and his lips turning downward into a frown.

Refusing to blush—but failing anyway—Lela growls up at the insufferable man she’s bonded herself with. Planting her hands on her hips, widening her feet, Lela growls out, “Not that it’s any of your business, but we aren’t gonna do shit else except watch a fucking movie. And you can’t be here because I know for a damn fact you’re gonna try to make it as awkward as humanly possible.”

“You don’t know that!” Tony declares like he doesn’t really know himself at all.

Gritting her teeth, Lela growls out low and angry, “Need I remind you of the absolute bullshit you pulled last week? You fucking fucking pulled out a goddamn printed book about abstinence and tried to get us both to pledge to whatever fucking bullshit you were talking about! You fucking dickhead!”

“Hey! There’s a total legitimacy to the whole waiting until marriage thing,” Tony defends himself easily as he too put his closed fist to his hips. Like he didn’t have a sordid fucking history filled to the brim with too beautiful models and actors and actresses alike.

“Oh, my fucking god,” Lela growled, pinching tight the bridge of her nose, Lela decides to play dirty. Rolling her lips, she says as seriously as she can manage, “If you don’t get the fuck back to your floor, I swear, I’mma call Pep and tell her what you’re trying to do right now.”

“She’s in a meeting, probably doesn’t even have her phone on her,” Tony waves away Lela’s threat with confidence. With a swagger to his step he turns and heads back to the couch Lela had kicked
Pulling out the big guns, Lela throws at the man’s back, “I’ll tell Bruce.”

Practically screeching to a halt, Tony whirls around and narrows his eyes in her direction, “You wouldn’t.”

Pepper, it turned out, was a hell of a girl to get pissed. The literal wrath of god had nothing on Pepper when she was purposely made mad. She was all righteous fury and vengeance. It was scary as all hell and a amazing all at once.

But honestly, if anyone ran the weird trio that Tony had going with them, it was fucking Bruce. Because hell hath no fucking fury like Bruce trying to wrangle his Alpha into fucking place. It was insane how much strength was hidden away beneath button downs and corduroy slacks. The fact that Bruce could muscle Tony with a single hand around made Lela all kinds of proud to be in a pack with him.

And for whatever reason, Bruce—as well as Pepper—seemed to be Lela’s biggest advocate in the whole ongoing James thing. So, Lela knows if she were to call the doc up, straight up snitch about what Tony was doing, there’d be some kind of hell for Tony to deal with.

“Oh, you know the fuck I would,” Lela threatens with a wide smile as she pulled her phone out of her hoodies pocket.

When Tony see’s Lela’s phone he holds out his hands like Lela’s just pulled out a gun. Slowly walking his ass to the lift, he tells her, “Alright, lets not make any rash decisions here kid. You and I both know how he can get.”

“Oh, I know,” Lela nods her head because she really did. Bruce won—hands fucking down—as reigning king of passive aggressiveness. All the butter softness of his amber colored eyes growing ice cold when he glared. It even gave Natasha a run for her money when he decided to give someone the cold shoulder. It was weirdly fucking amazing to watch in motion. Full out grinning, Lela clicks on Bruce’s contact and hovers her thumb on the number, “We can just forget about this whole thing, you go your way and I’ll go mine, and Bruce’s never gotta know.”

“Alright, nice and easy kid,” Tony nodded his head as he slowly entered the lift and clicked the button for his level, “No one’s gotta get hurt. I’ll see you when he’s gone.”

“Bye Tony,” Lela waved at him as he rode the lift down. Laughing to herself because for better or worse, Tony always made her all kinds of happy.

Spinning on her heel, Lela goes about fixing her place for James arrival. The decision to watch a movie back at her place as opposed to going out had been Lela’s idea. One she’d suggested and hadn’t really thought through. But James smile was not a thing she was about to dim. So she was gonna follow through despite how nervous the idea of him sitting close to her on her couch made her.

Pulling out drinks of every flavor, Lela looks over at all that she’s bought for the night. She’s got junk food of every variety sitting jammed pack on her suddenly too small coffee table. Enough so that she’s sure it looks like a convenience store as thrown up here. But she’s not really sure what James might like to munch on while he watches movies. So Lela had taken Clint and Sam up on their offer to help shop.

Nibbling on her bottom lip, Lela glances down at what she’s wearing and tries not to rethink her
current outfit. She’s wearing one of those workout leggings Pepper had bought her in hopes Lela would join her and the yoga class she was taking. Over that she’s got on a ratty gray hoodie that she’d stolen from Sam. It was entirely too big but it was Lela’s go to lounge about sweater. Her feet are bare, but they almost always were when she was home. Her dark hair sits in a sloppy bun on top of her head.

She’s about to head into her closet, pick something a little less fucking frumpy and maybe fix up her hair a bit, when suddenly there’s a knock at her door. Heart in her throat, Lela heads for the door and tries to will away the nervousness that still hasn’t seemed to die after 16 fucking dates.

(She was still fucking counting.)

Pulling open the door, she finds James looking like heaven on earth. He’s got on a long sleeved navy blue henley that did nothing else but hug his body like that was it’s sole purpose in creation. The dark washed jeans he sported doing much the same. His hair has been left loose to hang around his face. He’s trimmed his scruff down again but left it in place and Lela’s belly clenches tight at the memory of it scraping across her face.

Already a breathless mess of uselessness, Lela hangs on her door and wills her knees not to buckle, “H-Hey.”

“There’s my girl,” James answers her, his smile spreading wide as he looked her over.

“I, uh, I kinda didn’t get dressed up, or anything. I—you, do you mind?” Lela stumbles over the words as sh self consciously pulled the hem of her hoodie down over the mid of her thighs.

“You look beautiful,” James states as if Lela is dressed in fine silks and littered in diamonds.

Scrunching up her nose, Lela smiles a hopeless thing and waves him inside as she said, “Alright smooth talker.”

Bending down to lay a sweet and simple kiss onto her smiling lips, James enters her place and waits for Lela to lead him to the living room. And Lela thinks a little weird the way James always hangs back. The way he always looks to her for permission of some sort when he’s in her place. Like he’s afraid of overstepping or something. But she pushes that aside as she waved at her coffee table:

“I don’t know what you munch on, so I kinda when a little over board here.”

Grinning, James stands beside her and pulls up a bag Lela hadn’t once noticed in his right hand, “I, uh, I did the same.”

Huffing out a laugh, Lela takes the bag and peers inside. What sits inside is just about every little candy Lela’s ever eaten. Questioningly, she glances up at him and wordlessly asks how he knows exactly Lela’s poison.

A fine dusting of pink blooms on James cheeks as he scrubbed the back of his neck and told her, “I uh, I noticed you only ever get those from the vending machine at work.

Wearing a blush that outdid James’ own, Lela drops the bag onto the couch and whirls around to pick up her remote. Clicking it at the wall, the entire empty space that held the lift and door, turns into a tv in realistic clarity. Tony had installed it since day one. When he found out Lela hadn’t seen much of anything by way of b-rated movies, he’d downloaded the entire worlds movies into it.

“Okay, you got any preferences?” Lela asks to try to keep that blush on her face from being the central focus of the night.
Slowly sinking into Lela’s couch, James shakes his head and says, “Not really.” At that, Lela turns to dubiously stare at the man. A lone dark brow rises high on her face as she drawled out, “Uh-huh. Just like you didn’t have a preference about your music? You’re picky as all fuck James.”

Laughing, James shakes his head, his brown locks swaying with the movement. With glittering eyes, he tells her steadfastly, “You pick, I’ll watch whatever you want.”

Pursing her lips, Lela twirls her remote in her hand and warns, “I’m pretty much an avid horror fan. Freddy movies are my shit. You down for that?”

“Freddy?” James repeats, his face colored in confusion.

Huffing out a breath, Lela turns back to the screen and hunts down the movie. When she’s got the title reading back at her ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’ Lela throws over her shoulder, “Okay, we’re totally watching this shit in order.”

“There’s more than one?” James questions, his voice sounding a little unsure with the bleeding graphics currently playing.

Grinning, Lela drops her ass next to the man and teases, “You’re not gonna bitch out on me are you? Thought you weren’t a squeamish alpha?”

Knocking his shoulder into hers, James settles in deep into his seat and kicks out his legs as he said, “Alright then, lets see what you got sweetheart.”

In the end, James isn’t all that scared of the movie. But that might have a hell of a lot to do with the fact that somehow the lights get turned off and eventually lips find each other amid the darkness. There’s a hell of a lot more making out, arms wrapped around each other, hands wandering over clothes, than there is movie watching. And Lela seriously would’ve wanted to see James reaction to the whole dream monster thing had it not been for the way his tongue slipped down her neck and his teeth scraped over her clavicle. His hands slipping up beneath her hoodie to find skin to burn with his touch. Lela’s own clawing desperately at his to keep him close as she wrapped her legs around his waist. Their breathes mingling as they panted, growled and moaned into each others parted lips.

But seeing how all of it felt so goddamn good, Lela really can’t complain. She calls it a win right up until someone—by which she means Clint—comes tumbling through her fire escape with Natasha in tow. The heavy petting, the sinfully thorough kissing she’d been receiving, all washed away by the way Clint starts screaming about his eyes needing to be plucked right out of his head.

It’s still a hell of a good time and a hell of a date.

*~*

21

*~*

These days, Lela’s not entirely sure what sets her apart from a black hole where food is concerned. These days—more so now with her pack so close at hand and James—Lela was finding every free minute she has with something in her hand and her belly full. She’s not entirely sure why James has made it his personal mission to over feed her. But it’s a thing.

One Lela is selfishly enjoying even if she’s started to not fit into all her clothes.
In the process of handing her yet another white chocolate covered strawberry, James asks from where he’s sitting on the blanket he’d brought for their late in the day picnic, “What’d you wanna be when you were a kid?”

Head laid across his lap, Lela munches happily on her treat and answers him, “I don’t know.”

“Yeah you do,” James accuses, his eyes firmly looking down at her as he leaned against the tree they’d been using for shade.

Scrunching up her nose, Lela shrugs her shoulders as she licked her lips free of sweetness, “I had that stupid dream kids always had.”

“No dream is stupid,” James tells her like he’s ready to fight every single one of Lela’s insecurities hand to hand.

“Being a famous rock star is kinda dumb,” Lela says easily as she opened her mouth for the next chocolate covered fruit coming her way.

Dark brows pinching, James asks, “Let’s agree to disagree. But what happened? What made you give it up?”

Swallowing down the fruit in her mouth, Lela tries not to think about the thing she’s been steadily keeping under wraps. The truth about what she is. The fact that she’s an omega. The thing that basically kept her from living any kind of life she’d have wanted.

She hasn’t told James. she hasn’t told him because…well, because before it’d been that it was too soon. Now it was too late. Lela doesn’t want James to know because…well, because she doesn’t want him to look at her any different.

And she knows, it’s a shit thing to keep a secret. Because they’re dating—unofficially, as it was—and he deserved to know. Had a fucking right to know. But Lela can’t work those words out of her mouth. She can’t force them out for the life of her. She clams right up, gets overrun by pure fear, every time she even tries.

So she settles for the most obvious answer, the one that was mostly to blame for the way her life had just been shit.

“I don’t know, life? Plus, my moms, she was,” Lela starts, her eyes cutting to the side to stare at a rabble of kids playing soccer further on down the way, “She was a pretty mean bitch. She, uh, she pretty much made sure I never had my head up in the clouds. Kept my feet planted in the shit life around us.”

“I’m sorry,” James tells her, his voice practically bleeding with something. Like he blames himself for not traveling back in time and keeping Lela safe and sound from her own mother.

Looking over at him, Lela tells him honestly, “Don’t be. It was what it was.”

Silent for a long moment, James eventually asks in that low rumbling voice of his, “What was she like, your mother?”

For a long while, Lela thinks over the question. She thinks about all that James is asking and all that Lela could say. She thinks about all the worst things her mothers ever done and all the pain she’d gotten from the woman. She thinks about it and feels a phantom ache deep down in her bones. An ache that vibrates and shakes all the bonds she’s housing. They squirm under her skin but settle themselves down when Lela sends warmth their way.
“She was…she was strong, I know that much,” Lela says with as much conviction as she can put into the words. Because she can feel a hell of a lot of ways over her mother, but she knows that fact to be true, “Her life was hard and it kinda made her hard too, ya know? I mean, Alpha’s where I come from, they gotta be tough or else what’s the fucking point in them. And my mom could lay a fucker flat with a single growl. She was hell on wheels when she got pissed the fuck off.”

Softly smiling down at her, James murmurs, “Sounds like someone I know.”

Laughing, Lela shakes her head and tells him, “Nah, I had nothing on that puta. She taught me how to keep my head up though. Made sure I wouldn’t duck my head down for any fucker just cause he had a meaner growl than me.”

“Half the reason she was mean, I think, was cause she was on her own. Kinda like how I was back before my pack. Moms didn’t have no one to lean on. Her family—I think something happened cause they never came round when I was little, even when she passed. Whoever the fuck helped make me never came back after he knocked her up. So she pretty much raised me up on my own. Had no support when her brain went all screwy after she pushed me out. Then she started drinking and everything went all to hell.”

Rummaging through her pockets, Lela pulls out her pack and lights up a smoke. Never once does she pick herself up off the lap she’s using as a pillow. Far too comfortable where she’s at despite the topic at hand.

“But she was strong, I remember that. Bent her head to no one and wouldn’t take shit from the biggest baddest asshole in the neighborhood. When I was a kid, some fucker tried to rob our house and my moms tore him to shreds. I mean, I’d never seen shit like that before. She just fucking unloaded, it was surreal. Bitch was built with strength.”

Laughing, fingers running through her loose waves, James repeats, “Like I said, sounds a lot like someone I know.”

The silver in James eyes gleaming down at her like Lela was marvel in her own right.

“Nah, I don’t have shit on her,” Lela huffs out a dry laugh laced in smoke, “Fucking devil couldn’t cut that bitch down. I’m fucking small fries compared to that maldita puta.”

Shaking his head, eyes looking all kinds of far away and soft, James asks, “Did she look anything like you?”

It’s such a strange question that Lela finds herself pausing where she’s aching her smoke into the wind. Frowning, Lela tries to think back. She tries to remember her mother with anything but her face pulled into a drunken rage. She tries to remember her mother with anything but her face pulled into a drunken rage. She tries to think of her mother before she’d spiraled into the demon that haunted her memories. What she comes up with is a faded memory.

One that was worn down and torn.

One that was made up of work rough hands and laced in the scent of roses. Of a smile on lips the same shade as her own. Of eyes that glimmered in the bright morning sun like opals on a river bank. Of hair so thick and curly no tie could hold it down. Of a face that was far too pretty for the monster it became later on.

“Not really,” Lela says and hopes to sound nothing like the girl that had sat side by side with her mother before a mirror and wished she’d had some of that beauty on her own face.

Because her mother had been that right shade of soft brown. Not too dark and not too washed out.
Her mother hadn’t been so short, she’d been somewhat tall with her long lean limbs. Her mother had been born an Alpha. All the things Lela had hoped to be but wasn’t.

Pushing all the memories back down into the pit where they lived, Lela turns the conversation over to James with the same question he’d directed to her, “What about you? What’d you wanna be when you were a kid?”

Face shrugging, James runs his devilish fingers over her scalp and tells her, “I think I wanted to be a doctor, or a policeman. I think I always wanted to…help people.”

“So what happened? Why’d you end up being in the military?” Lela asks as she flicked pulled her empty coke can towards her. Dropping the dead butt inside, Lela stares up at the face before her.

“War happened,” James admits. His voice growing distant as he stared out over to the kids kicking their ball around. Shutters fall over his eyes as he explained, “It was everywhere, the things that were happening. The images of men, women, children being killed. I couldn’t just stand back and do nothing. So I enlisted.”

Growing quiet underneath the sheer heavy weight of all the things James cannot bring himself to say, Lela just stares up at him. Her heart aches for him and all he’s endured. The way a good man could be broken the way he had. A man who had rushed out to help and had been emptied of his soul along the way.

Reaching up to lace her fingers into the the ones that have stilled in her hair, Lela tugs until she brings it down to lay over her belly. Only when James is looking down at her does she break the silence:

“You woulda made a hot doctor, ya know.”

Slowly, a smile works it’s way over his lips those shutters over his eyes slipping off and away. With a rumbling voice James teases, “Yeah?”

“Fuck yeah,” Lela nods her head as she grinned up at him, “You’d rock the fuck out of that white lab coat. I’d fucking be running into your office with a cold every other day.”

Laughing, James captures his bottom lip between his brilliant white teeth and shakes his head at her. Like he doesn’t believe her one bit.

Feeling like a shithead, Lela affects a small haggard voice as she mock coughed, “Oh, I think I’m coming down with something doctor.”

“Oh, that so ma’am?” James seriously intones, his eyes glittering madly while he wore a semi professional expression, “Why might that be?”

“I don’t, I got the shakes,” Lela says while holding out her empty hand and trembling it excessively, “and I got this funny feeling in my belly every time I see this one guy come my way.”

“Ah,” James hums out, biting his bottom lip and making all of Lela want to catch flame. Bending down so his face—his lips—was hovering over hers, he whispers, “I don’t think I can help with any of that.”

“Oh fuck you,” Lela laughs against his lips before dragging the asshole down.

In a mad tangle of limbs they tumble into the grass and roll. That deep throaty laughter of his echoing in Lela’s ears as she pinned him down under her and pulled pomegranate and wine into her mouth.
Her heart singing as she tried to choke down all the things she’s been wanting to say to him for a while now.

*~* 32 *~*

Laughing, they run. Half slipping and sliding they rush through the streets. Rain had dropped onto them like the break of a leaky pipe in the sky. Buckets and buckets were falling.

Lela had warned him, told him rain was in the air, she’d smelled it, but James had been adamant to trust in the weather App on his phone. But Lela’s nose was never wrong about rain. She could smell it in the wind. Could feel it in the way the winds were growing fresher as the season began to turn. Summer bleeding into Autumn. For the first half of their walk around the park—the one about three streets down from her building—they’d been rain free. To which, James had fucking been entirely too fucking smug about. But then five had rolled in and so had the rain clouds which cut their date off before it could start.

Having abandoned his car in front of her building, they had resorted to running to keep from getting soaked. But that had been a fucking bust. Lela was drenched down to her fucking bones.

And she’d be mad about it, if not for the way James was laughing as he kept her from slipping and tumbling into puddles.

Eventually, they arrive at her building and rush their way inside. They’re still laughing as they tumble—soaked and soggy—into her level.

“I fucking told you it was gonna rain,” Lela tosses out on a breathless laugh. Her hair sticking to her face as she tried to unglue her denim jacket off her body.

“Alright, my bad baby-girl,” James laughed as he pushes his seat hair back and grinned down at her. Looking like sin with his pale gray shirt half see through, he tells her, “Next time, I’ll trust my girl ain’t ever wrong.”

Rolling her eyes at him and trying not to jump for fucking joy at the way he says ‘my girl’, Lela heads for her bathroom. Grabbing a couple of her charcoal colored towels, She heads back out and nearly fucking dies at what she see’s.

For there stood James, smack dab in the middle of her fucking place, pulling off his wet shirt like he wasn’t built to ruin hearts. Choking on an inhale, Lela stares at the way muscle ripples beneath soft pale skin. James head is ducked, his wet hair half shielding his face from sight, as he worked the soggy shirt from his arms. His jeans, darkened by the rain, hanging low on his hips to expose the sharp v of his hips.

A hunger—so bone deep, it twists and splinters like a broken bone—floods Lela at the sight. Her eyes greedily roam over his exposed chest and drink up what she finds. Mile and miles of pale unblemished skin, a holy land in and of itself.

James isn’t smooth like Lela had thought he’d be. Like Lela had half expected on account of him looking like a runway model half the time. He had a dark spattering of chest hair on him that was so light it was hardly there. It made Lela ache to run her fingers through it. To feel it beneath her finger tips and across her lips.
When James looks up over at her he smiles softly at what she carries in her hand. Half expectant, he waits for her to come closer.

Gritting her teeth, forcing herself not to fucking melt into a puddle, Lela makes her way over to him and hands over the towels. He takes only one and makes quick work to dry his hair. Following his lead, Lela does the same. Her eyes cutting over to him almost every other second.

“Do you, uh…you want a borrow some clothes?” Lela asks, her voice all kinds of wobbly.

“You got anything that fits?” James teases as he ran the towel down his chest and over his pale arm. His onyx colored arm shifting elegantly.

Completely lost in the way way James moves, Lela completely misses his question. Her eyes are stuck on the utter perfection of his body. They’re stuck on the way a small delicate dusting starts just past his belly button and dips down below his was it line. Her hands still in place—not even bothering to pretend she’s doing anything else but gawking—as she lingers on his entirely too defined abs.

Without a single word, James reaches out for her. Gentle—always so damn gentle—he slips the towel from her fingers and starts to dry her off. Quietly, Lela stays in place as James delicately wrung out all the water from her hair. Eye’s firmly on his chest, Lela breathes out a shaky breath that rattles all the way out.

Her head, running on that red haze of hunger, fills itself with all the lustful thoughts Lela’s made an effort not to entertain. But face full of perfection, she’s a little helpless against it now. Lela wonders what it might feel like to run her tongue over that chest. To scrape her teeth against the tender flesh of his neck. She wonders how close she has to get to sniff that Alpha scent he seemed to not have.

Hand slipping to cup her face, James tilts her head back so he can peer into her eyes. Helplessly, Lela stares up at him. Her desire, she thinks, must show on her face—in her eyes—because James kisses her the moment he sees it. His lips pressing soft and determined against hers.

Like red hot coals being doused with lighter fluid, Lela catches flame in a violent explosion.

Hunger echoes in her as she reached up and pulled the man closer to her. Her hands running up his broad shoulders to sink into his damp hair. His skin, fair as it was, always felt oven warm. Burning with a heat Lela’s never known a person to burn with. When she parts her lips, his pomegranate tongue slipping over hers, Lela feels lust spill down her belly and into a far more dangerous place. Like it’s filled with molten hot lava, her sex throbs desperate and wild.

Hands slipping over bare flesh, over metal and all, makes Lela grow entirely too hot. A primal kind of growl lines her throat as she raked her nails over her skin. An encouragement, if nothing else, for James to touch her more, to kiss her more, to do something about the ache between her legs.

Her bottom lip caught between his teeth, James pulls away and then mumbles, “We—You don’t…if you don’t want to…”

Lips pulsing in that way she’s come to find only ever happens when James is done kissing her, Lela stares up at him in confusion. It takes a while before her lust addled brain can make sense of anything he’s just said. But then it hits her, hits her like all things James, like a satin covered sledge hammer.

“I, uh,” Lela starts, pulling away from James and into the suddenly too cold air in her home. Awkwardly pushing her hair back over her left ear, Lela admits, “I do, but, if you don’t wanna that’s—that’s cool. I can get you some clothes and we can watch a movie or something.”
Head full of lust or not, Lela wasn’t about to push James into anything. No matter how much she was fucking rearing to chase some kind of pleasure.

Smiling a thing made of all of Lela’s darkest fantasies, James rumbles low and devastating, “Lela, baby-girl, I want you so much I’m outta my head with it.”

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela nervously smiles and asks, “Yeah?”

Wordlessly, James pulls her close and seals his lips over hers again. Tongues slipping over one another, James unravels her in one solid twist of his tongue. Heart swooping and belly tightening, Lela wobbles on her feet only to have James pull her clear off the floor. Excitement rings in Lela’s veins as she wraps her legs around his waist. Tangling her fingers in that too silky hair of his, Lela kisses him for all she’s worth. She pours every ounce of herself into it.

She puts all she feels for him in the way her lips slide over his and the way she grips him tight.

Dropping back into the couch, James hands slip up and under her shirt. Pulling the material off the skin of her back it stubbornly stays plastered to. Breaking the kiss, Lela pulls her shirt up and off her to let those gorgeous hands of his keep wandering.

Lela has half a second to feel self conscious sitting on James lap in only her black laced bralette. Unlike James, Lela isn’t unblemished. She’s littered in faded white scars that Natasha’s miracle cream could not wash away. But when she meets James eyes—eyes that have darkened into storm clouds with lust and something half wild—all her insecurities melt away. Because James looks at her like she is heaven come to earth.

Half possessed by the lust she’s running on, Lela sets back to devouring those damnable pink lips of his.

Carefully, James hands run over Lela’s back. His thumbs catching on the sheer material of Lela’s bra. Feeling the question on the pads of his fingers, Lela growls low and threatening as she nodded her head frantically. In a snap, her bra comes loose and slides off her person. And faster than she can make sense of it, Lela’s flat on her back on her couch. James body hovering over her in the v of her parted legs.

Dark gray eyes roam over her face before slipping down to stare at Lela’s breasts unabashed. Mouth hanging open, pants slipping past his pink lips, James face grows clouded with sheer want. James looks at her like she is some goddess that has fallen before him and he was built to worship. A rumble echoes in his chest as he kissed a line down her throat and down to her left breast.

Too large hands grip her, knead the sensitive flesh of her breasts. In James expert touch, pleasure sparks down the length of her spine making moans slip free from her parted lips. Tongue running over her pert nipples, James causes her pussy to ache and flow with wetness. Without thought, Lela grinds into his lap and finds a harsh firmness there awaiting her. A firmness that was just as eager as she was to slip deeper into pleasure.

Sharp teeth sink into her nipple as if in retaliation. The action making Lela both growl and moan as her back arched up off the couch. A wordless plea for fucking more. When James slips to her right breast to lave it with the same attention, Lela almost misses the way his hands set to work to undo the buttons of her black shorts. Once their unbuttoned, James slides them down and over her thighs as he scooted back and pulled them off. In a single motion, he’s pulling off her boots too.

Sliding off and down to his knees, James works her sheer black panties off her hips too. With his thumbs hooked in the material, it’s a slow drag that makes absolutely everything in her fucking burn.
Only when she’s bare, her thighs pushed apart, does James still and look up and over to her.

Wetting her lips, catching her bottom lip between her teeth, Lela nods frantically as she waited.

Slow, so damn slow, James bends his head and runs his velvet tongue over her throbbing lips. A moan that was utterly slutty, even in her own ears, slips out of her mouth as she watched him drink down all the slick wetness seeping out of her.

Rumbling low, deep in his throat, James drinks her down like he was born for it. Slipping a lone digit into her, Lela practically fucking dies as tension and pleasure shot up her spine. And it’s just a finger—a single fucking finger—but the stretch of it makes her toes curl up tight. It scrambles up her mind as her hands went flying to his head and tangle up into his hair. Working his tongue between her folds, James flicks that damn tongue of his over her clit. Groaning, Lela tries not to fucking come right there and then.

But it’s been so long.

So very, very, very long since she’s felt any kind of pleasure like this. So very long since someones touched her like this to give her anything besides pain. And god, Lela’s already so wound tight, she doesn’t think it’ll take much to make her orgasm.

Slipping his finger out of her and dipping his tongue deep into her, James continues to unravel the very seams that hold her together. It makes her want to clamp her thighs tight over that beautiful face of his. To keep him right where he is until she kicked over. But those hands of his, they grip the backs of her thighs and keep her spread for him without effort.

Eye’s catching hers James works his tongue in and out, never once looking anywhere but her. A steady rhythm that builds and builds and builds until Lela is a moaning writhing mess.

Close, she’s so fucking close, Lela feels it building up in the pit of her belly. A tightening pressure that aches to explode. She’s so fucking close as she curls up tight and half hugs James’ head. Driving his face deeper against her. When two fingers enter her, push and fuck into her and then curl to hit that place inside her built to make her see stars, with his tongue flicking over her clit—Lela falls.

Sparks flash, violent and pretty behind her eyelids. Her mind imploding as more slick wetness came like a broken faucet. Her muscles seizing tight and then releasing all at once.

With a cry, a strangled thing that is both a roar and not, of pure pleasure Lela fucking comes.

Panting, she falls back onto her couch. Her chest is heaving as she tried to work out which way was up and which way was down. The muscles in her inner thighs spasming as the walls in her pussy attempted to keep whatever part of James was still in her.

Ragged and breathless, Lela stares up at her ceiling and tries to work out, “Th-That—I…” fuck.

Running his tongue over her—like he was dead set on letting not a single fucking drop of her be wasted—James rumbles out something like agreement. The vibration doing nothing else but makes her already hungry clit happy as all shit.

Waving a trembling hand over at the man, wordlessly asking him to come back up to her, James settles back onto the couch. Between her spread legs, James hovers over her. His right arm bent—his elbow firmly placed beside her head—James looks down at her softly before kissing her gently.

Tasting herself on his tongue, Lela growls low and approving. Something primal and animalistic roaring in victory at the fact. Her hindbrain stretching out so it pulsed just as adamantly as her pussy.
“You know,” Lela mumbles between kisses, her nails running down his chest and down to his waistband, “I got a bed.”

And like that was all he was waiting for, James moves fast and without effort. Scooping her ass up into his arms, he rushes up her staircase and lays her down into her bed. Scrambling to get to her knees, Lela pulls that beautiful face of his close. She’s got a mouthful of pomegranate and wine as she worked her hands back to his waistband.

Undoing the button and the zipper, Lela slips her hand inside and nearly fucking chokes on James tongue. Her hand meats satin wrapped around steel. It thrums with the rush of his lust in the palm of her hand. It’s a cock, Lela knows—because she’s had the displeasure of feeling/sucking/fucking many of them—but she’s never had one so…

Pulling her lips away from his, Lela glances down as she worked to free the dick in her hand out its confines. And like looking at it will somehow make the sheer size of it impossible, Lela’s eyes grow wide and her jaw slack.

“Shit,” Lela whispers.

Lela knows, with fucking hard earned knowledge, that tall tale about Alpha’s and what they packed was a damn lie. She’s fucked alphas with pencil dicks. And she’s fucked Gamma’s with fucking monsters in their pants.

But James—there was a fucking living breathing proof of all the alpha propaganda out there.

Hand wrapped around it, Lela’s fingers don’t touch. It’s thick in all the ways a cock should be. Long and fucking built to destroy. The feel of it, heavy and solid, in her hands making wetness run down the inside of her thighs.

Wide eyed, Lela snaps her head up to stare at James as she tried to work some kind of word out of her mouth.

Sheepishly, James shrugs his shoulders and delicately says, “We don’t have to—if you don’t want to…”

And aw hell no. James was not about to fucking show her a dick carved by the hands of god himself and then say Lela couldn’t fucking ride it. It was…it was fucking inhumane. Lela finds her courage in the way every one of her instincts is crying for more.

Moving fast, Lela pulls James and throws him onto her bed. Be it surprise or willingness, James falls onto Lela’s navy blue sheets. Slipping down to pull his pants away, Lela throws his boots off and then tosses his jeans over his shoulders.

Sprawled out on her sheets, dick standing proud and fucking veiny, James is a goddamn portrait. Crawling until she’s the one over him, Lela stills at his cock. Reaching a hand out, glancing up to catch his gaze, Lela touches him and marvels at the feel of silky smooth skin over iron. When a groan, deep and throaty, slips past James mouth Lela tightens her grip.

Mouth running dry, Lela watches as James both unwinds and tenses up as shorn her hand over him. When she thumbs at his head, her thumb sliding on all the precum spurring out of him, James moans long and low. With all the care he’d given her, Lela slowly brings her mouth to his dick. Flashing out a tongue to greedily lap at his cockhead Lela finds he taste like pomegranate and wine here too.
Carefully slow, Lela works her mouth over him. It’s a mouthful, her lips stretching wide, as she swallowed him down. She works him deeper with firm strokes on a steady rhythm. What she can’t fit down her throat, Lela grips with her right hand. Her left running down to cradle his balls.

“Fuck,” James curses as he picked his head up to look down at her entirely.

Emboldened by both the fact that James has cursed—a fucking first—and the fact that his belly is flexing up tight, Lela speeds up her motions. Her heads bobbing, her hand is pumping, as she kept up her steady suction.

When Lela feels the tall tale twitch in his dick, Lela pulls off and grips tight at the base of him.

Lips shiny in her own drool and James precum, Lela pants out raggedly as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, “Do you have a rubber?”

Tightening his jaw, James shakes his head as he flopped back and gripped his hair tight.

Biting down on her bottom lip, she curses her shit luck and tries to think up something. She knows she’s clean—the clinic she’d gone to get her suppressors and shit had called Natasha and Red had told her after. Lela also knows James is clean too. She can smell it on him. Shit like that always sat in peoples skin. And Lela could never so much as smell a cold on the man.

Lela knows it probably won’t be a problem and she’s feeling really fucking reckless at the moment that she doesn’t really fucking care.

“I’m clean,” Lela tells him, like she’s trying to convince him.

“I know,” James mumbled out from where he was laying. His eyes steadily on her own. Then he adds on like he’s trying to convince Lela too, “I’m clean.”

Grinning, Lela nods her head and throws him back his words, “I know.”

So with that in mind, Lela throws caution to the wind and straddles James lap. Left hand on his chest, Lela grips his dick in her right and lines herself up.

The stretch, god, it’s unlike anything she’s ever felt. It burns. Burns and hurts. But…but in all the horrible ways that made it good.

Slowly, Lela sinks herself down onto him. When she’s half way, panting and growling low in her throat, James hands grip tight her hips as if to hold her up.

Both hands on his chest, Lela pulls herself nearly all the way off him and then slowly sinks back down. In a steady rhythm, Lela pushes down and down until she’s got him to the hilt. All that length, all that fucking girth, screaming at her now as she seated herself down entirely.

It’s too much, her body screamed.

It’s not enough, her pussy argued.

Grinding down, feeling the way her clit dragged against his skin, Lela moans low. Eye’s fluttering to a close, she rises up and drops back down. Pain and pleasure race up her spine and explode behind her closed lids. Mouth dropping open, Lela rises up again and drops down. A long note dragging itself out of her parted mouth.

The hands that had gripped tight her hips wander up her belly and cup her breasts. Her belly grows
tight at the dual feeling of fucking down onto him and the way James pinched her pert nipples.

Swiveling her hips, Lela drops forward and picks up her pace. Her eyes open and remain half lidded as she met gray orbs.

“Lela,” James calls out her name, breathless and wrecked.

The sound of it, tangled in his pleasure, makes Lela lose her rhythm for a moment. Her heart expands and constricts at the sound of her name on his lips.

Hand reaching up to touch her fingertips against his face, Lela tries not to lose herself. She tries to steady herself in that silver eyed stare. She tries to find her place in them as she sunk back down.

Cupping her face, James whispers, “Beautiful.”

The way he says it, so sure and fucking steady, forces her into a stuttering stop.

Heart in her throat, Lela tries to not fall apart then and there. She tries, desperately, to stay steady, to finish what she’s started. But, there’s a loaded sentence on her tongue as she stares into storming gray eyes.

Eyes that looked at her and only her. Eyes that made Lela feel good, wanted, beautiful. Eyes that never strayed. Eyes that never hurt.

Liquid smooth, James pulls her close for a kiss and flips them so Lela is beneath him once more.

Like all else with James, he fucks into her slow—so fucking slow—and careful. Like he’s ready to jump up off her if he thinks she’s in pain. He fucks into her like he’s dead set only to give her pleasure and nothing else. Like he’s trying to burn her brain with the waves of it that he sends. Every steady pump of his dick into her pushing her closer to the ledge. Every time he thrusted, deep and long, into her Lela felt something wind up tight and painful in her belly.

When James lays his lips on her, his hips never once stuttering, Lela nearly fucking cries. Because it's then that Lela realizes something that fucking rocks her goddamn world. James isn't fucking her. He's fucking making love to her. She can feel it with every single one of his thrusts. Lela can feel it in the way he holds her. She can feel it in the way he kisses her and grips her tight.

Finger nails digging into his shoulders, Lela kisses him with abandon. She drowns those loaded words on her tongue with pomegranate and wine.

Because like fuck was she gonna be a cliche and scream out ‘I love you’s during sex.

If she was gonna complicate the shit out of her life, she was gonna do it when her brain wasn’t so fucking lust addled.
SOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
Thoughts?
Please be kind guys.
Smut has never been my forte.
Love in its many forms

Chapter Summary

The world didn’t stop burning just cause Lela wanted them around. And god, how she wanted them around forever and always. Close to her as much as the bonds that ran through her were. Embedded into the very core of who she was. Sinking into her flesh the way their scents always were.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At this point, it’s a running theme, Lela thinks. That anytime she finds herself in some kind of crisis she’s gotta bring it to Sam’s feet.

“And you know what he said to me? He said—*to my face*—clothes don’t need to be separated. He looked me right in my eyes and told me it didn’t matter if he threw his damn raisin colored shirts in with my whites!” Sam exclaims. His face painted in his outrage. Waving his hands, Sam demands of her, “Can you believe that? That absolute ass didn’t even care when my clothes came out lilac! He just said they were *prettier* now.”

Snorting, Lela ignores her issues for the story being told to her. It was almost every other day that Sam was running up here to complain about something Clint did. Or was about to do. For however much Sam complained and threatened of moving down to Tony’s level, he never did and never meant.

Sam was just as much gone about Clint as Clint was about him. And Red would definitely murder someone if they tried to pry Sam out of her talons. All three of them falling into step with one another over the simplest things. Or at least, where it counted.

Rarely did anything other than happiness paint Sam’s face, only when he spoke of his long lost gamma did sadness sit heavy in his eyes. Lela thinks, Sam might have lost a bit of himself when that gamma had been shot out of the sky. But, Lela hopes, Sam is finding some part of himself amid the arms of Clint and Natasha.
“So what’d Red do?” Lela asks as she clicked off the flame on her stove and pulled plates down.

Huffing out a strangled sound, Sam tells her, “Nothing! She just glared at Clint and said he owed me new shirts. But that’s not the damn point! The point is, he’s a full ass adult and he can’t do laundry! How does that even happen?”

Serving rice onto Sam’s plate and then the enchiladas she’d been working on all afternoon, Lela throws over her shoulder, “I’m pretty sure he’s fucking with you Sammy.”

“I thought so too, but, nope, it’s totally legit. He doesn’t know how to wash his own damn clothes,” Sam declared like he was laying the worst of crimes onto Clint’s currently missing head.

“What’s he do when he runs out of the clothes?” Lela asks as she turned and handed the full plate over.

Laughing, Sam takes the plate form her hands and tells her with full incredibility painted across his face, “He throws them out! Like in the trash. Perfectly good clothes. He just throws them out.”

“You’re shitting me,” Lela laughs as she served herself her own plate.

“Don’t laugh! This is a serious issue!” Sam declares like he’s about ready to drop down the hammer of swift justice.

Laughing harder, Lela shakes her head and fishes out two forks. After she’s handed one over to Sam, Lela pulls up her own chair and digs into the food. It’s only until half of their food is gone does Sam eventually ask:

“So what’s up with you and lover boy?”

Scrunching her nose up in distaste at the nickname most of her pack has given James, Lela wobbles her head side to side and mutters simply, “Nothing, why?”

Quirking a brow up, Sam points an accusing fork at her and says, “Nah, you got that look on your face.”

“What look?” Lela says, defensively adding on, “This is just my face.”

“Nah, you see, you get this weird little pinch between your brows when something serious is on your mind,” Sam announces like he’s a goddamn certified Lela Whisperer. When Lela says nothing else, he goes on at add, “Also, your bonds been all kinds of weird since last week.”

“Weird? Weird how?” Lela asks instead of answering.

“It’s all—— at that Sam twirls his fork in her face and frowns deep, “It’s all screwy. Like you’re keyed up or something.”

Pursing her lips, Lela glances down at her plate of food and shrugs her shoulders, “We kinda—you know.”

“What?”

“You know.”

Staring at her like he genuinely didn’t know where Lela was going, Lela raises her brows and waits till it clicks. It takes a solid five second but Lela can see the moment realization hits the beta.
“Oh. Oh! NO!” Sam groans, dropping his fork and jams his palms into his eyes, “Gross.”

“Fuck you,” Lela idly drawls as she stuffed the last of her rice into her mouth. Turning to load up her plate once more.

“Wait!” Sam suddenly shouts making Lela turn back at him. His brows are pinched tight on his dark face as he stared at her firm and unyielding, “He didn’t push you into anything, right?”

Growling, Lela glares at her packmate and bites out, “Obviously, asshole.

Holding his hands out to peace, Sam offers his apologies before saying, “Okay, so you…did that. What’s the problem?”

“Never said there was a problem. Everythings…it’s cool,” Lela snaps defensively as she placed more enchiladas onto her plate.

“Yeah and Clint is definitely mature enough to be left alone in Tony’s floor unsupervised,” Sam snarks. He was spending way too much time with the redheaded devil he was making goo-goo eyes at.

Clint not being allowed into Tony’s level, unsupervised, had been a joint agreement on everyone’s part. After Clint had glitter bombed the place, he had to have an escort with him down there at all times. Tony was still trying to scrub that gooey shit out of his kitchen cabinets. Bruce was still finding lumps of pink glitter in their couch. And Pepper had a fine coat of silver on her arms that refused to wash away.

The blonde gamma had caught hell for it, but he’d laughed it all off so happily Lela couldn’t help but grin too.

Pulling in a deep breath, Lela slides back into her seat and mumbles, “I uh, I think I might—kinda—be sorta, like, deep in the feels for him. If ya know what I mean.”

“Oh shit,” Sam half shouts causing Lela to cut her eyes over to him. Wide eyed and looking all kinds of shocked, Sam asks, “Does he know how you feel?”

“Ah, no. I figured I’d tell him the next morning but then I didn’t want him to think I was one of those kinda girls. You know? The ones that get all kinds of clingy after they’ve fucked.”

“Okay, first off, that’s offensive. And second, you guys have been dating for like months now. If you got any kinds of clingy, it’s totally normal. Kind of expected actually,” Sam tells her firmly.

Feeling all kinds of queasy, Lela pushes her food around as she admits, “I’ve never…the last time I felt like that for someone, it didn’t turn out so good for me.” Running her tongue over her lips, Lela quietly admits, “I also…I haven’t told him about me being a…ya know.”

Reaching a hand out to clasp hers, Sam’s flower bond thrums with strength, care and warmth. Only when her eyes are on his does Sam smile gentle and encouraging, “Hey, James is a dirty cheating bastard in a fight, but he’s not the kind of guy to do anything like that if you were to tell him.”

Feeling a smile slowly stretch her lips, Lela rolls her eyes and accuses the beta man, “You are just as bad about holding petty grudges as Clint is.”

“My ears are ringing!” Clint’s voice rings out as he slipped in from Lela’s fire escape.

Turning to grin at the blonde getting to his feet Lela lightly admonishes, “Clint, babe, we talked
about this. We got doors for a reason.”

Grinning wide and happy, Clint bounds over to her and drops a kiss onto her crown before stealing the plate before her. He’s happily munching as he tells her, “I was on the roof. You know Tony’s trying to set up some kind of surveillance system?”

“What the fuck for?” Lela demands as she tried to steal her plate back.

“About time,” Natasha’s voice suddenly spills out from the living room where she’s mysteriously appeared from. As if the demoness moved in the wind, that was Red. In a slow dragging speed she makes her way over to the kitchen. Her hand running up Lela’s left arm as she began to serve herself a plate of food.

And before she can demand an explanation from the beta woman, the sound of the lift rising catches Lela’s attention. The tall tale sounds of Tony bickering reaches her first.

“Pep! It’s for safety!” Tony defends himself as he opened up the lift gate and stepped into Lela’s floor. Wearing a wide smile, Tony shouts, “Whoa! Kid you cooked!”

Rolling her eyes, Lela waves at her stove as an invitation and watches as Pepper and Bruce follow after their Alpha.

“Tony, it’s excessive!” Pepper argues. Her baby blue eyes gleaming happily when she flashes Lela a smile.

“Even by your standards,” Bruce adds in as he took the chair next to Lela. He flashes her a tired and exasperated smile when he settles himself.

“No it’s not. I mean, I’ve always had Jarvis wired into my home,” Tony tells them as he served himself a plate.

“You’re wiring Jarvis into the building?” Lela questions as Tony ruffled her hair. Snapping her teeth at him in irritation, Lela attempts to push back her hair out of her eyes.

“Yup!” Tony happily announced as he shoved himself between Bruce and Pepper’s bodies. Only when his plate has a place does he continue on, “Should’ve done it since we moved in but I never got around to setting in the right wires. He should be installed this afternoon.”

“Why?” Lela questions because she’s way past even arguing when Tony was this damned determined.

Lela’s learned it was sometimes easier to ride the waves out than to try to swim against them. At least, where Tony was concerned.

“Because we won’t always be here,” Natasha answers instead like she’s the mastermind behind all of this. Which, in all honesty, might be the case.

Brows pinching in confusion, Lela stares at the redhead and tries to work out why that might be. And then it hits her. Their jobs, their life outside of this. The whole super hero thing. Her pack, every single one of them, they had duties—obligations—that took them far from home and away from her. And there was gonna come a day when they weren’t all piled into her living room fighting for the fucking remote.

“Oh,” Lela mumbles. Feeling like a damn idiot for not thinking about it sooner. For realizing it this late.
Heart clenching tight in her chest, Lela slowly pulls herself up to serve Bruce and Pepper both. When she’s got the loaded plates, Lela places them before them two. Hands empty, she heads for the window Clint left open. Perching her ass on the windowsill, bare feet planted on the little stool that made climbing in and out easier for her, Lela sparks up a smoke and tries not to fall into a pit over the revelation.

In hindsight, Lela should’ve already known this shit was bound to happen. Each and everyone of them was a literal hero and they had evils to stop. The day they all went running to dive head first into danger was bound to come. Lela just…she hadn’t thought about it. Her selfishness blinding her to the harsh reality of what kind of life all her bonded pack mates lived.

The world didn’t stop burning just cause Lela wanted them around. And god, how she wanted them around forever and always. Close to her as much as the bonds that ran through her were. Embedded into the very core of who she was. Sinking into her flesh the way their scents always were.

Quietly, she watches the way Clint tries to steal food out of Sam’s plate as Natasha growled at him to go serve himself more. Quietly, she watches as Bruce tried to talk reason into Tony while Pepper served herself a cup full of lemonade from the chilled pitcher before her.

They way they argue, their voices running over one another, feels a hell of a lot like the family scene Lela has always seen in movies. The way they bicker over who gets the last of the rice making warmth explode in her suddenly too cold chest.

Every inch of her hindbrain—so malleable these days, soothed more often than not—stretches pleasantly at the sight of Bruce stealing the rice right out from everyones noses. Everyone of her instincts makes her feel so secure here—in the home each and everyone of them has made for her, with her, for all of them—until she feels like she might just fall to pieces. Listening to Tony grumble and complain at Natasha to share what’s on her plate makes her so damn happy she feels her veins heavy with it. When Pepper laughs at something or the other that Sam makes Lela’s heart sings with the sound that spills into the air.

In that moment, Lela thinks, this is home here. With them, all of them.

Lela knows, she’s done nothing in her life to deserve any one of them. She’s done more bad than good so she knows this must be some kind of mistake. But Lela wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth, not anymore. She’s willing as all fuck, these days, to take what good comes her way and fucking run with it.

Carefully slow, Lela thinks about what she’d been talking about with Sam. About how she felt for James. About the way her heart had been branded by his kisses, his touch, his taste, his smiles. Lela thinks about that and thinks that if anyone deserved any kind of admissions from her first it was these brainless idiots.

The ones who had seen her at her lowest and had stuck around. The ones who had put up with her when she was a monster and hadn’t for once doubted there was a person underneath. Lela knows it’s got everything to do with who they are. Each and everyone of their hearts too fucking pure—defying reality—it was almost unreal.

Her pack, her pack, whether they were here beside her now and gone tomorrow to save the world form itself, Lela would love them to the ends of the earth. These idiots owned every part of her that was worth while.

Smiling over the butt of her smoke, Lela rests her weight onto her bent knees. Ashing her cigarette, Lela says, “You know,” only when every single pair of eyes is on them, Lela pulls in a harsh drag of
smoke and says, “I love you fucking idiots.”

The words don’t stick in her throat like Lela assumes it might. The way she expects they would do seeing as to how she’s never had any occasion to say them before. Even with her mother, her fucking ex, the words never flowed so easily. They fall easy as the smoke that’s laced in them.

Each and everyone of them wears shock of some sort on their faces as they stare at her. They look almost as if Lela’s fired a gun in their direction and missed by a fraction of a hair. And as much as she should be filled with fear, Lela finds herself grinning at their expressions.

In a mad scramble, they all rush towards her. The food they’d been fighting over abandoned as they wrenched Lela from her perch and swallowed her whole in too many grabby hands.

Laughing, Lela lets herself be man handled as her smoke went tumbling down.

“Okay, so I got a problem,” Lela mumbles from the big pile of limbs all splayed out over her carpet.

Clint and Sam had been unnaturally fast to pull every single pillow and blanket Lela owned in creating something plushy soft for them all to lay on. Tony had pulled them all down with determined hands as Natasha worked to get everyone into place. Bruce and Pepper had steadily purring the whole way through. Never skipping a beat as they all arraigned themselves to lay some kind of limb onto Lela.

The whole of it should be uncomfortable—what with how many limbs were involved—but it’s not. It’s the exact opposite. Lela finds herself at home in the middle of it all. Every one of her bonds thrumming as she burrowed down deep amid them all.

“Like you have to pee kind of problem? Or you’re hungry kind of problem?” Clint asks soft and low. His fingers twirling on the loose ends of Lela’s hair.

Every time Lela had the itching to chop it all off, one of them had to go running their fingers through her hair. Pepper had this not so subtle obsession with coming Lela’s knots out. Which would be a little weird if not for the way her hair looked fucking shiny and pretty afterward.

Scrunching up her nose, Lela shakes her head on Sam’s belly, “Neither. Okay, I’m a little hungry, but, that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Is this about Mr. Hobo- Extraordinaire?” Tony mumbles drowsily. He’d been slipping in and out of sleep since he became a human/octopus hybrid.

“Yes,” Sam grumbled as he pulled Natasha’s hands closer to his face.

“Is he coming over?” Bruce asks from where Pepper has him wrapped up in her arms. On Bruce’s back, Tony had laid his head.

“Nope, no way,” Tony adamantly starts, lifting his head up to meet Lela’s eyes, “We’re doing pack cuddling right now. He can come by tomorrow. I’m not done.”

Just about everyone, even Pepper—who was James most staunch defender most days—makes a grumbling noise of agreement.

Rolling her eyes, Lela easily tells them, “He’s not coming over.”
“Good, we’re busy,” Clint throws out as he snuggled in deeper and pulled Lela’s left leg higher up his back.

“This about what we were talking about earlier?” Sam questions.

“How about you sleeping with Barnes? Or you being in love with him?” Natasha breezily asks with no care in the world. Her words vibrating against the sensitive skin of Lela’s stomach.

Feeling the whole of the room still once more, Tony shoots up and growls out, “What?!”

Ignoring the scandalized tone in Tony’s shout, Lela shrugs her shoulders and offers simply, “Both? I mean, I’m running on uncharted fucking territory here. Don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“Wow, that’s, uh, that’s pretty important,” Pepper states, her big blue eyes wide on her face.

“She hasn’t told him she’s an omega,” Sam announces like he’s got no issues selling Lela the fuck out.

Lifting her head up and dropping it down hard, Lela relishes in the winded ‘oomph’ of pain that leaves his lips. Grinning to herself, Lela eventually says, “Pretty much.”

“Do you want to tell him?” Bruce questions delicately.

“Uh, not really. But, like, we’ve been seeing each other for a while now. And then we kinda did the dirty deed between the sheets. And I’m kinda fucking head over heels for the fucker. I figure, it’s gotta come up. He’s kinda got a right to know…right?”

“Okay, can we…just, not keep throwing that out there. I’m trying real hard to not barf over here on this end,” Tony warns in that dick-ish voice of his.

Ignoring the alpha completely, Pepper tells her firmly, “No one has a right to know anything about you if you don’t want to share it. We’re owed our secrets Lela. So if you don’t want to tell him, you don’t have to.”

Slowly, Lela works over Pepper’s words. She lets her mind pull them apart vowel by vowel. She knows, logically, she doesn’t gotta say shit to James. She’s got a choice in this. She’s got a choice to be honest with him—honest about all of her—or not. It’s a choice.

One Lela finds herself ready to tackle head on.

Heaving out a heavy sigh, Lela sinks deeper onto the blankets and whatever pack members limbs she’s laying on. Slipping her eyes closed, Lela grumbles, “Yeah, but I’m kinda in love with him. So I figure if this shits gonna work. It’s gotta be with all the cards on the table.”

“Hey,” Tony calls out to her, he waits until she’s looking at him before he continues on. His eyes set with determination as he firmly told her, “You know, whatever happens, we’re here for you. All of us.”

“Yeah I know,” Lela nods her head at him as she smirked, “Fucking pack right?”

“Damn straight,” Sam hummed out underneath her.

“Shit,” Clint starts, his head shooting up so his honey colored eyes bore into hers, “Does that mean we gotta invite him to movie night now?”

Before Lela can open her mouth, everyone starts arguing about who was gonna have to give up their
assigned slots. Even Natasha refuses to budge where usually she remained above the petty bullshit.

Laughing, Lela tries to calm her suddenly animated pack members, “He’s not picky. He’ll watch whatever bullshit you guys lay on him. But I swear to god, if I have to watch Freaky Friday on more goddamn time—”

“It is a cult classic you heathen!” Clint shouted as everyone else groaned.

“Seriously, Clint, I can’t watch that movie anymore. I’m having nightmares,” Sam huffed.

Laughing, Tony mumbled out a line, “I don’t believe in physical violence.”

“Tony, man, please, I’m having flashes!” Sam cried.

“It’s peak Lohan magic, assholes,” Clint defended himself as he threw a hand out to smack Sam’s shoulder.

“And it’s got, like, nothing to do with the fact that you’ve got the hots for Chad Michael Murray, right?” Lela teases because she’s totally on to the honey eyed bastard.

“I mean, it’s got something to do with it.” Clint argues with his trademark smile stretched across his golden face.

Scoffing, Tony props his head up and declares, “He looked way hotter in Cinderella Story.”

“Yes the fuck he did!” Clint barks out with a happy laugh, “We’re watching that one on my night next!”

Groaning Lela smacks her hand out at Tony for opening his mouth.

Everything else fading away on account of how comfortable she feels laid up with her idiots.

*~*

“I’m serious!” Lela laughs. Her lips stretch out on a smile no matter how hard she fights to kill it.

There was this feeling, one Lela was steadily finding out did not seem to wind down no matter how long she keeps seeing him, that wraps her up like an electrical blanket on the fritz. She’s happy when she’s with him. Always so damn happy she her cheeks always ache with all the laughing and smiling she does.

Like she’s walking on air, that’s her any time she’s around James. Her whole head getting floaty. Her instincts, second natured, abuse born, fade away to nothing and leave her a mush. A mush that was entirely too fucking chipper for Lela’s pleasure.

Narrowing his eyes dubiously, James stills in his assigned task and tells her, “You said that last time and it was not as sweet as you promised, doll.”

Snickering, Lela dumps all the jalapeño’s she’s chopped up nice and thin into the cooking meat in her pan. Grinning, she takes up her wooden spoon and waves it at the man, “It was sweet. You just can’t handle spice Mr. Big Bad Alpha.”

Huffing out a laugh that did nothing else but scrape raw down her spine, James hands her his cutting board lined with freshly diced tomato and accuses, “It was lethal.”

Laughing, Lela takes the board and drops the tomato into her pan too.
The plan for the night had been to go out. To try out some new restaurant that Tony had made reservations at for her. As the man had stated, important moments like tonight all hinged on the atmosphere. But Lela had been iffy about being out in public when she finally got around to saying what she did.

The thought of other people, fucking strangers, overhearing her—even if in passing—made all her instincts curl up tight and desperate.

She’d chickened out and simply asked James if he didn’t mind if she cooked for the night. There was a warm safety in being in the same building of her pack mates should anything go wrong.

Not that it would.

James was... he was a good man. He was sweet. He was caring. He was so soft and gorgeous. He wouldn’t... nothing would go wrong.

But on the off chance it did—because Lela’s always been the pessimist no matter what—she’d prefer to be on familiar ground. Playing at the home field advantage and all that.

Wordlessly, James grabs hold of the plates set up on her counter and walks himself over to her kitchen table. Slow and careful, he sets up the table; he arranges it just so that there is not a thing that is even slightly out of place.

Gripping tight her wooden spoon, Lela tries to not internally freak the fuck out. She tries to focus on not burning the fajita she’s cooking and makes sure her rice is truly cooked before lowering the back flame till it sputtered out. Grabbing hold of the handle, Lela steps over to the table and places the hot pan on the raised pot holder between the two sets of plates. Before she can turn to do the same with the second pan, James beats her to the punch.

“I, uh, I have wine. If you want some?” Lela offers as she reached over to her counter and pulled out a dark and nameless bottle.

“You don’t drink wine,” James tells her like he’s an expert on all things Lela.

Feeling her chest both expand and constrict at the fact that he’s right, Lela shrugs her shoulders and holds out the bottle to the man.

“Red got it for us.”

Which wasn’t really a lie seeing as to how the beta had shoved the bottle into Lela’s empty hands and hadn’t offered an explanation at all. Lela guesses Natasha had just known Lela wouldn’t’ve gone to the restaurant at the end of the day.

Pulling down two glasses, Lela figures tonight she’s gonna try her hand at wine. If nothing else, it’ll probably help with her janked up nerves. If it ends up tasting like shit, Lela could just dump it down the drain. She’s just about to go in search of a corkscrew she’d stolen from Tony when James pulls the cork out with a single idle flick of his onyx colored wrist.

“I thought that shit was hard as all hell to get out,” Lela muses as she walked over to his long frame and handed over the two glass cups.

“Red got it for us.”

Which wasn’t really a lie seeing as to how the beta had shoved the bottle into Lela’s empty hands and hadn’t offered an explanation at all. Lela guesses Natasha had just known Lela wouldn’t’ve gone to the restaurant at the end of the day.

Pulling down two glasses, Lela figures tonight she’s gonna try her hand at wine. If nothing else, it’ll probably help with her janked up nerves. If it ends up tasting like shit, Lela could just dump it down the drain. She’s just about to go in search of a corkscrew she’d stolen from Tony when James pulls the cork out with a single idle flick of his onyx colored wrist.

“I thought that shit was hard as all hell to get out,” Lela muses as she walked over to his long frame and handed over the two glass cups.

Offering her a casual shrug, James goes, “I’m a jack of all trades.”

“I heard that shit is actually some kind of insult,” Lela says as she sat herself down into her seat and watched as James did the same across from her.
The white v neck he’s got on stretching sinfully as he placed his elbows on the table top. His brown hair darkening in the low light Lela’s set up over the table.

She had, in the end, listened to some of Tony’s tips on how to set a mood. She’d even put old jazzy music that was as sultry as Lela could find overhead. It played low enough to be background music.

“Yeah, it’s supposed go: *Jack of all trades, Master of none,*” James says as he set the bottle down beside one of the pans and moved to serve her.

“Don’t really see how that’s an insult,” Lela says, pulling her wine filled cup close to her. The soft red liquid sloshes against the inside walls. The heavy scent of something almost bitter sweet attacks Lela’s nose as she raises it to her lips. When she dares to take a sip it explodes like sweetened cough syrup. A tang of alcohol sitting in the back of her throat.

“I mean, I think I’d prefer someone who was pretty handy in almost everything than someone who was an expert at only one thing. Imagine that shit?” Lela mumbled as she picked up her fork and shoved food into her mouth.

“Well,” James grins, sweet and charming enough to make Lela’s stomach swoop, “Thank god I’m pretty handy then.”

Feeling a blush crawl it’s way over the bridge of her nose, Lela smirks at the man and teases, “Well see.”

“Oh,” James laughs as he finished serving himself. His gray eyes glittering silver in the low light, “You doubting me baby-girl?”

“All I’m saying is, I’mma need to test you out a little more before I can make a…more *informed* decision.” Lela drawls out with a wide smile painted across her lips. Her heart thumping in her chest as she tried not to squirm right out of her seat.

Running his tongue over his bottom lip, capturing it between pearly white teeth, James smirks before he rumbles low and delicious, “Well, let me know what I can do to help you with that. You know I aim to please darling.”

And fuckkk. Lela seriously had to pick up religion of some sort soon enough. If only to fucking get on her knees—all proper like—for whoever was responsible in making James smile. That fucking smile made hunger race through Lela’s veins. It made lust—mad an unquenchable—stir deep in the pit of her clenched belly.

Pomegranate and wine echo on her tongue like a reminder of what James tasted like…everywhere. He might not have much of a scent, but, he sure as shit tasted like how she imagines he might have smelled like. It sat have in his skin. In his mouth. In his goddamn precum.

Picking up her abandoned cup, Lela narrows her eyes in the man’s direction and warns, “Slow your roll pretty boy, let me eat my food before we get to testing you out some.”

Distantly, Lela knows there’s no way in hell she’ll put up a fight if James keeps looking at her the way he is. fuck the food, fuck the talk that she’d wanted to do. There was a maddening pulse between her legs now that refused to be ignored. An ache for James and all he could do to unravel her.

Brows shooting up on his face, James laughs and shakes his head, “*Pretty boy*?”

“C’mon babe, you and I both know you’re dripping in good looks.”
“I don’t know that but I’m glad you like what you see doll.”

“Oh, I like it,” Lela tells him, feels herself grow bold under the way those eyes glitter with dark promise at her, “Like everything else that comes with it.”

She more than likes it, but, she’s chasing after something now. Running it down with a single mindedness her hindbrain was entirely invested in. All her instincts, second natured and not, humming with the need for Lela to growl out her interest—her desire. All her instincts aching for Lela to tilt her head in submission and bend right the fuck over.

“Yeah?” James drawls, ignoring his food entirely as he openly stared at her with hunger in his eyes.

Running her tongue over her bottom lip, chasing the taste of bitter sweetness, Lela tilts her head to the side and tries her hand at being some kind of sultry. Voice rumbling low with all her pent up hunger, Lela husks out:

“Can’t stop thinking about your tongue. The way it ran over me and drank me down. Your hands on me...in me. The way you tasted on my tongue. The feel of you in me...thick...long...pushing into me.”

James is stone still after Lela’s words have been issued. His eyes darkened into storming clouds and his mouth parted as growls slipped past his lips. There’s a half second where Lela thinks she might’ve broken his brain. But then, like the life has zapped into him, James surges forward and over the table.

His lips land on hers firm and unrelenting. His tongue—the one she’s been fucking dreaming of—slips past her parted lips to tangle with her own. James kisses her like he’s dead set on pillaging fucking gold from her. Like he’s trying to brand her lips with a kiss built to ruin all other kisses.

Breathless, Lela kisses him back. Her hands abandon all else as she sinks her fingers into his brown hair and tugged him forward.

Fuck the food and fuck her talk.

Gripping him tight, refusing to break the kiss, Lela knocks her chair back and half crawls onto the table top. Things go tumbling, something crashes and breaks—but Lela honestly couldn’t fucking care less. With sure hands, James scoops her up until she’s in his arms. Her legs wrap around his waist as his hands cup her ass.

Lela figures she’s got time. Time stretching out before her to say what she’s got to say. Right now, all she can think of is the way his hands dig into her ass and pull her tight. Right now, all she can think of is the way James growls low in his chest when she sinks her sharp teeth into his bottom lip. Right now, all Lela wants to think about is the way James lays her out on the bed and stares at her like she’s all his dreams come to life. Like she’s his personal form of salvation trapped in flesh and bone.

Lela figures she’s got time.

She’s got time.

*~*

“Owen’s now you’re running out the clock?” James asks, a wide smile painted across his face. His gray eyes glittering with mischief.
Laughing, Lela leans back onto one of the tool lined counters trying real fucking hard to not full out grin in the bastards direction.

They’re in James hanger. One she hasn’t been assigned in so very long. But it’s her lunch break and Lela couldn’t help herself.

“Owen’s can eat a dick,” Lela throws out with a casual shrug. Laying her hands on the counter behind her, Lela cocks her head at him and teases, “Why, you got a problem with me being here, pretty boy?”

Running his hand through his hair, James drops the wrench in his hand into his tool box. Half prowling in her direction, James comes over to her. The top of his mechanic overalls pulled down to be tied at his waist. It leaves him in a simple dirty tank top. When he comes to stand, half looming over her, trapping her as he laid his hands by her waist on the counter behind her, he drops his head down and whispers low against her lips:

“You’re one hell of a distraction baby-girl.”

Stomach tightening up as a grin spread her lips wide, Lela murmurs close to those lips, “Want me to go?”

The promise of a kiss—those lips too close to hers—makes the rest of the world slip out and away. Lela can’t find anywhere in the world she should be than right here and now. Trapped in gray eyes and James’ gorgeous body.

Distantly, Lela thinks about what she hasn’t told him. About what she still hasn’t gotten the balls to admit to. She thinks she should probably get the hell over it and say it.

But then those lips land and it washes way to the furthest pits of her mind.

Grease stained hands undo the buttons of her shirt. They slide up the skin of her upper arms and leave streaks as they go. Lela doesn’t mind. She doesn’t care. Because his hands are kneading her breasts through the thin slip of her lace colored bra. Pleasure spikes in her racing veins. Makes it so Lela pulls in ragged breaths and exhales growls. Her mouth runs over James’ own. Fast and hungry, she travels down over his thick neck. Tongue laving up the sweetness of pomegranate mixing with the salt of dry sweat.

Growling low in her throat, Lela sinks her teeth just past his clavicle. Her greedy hands pulling until his shirt gets pulled right up and off of him. James hands pull and pull until Lela’s belt goes clattering to the floor. Gripping the back of her thighs, James hauls her up and off her feet and seats her ass onto the counter.

There’s a stray thought that runs through her mind. That they’re at work. That anyone could walk in. Anyone could catch them.

But the thought slips right out of her mind when James works his hand into her pants. When they push past her soaking panties, slip over her slick lips, push into her, fingers dipping into her aching sex—Lela really can’t think.

A ragged moan slips past her lips as Lela desperately reached down to undo the tie of his overalls. Popping off his jeans button, Lela unzips his fly and reaches into his boxers. Handful of hard sin, Lela growls out:

“You got any on you?”
Learning from past experiences, James nods his head as his tongue ran a course over her neck and down into the valley of her breasts. Rummaging through his back pocket, James hands over a gold colored square. ripping the shit open with her teeth, Lela slips the rubber over him and kicks off her left boot. Without prompting, James slips her pants and panties down until they bare him to her.

Scooting her ass down onto the edge of the too cold steel counter, Lela pulls the man close to her.

Push, push, pushing into her. James slides deep and true. Stilling only when she’s swallowed him down to the root.

Growls, grumbles, slip past his lips sounding like heaven in her ears. Pleasure drags it’s sharp nails up from her aching sex and over every inch of her.

Pulling out, slow like any faster and he might break her, James thrusts back into her. A smooth languid pace that makes Lela’s toes curl up tight and her eyes wanna roll back into the back of her head.

“Faster,” Lela pants, wrecked already, so close already she can feel the burn of it in her tightened belly.

Whether he hears her or not, James doesn’t speed up. He draws it out, pushes into her like he’s caught up in the embrace of something holy and won’t leave it now for the world.

“She wants it faster,” Lela begs, finds her voice breaking on a moan when his teeth drag down her neck. They sink into shoulder to mark, to claim. Mixing an ounce of pain into her pleasure.

It undoes her. She crashes, breaks, undoes. Spills in heavy waves slickness onto his hard cock. A cry and a moan hang on her lips as she drops her head back and squeezes her thighs tight around his waist.

Hand slipping between them, James rubs at her twitching clit. Forces her orgasm to crest and build further.

His deep and slow rhythm never stills, never faults, never breaks. In each stroke, Lela can feel the endless strength of him in every joint of her body. It makes an ache build, one she’s unfamiliar with, half painful but not really.

Nothing James ever gave her could be painful.

Body trembling, Lela sinks her nails into his taught back and rides out the endless waves of pleasure coursing through her.

Her hindbrain cries then, needy and desperate for her to bare her throat. To roll her head to the side and let him sink his fangs into her. For him to claim her in the very way she’s sworn never to be owned like again.

Mind shot to shit, Lela does it, bares her throat and finds herself not giving two fucks about the way James dives for the exposed skin.

But his fangs never sink. The sharpness of Alpha fangs never pierce her skin. What she gets is his dull teeth that bite and bruise. For a solid moment, one that Lela won’t touch except here and now, feels disappointment in it. Her second nature, her primal instincts, ache for that claim. Hunger for it as much as she hungers for those sweet as sin lips. She won’t touch it later but she feels it now bloom cold and hot in her chest.
For now, Lela takes it and falls deeper into the arms of pleasure scooping her up and out of her body.

*~*

“You haven’t told him?” Pepper asks, her face awash with the shock she wears.

Shooting the woman a glare, Lela carefully glances over to where James is standing side by side with Clint and Sam. He looks uncomfortable where Tony is raving on and on about something or the other. The cold beer in his onyx colored hand has not been emptied despite the thirty minutes that have passed since he was handed it.

Through tight lips, Lela demands of the blonde woman, “Keep your fucking voice down.”

“Sorry,” Pepper sheepishly tells her. Pale blue eyes eventually lose their wide eyed-ness. Eventually, Pepper goes back to mashing up the bowl full of cooked potatoes.

“We just…we thought you’d told him already,” Bruce picks up where Pepper seems unable to. His face mirroring Pepper’s earlier expression.

Narrowing her eyes, resolutely ignoring the flare of pain in her chest, Lela grumbles, “I’m…I’ll get to it.”

“When?” Natasha demands as she swirled a cup filled with red wine. The demoness refusing, very early on, to help with a single thing.

It was movie night—Natasha’s movie night—and thus she’d taken the seat of reigning queen. Lifting her finger for nothing else but to point out what she wanted to eat tonight.

“I don’t know,” Lela growled as she flipped the chicken in her pan, “I didn’t think there was a fucking time line I was supposed to be following. Shit like this is…it’s pretty fucking important, right? Like you don’t just drop a bomb like ‘Oh hey, sorry forgot to tell you when we first started dating, I’m an Omega and I’m tits deep in love with you!’ “

“Wait!” Bruce half screams, his head whipping around to see if anyones looked over at him. When Tony, Clint, Sam and James don’t budge an inch he goes on to heatedly whisper, “You haven’t told him anything yet? Not even that you’re in love with him?”

Gritting her teeth tight, Lela shrugs her tense shoulders and drops her spatula, “Can we drop this?”

“You have to be honest Lela,” Pepper throws out, her hands stilling as she firmly intoned, “This is important.”

“No shit,” Lela snaps, feels herself grow irritated because she’s being backed into a corner.

“You know,” Natasha says as she peered down into her glass cup, “If you want this to work, between you and him, you’ve gotta say it. It won’t work with lies laid on top of it.”

“I’m not lying,” Lela throws out, crossing her arms as if that will keep the ugly twist in her heart down.

Despite knowing she hasn’t lied a single time to the man, Lela feels like maybe her own words aren’t true. She hasn’t lied. Not once. But she hasn’t exactly been honest with him either.

And like the goddamn devil she is, Natasha’s bond thrums as she drawled lazy and slow, her jade colored eyes twinkling with infinite knowledge, “Omitting the truth is a form of lying.”
Hating the words being thrown at her, Lela bares her teeth at the woman in a snarl, “I’m gonna tell him.”

Humming, like maybe she doesn’t believe her, Natasha says nothing else on the matter. A small half smirk tilts her perfect pink lips. There’s a silent challenge in those emerald eyes that practically screams in Lela’s face. A challenge and a dare.

Tossing her hair over her shoulder, Lela plants her feet beneath her and juts her chin out to answer the undeclared challenge.

“I’m gonna tell him,” Lela repeats, puts some effort in making it sound as fucking firm as she can manage.

“Okay,” Natasha nods her head like she doesn’t believe Lela at all.

Pursing her lips Lela glares at the beta woman. Distantly, Lela knows what Natasha is doing. The redhead was baiting her. Pushing her between a rock and a hard place. Distantly, Lela knows that but damn if it isn’t working.

Narrowing her eyes Lela growls out, “I am. I just, I got time.”

“Oh,” Pepper says into the open air between Lela and Natasha. Her voice is soft as she agreed with Lela, “You take it at your own pace. Tell him whenever you feel comfortable.”

Rolling her eyes, Natasha glances over at Pepper and carelessly says, “She’ll be fifty before she tells him.”

Opening her mouth to spit curses at the redhead, Lela is thwarted by Bruce’s soothing voice:

“If that’s how long it takes her then that’s no one’s business but her’s.”

Scoffing, Natasha grabs hold of her wine bottle and serves herself another cup full.

“When I told Tony or Pepper I loved them…it—it took me a lot longer than I thought it would,” Bruce admits, ignoring Natasha’s sarcastic huff of air.

Laughing, Pepper shakes her head and says, “Honestly, we knew long before you ever told anyone of us.”

Trying her damnedest at moving past her part in all this, Lela instead focuses on what Bruce and Pepper are talking about.

Quietly, Lela questions, “How’s that work? How’d you know?”

“It was in the little things he did,” Pepper sighs, her face growing all soft and tender as she looked over Bruce’s blushing face, “Always made sure to ask after us. Kept us both from falling apart after long days. Never let us go to bed without a long hot bath. The way he held our hands. All of was filled with his love.”

Blushing crimson, Bruce ducks his head and mumbles, “Was I that obvious?”

Grinning wide, Pepper leans over and lays a kiss on Bruces cheek before whispering, “A little.”

Each hand on Lela’s upper arm flares with tender care as Bruce and Pepper nuzzled into each other. Each of their individual tasks abandoned. Lela feels the heavy weight of their love pulsing through her. Vibrating and heating, it was a marvel to witness and a damn blessing to behold.
“Whoa, whoa, whoa! I’m feeling left out here!” Tony calls out as he raced his ass over to the kitchen. Stilling outside of the small cuddle Pepper and Bruce are in, he frowns and asks, “Why don’t I get kisses?”

Laughing, Pepper lightly pushes at the alpha’s chest and states, “When aren’t you hogging up all the kisses between us?”

“Uh, never?” Tony regally remarks, his face entirely too serious.

At that even Lela rolls her eyes because she fucking knows Tony. Gripping her pan, plating everything out nice and proper she listens as Tony continues to complain of the slight made against him. Right around the time everyone starts filling up her kitchen—James on the outer edges—does Lela have her fill of it.

Growling low in her throat, Lela walks over to the harping Alpha and grips him by the shirt. Yanking him down, Lela lays a loud smacking kiss on his cheek and carries on her way.

It’s such a simple thing, Lela doesn’t even bother to think of the consequences. Or at least, she doesn’t expect there to be any kind of consequences for it. But like all things in her life, shit was far more complicated than that. When she’s done pulling plates out of the cabinets she turns to spot just about everyone with wide eyes and expectant expressions.

Tony’s face wearing something like shock and pride.

“What?” Lela asks as she placed the last of the cups onto her counter.

“Why does Tony get a kiss?” Clint demands, the only one among them all who looks like he’s been mortally offended. His honey colored eyes half bleeding like Lela’s stuck his most favorite gun into the dishwasher.

Confused, Lela shrugs her shoulders and simply says, “He was whining like a bitch.”

“That’s not fair,” Sam says, over Tony’s affronted noise, “I was complaining the other day about Clint and I didn’t get a kiss for it.”

“I was complaining about Sammy, where’s mine?” Clint demands, as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Are you serious?” Lela chokes out.

“As a damn heart attack,” Sam firmly states, his brows pinched up tight.

Tossing her head back, pinching up her eyes tight, Lela growls long and low in her throat. She never thought being a member of a pack—as dysfunctional as it was—would be so damn...

Figuring she’s the one that started this by fucking laying one on Tony, Lela marches up to the closest person to her—Natasha—and kisses her hard on her left cheek, the band on her wrist exploding in something that burned and thumped. Then she grips Clint’s stupidly handsome face and kisses him on his right cheek. Clint’s entire silk ribbon twirling all across her chest for it. When she gets to Sam, the fucker’s already waiting, she lays her lips on his forehead and tries not to smile when the man rumbles low in his chest. His flower expanding further than Lela’s ever seen it go.

When it’s Pepper’s turn, the woman grins softly like she’s finding it funny that Lela’s doing this at all but isn’t about to stop her one bit. Kissing the blonde on her left cheek Lela feels the way the hand on her arm grips a little tighter. Sliding over to Bruce, Lela kisses him on his right cheek soft and
careful and watches as his blush grows deeper and redder. The hand on her arm spasming like he’s not sure if he wants to grip tighter or fly away.

Considering her job done, Lela turns to head back to her stove and is stopped by the whine that comes spilling out of Tony. Rolling her eyes, She waves her hand at the man and watches as he stoops down to lay a kiss on her own right cheek as she kissed his left. The boa on her spine flooding her with electricity until Lela felt it down to her finger tips. With a slap to the mans chest, Lela makes her way back to her stove to pull her rice off of.

“Okay, not it’s really not not fair, I mean Tony got two,” Clint cries.

“I think she’s playing favorites,” Sam accuses, sounding just as childish as Clint.

“Impossible,” Natasha says, firm like she’s ready to kick someones ass. for a solid second, Lela’s sure Natasha is going to be the voice of reason and maturity when suddenly the beta announces, “I’m her favorite.”

And just like that, everyone is plunged into an argument. Insults flying every which way. Pepper and Bruce not above it at all. Natasha leading most of the argument as she rolled her eyes. Tony declaring he was clearly the best of them all. Clint crying about knowing Lela longest. Sam shouting that had shit all to do with it. Even Bruce was caught up with it all as he continued to argue about the amount spent with her.

“Oh my god!” Lela groans, and waves them all away with a simple, “Get away from my kitchen if none of you assholes are gonna help me!”

Easily, they all filter out into the living room with the argument still alive and well.

It leaves her alone with James to help her with all that’s been abandoned. Shaking her head, Lela goes back to setting things up at her kitchen table. When James holds out the many forks he asks with a smile that was so soft it hurt to look at:

“Do I get a kiss doll?”

Laughing, Lela pulls the man close to her and lays her lips onto his. Grinning into their kiss, James wraps his thick long arms around her until Lela’s firmly in his embrace. When he pulls away he leans his forehead against hers.

And yeah, Lela knows she’s got to say what she has to say. But with a mouthful of pomegranate and wine—with her pack so happy humming inside of her—Lela figures she’s got time for all that.

She wasn’t going anywhere.

James wasn’t going anywhere.

Her love for him growing with the passing of each and every day they shared together. Every moment, every shared kiss, every touch making it so it grew deeper and further. Bubbling until Lela felt new and free in ways she’s never known.

She had time.
Chapter End Notes

Okay, so fair warning guys, things are about to take a turn. I don't want to give away any of the details. But somethings gonna happen to Bucky and y'all are probably gonna hate it. But I promise I'm doing it for a reason. Only way we can get Steve in the mix the way I want the story to go. So I really hope you guys enjoyed the jolt of Lela/Bucky romance so far.

Anyway, hope you guys enjoyed this chapter!
Let me know what you think.
Pack love is long over due!!!!!
When Time Runs Out

Chapter Summary

At that, Barnes wears devastation and tragedy like it’s his and his alone to wear. Like a crown made of thorns, it sits weighted and painful on his head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aside from the obvious, Lela doesn’t really get along all too well with those she works with. It doesn’t come as much of a surprise if Lela’s being entirely honest. Lela could be one hell of a bitch when she put her back into it. Mr. Owen’s only ever gave her the bare minimum of responsibilities because he could hold a grudge just as much as Clint and Sam.

Which was all kinds of alright in Lela’s book. Having to clean up after Claire and her gaggle of bitches was already a fucking pain in the ass. How they managed to keep their fucking jobs with the piss poor way they operated was a fucking mystery to Lela.

When he singles her out, tracks her down where she’s smoking out in the stretch of grass between building K and L, he screws up his face in distaste and tells her:

“There’s a new hire I need you to train.”

And blow Lela fucking down, she idly mumbles over her smoke, “No shit?”

Only then does Lela spot the tall ebony colored beauty hidden behind his old ass frame. Her kinky black hair puffed all around her like wild strands of beauty. Her soft brown eyes are nervous as she glances at Lela and then to the ground.

“I expect you to be professional and refrain from being...your usual self,” Owens tells her with a sneer on his face.

Flashing a smile that was all sharp toothed and wild, Lela laughs and says on a malicious purr, “No promises.”

In a huff, Owens leaves behind the girl he’d brought. Where he goes Lela doesn’t know and she doesn’t rightly care. Just as long the fucker was gone.
Pulling a heavy drag off her smoke, Lela idly looks at the girl before her. She’s pretty, Lela thinks. The way her cheeks bones cut high and her lips are full and plump. All long limbs and a curved hourglass figure that the frumpy uniform can’t hide at all. She’s pretty and by the smell of her she’s a gamma. Like taffy and sea salt.

Ashing her smoke, Lela states, “I’m Lela.”

“Amber,” the gamma—Amber—says with a small tilt of her head to the side. Her long dark neck exposed under the light of the midday sun. A small shiver running through her because she’s just wearing her uniform shirt and the winds were picking up now. Growing colder as the days grew shorter.

No matter how much she’s in a better place these days, Lela still can’t stomach the sight of submission like that. The way Amber just tilts her head like she’s been conditioned for it.

It makes something old in Lela—ugly and half dead—want to lengthen her fangs. It makes everyone of her old instincts—abuse born and animalistic—want to growl deep and low in her chest. It makes Lela—the old version of herself—want to surface. Bubbling up like lava from a dormant volcano.

Flicking her smoke out and away, Lela nods her head and pulls herself off the building she’d been leaning on. Stuffing her hands into her pant pockets she tells the gamma, “Alright, lets do this shit.”

*~*

“I used to work in a couple of motels before this,” Amber carefully informs her. Her soft voice barely drifting out of her mouth as if she’s half afraid Lela might snap at her for silence.

Grunting, Lela continues to push her cart in front of her. The doors open up before Lela can swipe her pass at anything. Jarvis, the beautiful babe he was, was a goddamn gentleman.

“The jobs, pretty much the same, right?” Amber delicately questions.

Lela’s still not sure what it is, can’t really name it, but there was something that unsettled her about Amber. It was in the way the girl held her body. The way she jumped every time Lela knocked into something. The way Amber looked fucking spooked by her own down shadow.

It made Lela want to bare her teeth for whatever reason. Made her feel on edge more than anything else. Like some kind of Alpha was hunting after her in dark alleyways again.

“Pretty much,” Lela mumbles as she stilled outside an empty office.

“Is it…it’s not, like, there’s not any kind of danger working here, right?” Amber asks. Hesitation and something else cover every inch of her words.

“Why would there be?”

The question catches Lela off guard. Doesn’t really make sense since this gig was as white bread as Lela’s ever had.

“Uh, well, Mr. Stark he’s—you know—Iron Man.” Amber states, hushed and scared.

“So?”

Fidgeting underneath Lela’s stare, Amber shrugs her shoulders and curls into herself. Like she’s scared she might’ve pissed Lela off, “He’s a superhero, doesn’t that mean—isn’t it a problem, like, in
Lela opens her mouth, is about to say something along the lines that her entire time here the most dangerous part about this job was a damn fire—but she doesn’t get to say anything at all. For in that moment, a siren starts blaring. The lights flash red and white like a strobe light. Both surprised and hell of a lot confused, Lela glances around her half expecting to see someone running with stolen goods stuffed under their arms.

Her phone vibrates then in her back pocket. Pulling it out, Lela reads Tony’s name on the screen and answers absentmindedly.

‘Hey kid! How’s—How’s it going?’

Tilting her head to the side, Lela answers easily, “Not bad, training the new hire. What’s going on with the lights man?”

‘Ouuu, look at you, climbing that corporate ladder. Proud of you kid.’ Tony huffs out like maybe he’s running or something, ‘Officially, this is just a drill.’

“Unofficially?” Lela questions because she can feel the way the boa on her spine is coiling up tight and unforgiving.

‘Unofficially, there’s a couple of baddies that slipped through security and started puttering about in building E and F. So just stay where you’re at. Don’t move. Jarvis is gonna look after you and he’ll let you know when it’s over.’ Tony rushes out as something popped on his end.

“Holy shit, are you going fucking Metal Mode over this?” Lela demands, her eyes growing wide as worry seeped into her. She wonders where Bruce and Pepper are. If they’re safe up in the main building.

Violently she reaches out to them with her bonds. She yanks on them until she’s got a solid hold of them and searches them both. Both are filled with worry but nothing bone deep. It sets her at ease somewhat.

‘Yeah, I’m suiting up. Shouldn’t be a problem though. Just a couple of local baddies. Small fries.’ Tony says while electricity laced assurance slipped out of his bond and into her.

Taking it for what it was, Lela sends care right back and tries not to be a bitch when she demands, “Alright, hurry up and deal with this shit, I got a new hire to deal with.”

‘Aye, aye, captain.’ Tony laughs out before the call ends.

Gritting her teeth, Lela stares at her phone until the screen goes black. Logically, she knows, she’s got nothing to worry about. Tony in his fucking super tech suit would be safe. Her Alpha would be safe. Lela tries to remind herself that the dude has admitted to fighting extra terrestrial monsters. A couple of assholes with a gun would probably only take a couple of minutes to deal with.

But Lela still feels worry crawl up her throat. She’s choking on it when Amber makes some kind of distressed bullshit assed whine in the back of her throat.

Eye’s cutting over to her, Lela wordlessly glares at the gamma.

Wide eyed, Amber asks, her words littered in gamma cries of distress, “What’s going on?”

Now more than ever Lela doesn’t fucking like her. Lela’s been working here a solid eight months
and not a single fucking thing like this had happened in all that time. But one fucking day and one fucking word from the gamma and everything went to hell.

Girl was a fucking jinx.

Pushing her cart fully into the office, Lela tosses the girl in with one solid push. Under her breath she throws out, “Stay here till I fucking come back.”

Slamming the door shut Lela stays in place in the empty hallway. Pulling in a deep breath she tries to feel for all her bonds. All of them—every single one of them—is wired tight and hyper aware. Like they all know whats happening. Sam’s flower is pulsing assurance like he’s steady and sure that nothing was gonna happen to Lela at all. Natasha’s pulsing strength like she thought Lela was gonna do something stupid. Clint’s spring tight like he was hunting her down in that moment to keep her safe in his own two hands. Pepper’s and Bruces hands holding her tight like they needed reassurance that she was safe and sound. Tony’s boa was coiled tight in nerves and determination.

Her mind isn’t filled with fear for herself though. Like it ought to be. It’s filled up with worry for a gray eyed gaze and the man it belonged to. The thought of him, in his damn shop, unaware of the danger that lurked, made her fangs grow long.

Huffing out a breath, Lela announces, “I need to get to building D.”

“I’m sorry Miss Lela, Mr. Stark has asked for me to keep you here.”

Growling, Lela glares up at the ceiling and tries her hand at threatening an intelligent cybernetic life form, “I swear to fucking chirst J, if you don’t open the doors and get me there I’ll…I’ll never fucking play twenty questions with you!”

It’s quiet for a long moment. Long enough that Lela’s sure her threat is going to be ignored. Not that she was serious, like at all. Lela got way more out of it than Jarvis after all. But then the doors swish open like the man upstairs wasn’t about to risk it in case she was being serious.

Full out grinning Lela calls up, “good boy” and books it.

*~*

The trip over to building D is uneventful. Lela half expects to see roving security guards in riot gear. But she doesn’t. Everyone’s locked up tight in their buildings. The only coming and going is her.

Eventually she makes it. Her breath panting from where she’s just run half of the way there. When she pushes open James door, Lela expects to find him under another truck. For him to be safe. Or at least, that’s what she hopes to find.

But it isn’t.

Not at all.

What Lela clocks first is the people. The many different people littering the ground. Some are lying in pools of blood. The clash of crimson stark against the gray concrete of the ground. Lela doesn’t know if they’re dead but by the way they’re bleeding, it’s bound to be the case. The sound of the door clicking shut ringing in the deadly quiet.

Somewhere, far far away, the world is screeching to a stop and Lela can’t hear the tires spinning. Somewhere, far far away, something is made of glass has been flung to the wall where it crashes and breaks like Lela’s mothers’ plates.
Wide eyed, Lela searches for James and finds him standing stock still in the center of it. In his hands he grips some kind of rifle Lela’s only ever seen in movies and video games. It’s a weapon built for war no matter how sleek and pretty it was colored in black.

For a long second, Lela doesn’t know what she’s supposed to say. What is she supposed to do. Shock makes it so she doesn’t feel anything else except maybe surprise.

Carefully, Lela’s mouth opens and before she can make sense of what she’s going to say, Lela calls out his name, “James?”

Whirling around, gun in his hand, gun pointed at her, James stares her down.

Lela’s seen many different things on James face.

She’s seen happiness. She’s seen joy. She’s seen softness. She’s seen gentleness. She’s seen hunger. She’s seen lust. And in the quiet of the night, tangled up in her sheets in a bed that could barely fit them both, Lela thinks she might have seen love on his face in the shadows.

But what he wears now…painted across his face, darkening his features, twisting them into something soulless and void—is not a thing she’s ever seen before.

Gone is James smiles.

Gone is the warmth of his eyes.

Gone is the face of the man she loves.

Gone….

His eyes are dark—nearly as black as the gun in his hands—when he aims his rifle. His face is set grim and dark like he’s readying himself to pull the trigger without once thinking twice about it. His pink lips pulled tight into a snarl that made her heart stutter into a stop in her chest.

Pulling a deep breath Lela feels her body tense up in preparation for the shot he’s aiming her with. Frozen, Lela waits because she can do nothing else. Fear runs cold in her. Fear makes it so she can’t feel the tips of her fingers and the lips on her face. Fear—she’d forgotten what it’d taste like—clogs up her mind. Fear makes her hindbrain thump ugly and vicious. Fear fuels the need in her to bare her throat. To drop to her knees and fucking cry for mercy. For pain not to be given to her by the person she loves.

Not again. Never again.

Seconds, minutes, hours—fucking days—pass them by as he aims his gun. His eyes never blinking, never wavering as his finger laid upon the trigger.

“James?” Lela calls again. Her voice rattling with the plea that’s drenched in his name.

There’s no recognition in James eyes. Nothing of the man that she’s come to know. Nothing of the man she’s come to love so much. Nothing of the man who laughed at her jokes. Nothing of the man that ran his fingers up the back of her thighs with such care she thought he must be spinning glass with them. Nothing of the man that whispered forgotten stories of himself in the middle of the night into her very skin.

There’s no recognition of who she is. Of who Lela might be to him.
Nothing.

His gaze is empty.

He doesn’t see her.

And Lela, she can’t fucking breathe. She can’t pull in a breathe because where the fuck was James? What happened to his eyes?!

With a flash and a bang, Tony comes flying into the mechanic wing. His suit gleaming in glory against the sunlight as cold air rushed in from outside. Tony’s shot a hole into the hanger door to get in. There’s guns out and ready on his crimson colored suit. Both of them pointed at James as he flew to place himself square in front of Lela. A wall to protect her from the gun in James hands.

“Barnes!” Tony shouts from behind his mask. His voice booming with all his alpha rage.

James doesn’t move. His gun stands at the ready in his hands like he’s ready to gun down Tony now too.

Appearing like smoke on the water, Natasha magically appears beside Lela. Her hands gripping tight at her shoulders and pushing her back into Clint’s magically appeared body. Only when she’s sure Lela’s not in the way of the danger James has become does Natasha step out beside Tony.

“James, are you there?” Natasha calls out. Her voice pitched low and careful as her pale hands hovered over the two guns strapped to her hips. She’s wearing some kind of black tactical suit that hugged her tight and was littered in strange weapons.

Silence rings after Natasha’s words. James doesn’t answer. He just silently shifts his gun over to her like he doesn’t recognize Natasha either.

“What happened?” Clint growls out, his hands tight over Lela’s shoulders like he’s readying himself to throw her over his shoulder and run. Like he’s waiting on the sound of gunshots to break out at any minute.

For one solid second, Lela thinks Clint’s asking her. But then Tony speaks. His voice heavy with anger as he spit out:

“Hydra goon squad. Set off a bomb in the left entrance of the compound so they could slip over here.”

“Shit,” Clint hisses, his gamma growls spilling from his mouth, “Do you think they reactivated him?”

“No,” Tony says quietly, “Jarvis says they started a sequence of code words but he was able to put them down before they finished.”

“Wha—what’s happening?” Lela asks, feels her words shake in her mouth.

Glancing down at her, eyes more green than honey gold, Clint sets his lips tight and grim. A frown pulls his face so he looks older and far more severe than she’s ever known her gamma to be.

“Are you still with us James?” Natasha calls out as she stepped closer to the Alpha with his gun trained on her.

And Lela’s never had any reason to fear James, she’s never thought him to be a danger despite all he’s said he’d done. But watching Natasha try to walk up to him Lela feels fear from him then.
“I…I…” James starts slow and broken. Like he’s struggling to work the words out of a mouth that had been wired shut for years, he eventually says, “I stopped them. Sequence didn’t….didn’t complete. But…but I can’t. Can’t get it out.”

“That’s okay.” Natasha says like she’s about to right the world with that alone, “You’re still yourself. That’s all that matters.”

Shoving Clint’s hands off of herself, Lela steps past Tony and searches for James with her eyes. As soon as she can see him she spots the defeated slump of his shoulders. His head hangs low as his left hand gripped the dangling rifle. Every line of him speaking to the defeat he wears in his heart.

“James,” Lela calls out again, hoping that when those eyes look at her they fucking see her.

Head flashing up fast, James stares at Lela. His gray eyes widen as memory and life sparked into them. Recognition flashes in those eyes, James remembers her. It’s her James looking at her now. His eyes are gray like star light again. It’s her James and that’s all Lela can think of as she took a hurried step forward.

Everything in her screaming to make sure her wasn’t hurt or bleeding. To feel, with her own hands if he was whole and hale.

But when she takes those steps forward, James stumbles back. Lela stills herself as confusion floods her. Her face twisting up in question for it.

“Don’t.” James demands as he pulled up a hand up as if to form a barrier between them two.

His face grows grim once more. The life that had shot through it for a moment being drained away in an instant. Sorrow hangs on the bow of his lips. Sorrow so deep it spills from his eyes like gushing rivers of ugliness straight into the very core of who she is.

“I…” Lela starts, because she’s not sure what’s happening. She doesn’t understand and she still can’t fucking breathe.

All she wants to do is lay her hands on him. All she wants to do is make sure he’s fucking not bleeding. All she wants to do is fucking rip that sadness out of him. To burn it away so it never settled itself down again.

“Don’t.” James repeats, his voice growls. True alpha growls spill from his mouth.

They shake the very floor Lela stands on. They make every ounce of her go to war within her. The need to bare her throat fighting against past self preservation instincts. The need to grow small and cry out for mercy going to war with the need to pose as a threat herself. The need to care for him going to war with her survival.

Pain blooms high and tight in her chest over the demand. Pain chases away the shock that had kept her numb from it all. Pain lances through her like maybe she had been shot and was barely now feeling it. Pain…fucking pain…

“Clint,” Natasha calls out on an order.

And faster than Lela can make sense of it, she’s being pulled out and away. Her feet lifting off the ground as Clint’s toned arms hauled her away like cargo.

Her eyes remain locked on James for as long as she’s able. Her eyes remain on him until she’s out of the building through the hole in the hanger door. Her eyes remain on him until she’s gone.
She’s quiet as she brushes a comb through her hair. She’s quiet despite the full floor she’s got. She’s quiet because all the questions she’s got don’t have answers. At least, not from the people that surround her.

The answers her heart demands should come from James, not them. So she doesn’t ask. Every time they ask her if she wants to talk about it, she glares until they stop.

It’s been over two weeks now. Two weeks since that day. Two weeks since she’d found James with bloody bodies all around him. Two weeks since James had pointed a gun at her. Two weeks since he’d growled out a demand drenched in an Alpha growl. Two weeks since James has called her, texted her, or fucking seen her.

Two weeks of Lela trying to carry on like her world wasn’t tipping on its axis. Two weeks where Lela did her level best not to fucking rip into the people that passed her by. Two weeks where Lela was trying to work out what happened to the man she was so deeply in love with. Two weeks where she’s spent every night wondering what the fuck she did wrong. Two weeks where Lela thinks back on why she’s been cast away and aside.

Two whole fucking weeks.

“Okay, so what’s it gonna be kid?” Tony calls out as he held out the remote for her to take.

Irritated, Lela pulls a face and snaps out, “I don’t fucking care. Put whatever you want.”

“That’s not how movie night works, babe,” Clint argues from where he’s seated on the carpet with a bowl of gummy bears in his lap.

“It’s your night, you gotta choose,” Sam tells her as he dipped his hand into a box of whoopers.

Gritting her teeth, hating how fucking angry she is, hating how fucking angry she always is these days, Lela bites out, “I don’t fucking care.”

“If you want to talk about it, just ask,” Natasha drawls from Lela’s right.

Glaring at the redhead Lela bares her teeth at her and resorts to getting to her feet and over to her fire escape. She knows the anger she feels doesn’t have shit to do with her pack. But damn if it doesn’t spill over.

They’d been sticking close to her ever since then. Never leaving her alone for longer than strictly necessary. Like they thought if she did she’d do something stupid like hunt down James. Not that they weren’t wrong. But damn if it made her a hell of a lot more bitchy.

It’s not their fault, Lela knows that. But right now she doesn’t fucking care. She just wants to be left alone. She just wants to fucking see James. To ask him if he’s alright. If he’s okay. If he’s fucking sleeping alright. If he’s eating. If he’s feeling any type of way that wasn’t good and happy. She just wants to see his smile. She just wants him to answer his fucking phone.

Smoke pinched between her lips, Lela stands on her fire escape. The cold air of the night making her break out in chills all across her body. She ignores it for the hunger that abates with nicotine in her lungs.

Silent, like a ghost, Natasha comes to stand beside her. Half jolting in place Lela growls out in anger. But when the redhead doesn’t budge an inch Lela just ignores her.
“You want to talk about it? Or are you just going to continue on with your temper tantrum?”

Gritting her teeth tight, Lela bites out, “I got nothing I wanna talk about.”

“Are you sure?” Natasha drawls out, sarcastic and fucking petty, “Because you’ve just walked out on movie night when you’ve been waiting to force Bruce to watch Halloween.”

Blowing out smoke through her mouth, Lela grumbles out, “He hasn’t answered my calls.”

“He will, when he’s ready,” Natasha says like she’s fucking sure of it.

“You don’t fucking know that,” Lela snarls.

Heaving a tired sigh, Natasha turns so her lower back is pressed against the railing and stares at Lela, “He’s working through something personal. But he’ll call you when he’s done.”

“I just…” Lela starts only to have the words fall away from her. Her chest still aching with the pain that had bloomed on it two weeks ago. It hadn’t faded with time as she supposed it should, “I just want to see how he’s doing.”

Crossing her arms over her faded lilac shirt, Natasha reaches a hand out to clasp Lela’s shoulder. The touch is firm, laden with her impossible strength, that the steel bond on her arm pulses with it. Some of Lela’s anger, confusion and everything else fades with the touch. It settles down into the pit of her belly until Lela can fucking pull in something like a strangled breath.

“He’ll call,” Natasha reassures her with such firmness that Lela aches to believe her.

Nodding her head, Lela pulls a drag off her smoke and mumbles, “Kay.”

Only until she’s done with her smoke does she slip inside with Natasha hot on her heels. When she enters her own living room she has to wrestle the remote out of Clint’s hands and picks Halloween. A small laugh works its way out of her mouth as she watches Bruce pull a face and burrow deeper into his end of the couch.

*~*

He’s quiet because he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say. He’s quiet because he’d walked in here with a hell of a lot to say only to have the fucking wind taken out of his sails. He’s quiet because he’s a lot of things but he’s not heartless.

Barnes sits in the room with his head hung low. His stupid long hair covering most of his face as he stared at the floor between his bare feet.

Tony’s seen defeat in many different shades but he’s never seen it like this. Never seen the very core of someone break in half and leave behind a shell. Because that’s Barnes looks like now. A goddamn shell of a person.

“From all the tests we’ve run, it doesn’t seem as if anything has been triggered,” Dr. Delsi says. Her eyes running over her chart as she announced further, “Seeing as to how the sequence was never completed, he should be fine.”

And like that’s all she’s got to say on the matter, the old Alpha slips out of the exam room. Taking with her a sterile scent of medication.

“Okay,” Tony starts, his eyes flashing over to Natasha who stands with her arms crossed over her
chest on the far right wall. When no help comes from her, Tony says, “I guess you’re all good then. No need to sit around here. I got trucks that need fixing you know.”

Silence meets Tony’s bright words. Silence that’s heavy with all the guilt that seems to spilling out of the Alpha on the table. His bare shoulders never lift as he remained locked in place.

“Green light means go, guys?” Tony tries, feels himself grow weary and uneasy in the room.

“I almost shot her,” Barnes says into the silence. His words, though pointed down, ring out loud like he’s shouted them.

Confused, Tony asks, “Who?”

“Lela,” Barnes whispers like he’s not worthy of the girls name. Like he’s ruining her by saying her name, “I almost shot her. I didn’t…I didn’t recognize her. I thought…I didn’t see her.”

Wide eyed, Tony grows quiet. Rage, anger and Alpha protectiveness all rearing to throttle the man before him. Because he remembers what he’d seen on Jarvis feed when he’d shot down that hanger door. He remembers the sight of Barnes pointing that damn rifle. The way he’d lost his mind and could only think of Lela and getting her as far from the danger as possible. Tony still couldn’t wash away the fear that had swallowed him whole at the thought of her being shot down.

“But you didn’t,” Natasha states into the open air. Her jade eyes are half lidded like she’s only barely interested. Like she wasn’t the one that had torn through fifteen men to get to Lela before Barnes could pull the trigger.

“I couldn’t…I almost hurt her because…because my mind isn’t my own,” Barnes growls out, His head lifts only barely to level a glare at Natasha.

In those eyes, Tony see’s all the pain the man holds within himself. All the guilt he carries etched into his eyes. Every life taken by his hand at the orders of Hydra bleeding from them. Tony see’s it and finds himself unable to hold the gaze at all.

“Okay,” Natasha says simply, as she uncrossed her arms, “You almost did.”

At that, Barnes looks down and away. His head hanging heavy like he’s been condemned. Silence stretches after that. An ugly loaded thing that pushes down on Tony’s shoulders and makes him want to squirm out of his skin. He’s never been too good with silences like these. Felt too many of them growing up that he’s gotten used to blaring music to chase it away.

“I can’t…I can’t hurt her,” Barnes admits, swears as he lifts his head and pins his eyes onto Tony. There’s a challenge in his eyes as he demands of Tony, “You can’t let me hurt her.”

“It’s never been an option Barnes,” Tony growls out as he narrowed his eyes and brought up his chin to meet the challenge head on.

Nodding tightly, Barnes slips off the examination bed and starts pulling his clothes back on. Thinking the conversation has ended, Tony turns to head out. Only, he never manages to leave because Natasha’s words still him in place.

“What are you going to do?”

Silent, Barnes works to pull his clothes back into place before her turns and declares, “I have to go. I can’t be around her if the sequences still work. I…I can’t hurt her.”
Narrowing his eyes, teeth growing long in his mouth, Tony rushes up to the other Alpha and growls out, “What the fuck are you talking about asshole? You can’t just fucking leave!”

Jaw clenched tight, Barnes squares his shoulders and bites out, “I can’t hurt her. I won’t.”

“And leaving isn’t gonna fucking hurt her?” Tony demands in a yell.

Lips screwing up tight, Barnes pulls his gaze down to the floor. Lowly, he says, “If they come back—”

“If they come back we’ll make sure she’s locked up safe. I already talked to Jarvis about this. She’s gonna be safe no matter what,” Tony declares as he walked back to the door.

“If they come back, you know what I can do. I won’t know who she is. I could… I could kill her and…and I won’t risk that,” Barnes states as if heaven and hell couldn’t move him on this.

“No, this—this is stupid. If you leave, I swear to god, I’ll fucking kick your ass so hard you’ll be—“ Tony starts, shouting as he really worked himself into it.

“Tony.” Natasha calls out. A swift and deadly bark in her throat that stilled tony in his tracks.

Frowning, Natasha stares at Barnes and slowly asks, “Do you know how she feels about you?”

Looking like he’s just got shot in the thigh, Barnes tightly nods his head.

Quietly, Natasha’s green eyes roam over Barnes’ face like she’s reading his very thoughts. Surprise and then something like anger crosses over Natasha’s face as she stated, “And you’re still going, even though you know.”

At that, Barnes says nothing. His jaw simply clenches tighter as he stood glued to the floor.

Scoffing, Natasha breezes past Tony’s body and throws over her shoulder, “Never took you for a fucking idiot Barnes.”

shaking his head, Tony tries to think of Lela and the way she smiled every time Barnes came around. Tony thinks of the way their bonds always felt so warm, bright and happy. Tony thinks about the way Lela’s laugh was a near constant sound around the building. The way it seemed to travel down into each of their levels. Her husky laughter floating in each of their bonds because she loved this asshole here.

Tony thinks about all that and thinks about how she’s been looking these days. The way she kept glancing at her phone for a call that never came. He thinks about the girl who sits on her fire escape because she’s too afraid to ask if Barnes was coming back. He thinks about the girl who’s twisted up into knots because she probably blames herself for Barnes’ absence.

Tony thinks about the way it’s gonna hit her when it happens. Tony doesn’t want to know what she’s going to feel. He doesn’t want their bonds to shake with it. He doesn’t want her to feel anything except happiness.

But Tony gets where Barnes’ is coming from. If Tony, for one fucking second, thought he was a danger to Lela—he’d fucking run himself off a cliff side. So he gets it even if he really doesn’t want to.

“She loves you,” Tony admits, feels like he’s selling Lela out as he says it. But he’s trying to keep the girl from breaking. Tony doesn’t want to see heartbreak on her face. He doesn’t think he’ll survive it at all, “If you leave, it’s going to break her fucking heart.”
At that, Barnes wears devastation and tragedy like it’s his and his alone to wear. Like a crown made of thorns, it sits weighted and painful on his head.

Finding that he’s run out of things to say, Tony leaves because he can’t be a part of this. He can’t because dark eyes were about to be dimmed some more. He can’t because those wide smiles might be broken after all. He can’t because his kids gonna have her heart broken by someone she loved.

He can’t.

*~*

She’s working through the last legs of her shift when her phone starts to vibrate in her pocket. Lela’s pretty sure it’s Tony again because he hasn’t stopped calling her all day. Trying, for whatever reason to ditch work and ride around with him in his car. Lela might be down in the dumps because James hasn’t called her back but she wasn’t suicidal just yet. She was not getting into a car with that asshole again.

For whatever reason, Tony hadn’t left her alone for a single minute these past two days. Always chasing after her like he was trying to right the world for her. A personal mission of his she doesn’t know who the fuck okayed it.

When she pulls it out of her pocket she’s surprised as all fuck at the name that reads back to her. James. Fumbling to answer before it got sent to voice mail, Lela breathlessly answers, “James?”

“No!” Lela half shouts down the line, excitement and fucking something else twisting her up from the inside out, “No, not busy. You want to meet up? We can…we can grab something to eat after I get out of work, yeah?”

James is silent for a moment. The line deadly empty before he says, “I, uh, I was hoping I could come to your place, if that’s alright?”

Grinning, feeling so stupidly happy, Lela nods her head before she remembers James can’t fucking see her, “Yeah, that’s cool. I’ll, uh, we can chill at my place!”

“Okay,” James tells her, he sounds odd when he mumbles a goodbye.

But Lela’s not thinking about any of that. She’s got her heart thumping. Her whole body feels wired up. Like she’s running on too much caffeine. With more energy she remembers her bodying holding all goddamn day, Lela sets to get the fuck out of the tower as soon as possible.

*~*

Fresh out of the shower, Lela stares at herself in the mirror. She’s wearing a simple black long sleeve. One of the ones that plunged in a v and hugged every inch of her torso. With it, she’s got on her favorite pair of dark washed skinny jeans. On her feet she’s got on her vans. Her damp hair hangs around her head freshly combed and reeking of cocoa butter. She hadn’t bothered with putting
on any makeup because she was way too excited to sit still for it.

It’s simple, she thinks, her outfit. Simple enough that it doesn’t make her look as obsessed as she had been when she’d picked it out when she got home.

Rushing out of her bathroom, she heads to her kitchen. She thinks about setting something up to cook because she hasn’t eaten anything yet. She kind of hopes she can share a meal with James though.

But before she can set herself into doing anything there’s a firm knock on her door. Smile half splitting her face in half, Lela runs to her door. Yanking it open she’s blessed with the sight of James. He’s dressed in a simple blue shirt and his usual dark jeans. His leather jacket thrown over it the only sign that his summer attire is only a little different from his brisk autumn one.

“Hey,” Lela calls out, already half leaning up on the tips of her toes in search of those lips she’s been dreaming about.

It’s only as she’s half up onto the balls of her feet does Lela notice James face. He’s got this strange look on him, the one she only briefly remembers him wearing all those months ago. The one where he’s not sure what he’s supposed to do. The one he’d worn when Lela had first seen him in his garage.

The sight of it rattles Lela. It makes it so her happiness swoops on out and leaves something too cold to name.

Rocking back and away, Lela opens up her door and waves him in. The smile she had worn slipping down. When the door is closed, James stands in Lela’s living room. His hands jammed into his pockets as he looked everywhere that wasn’t her.

“Are you…” Lela starts feeling fear sink it’s claws into her as she tried to figure out what was happening, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” James says, his eyes briefly landing on Lela’s face before flashing down and away.

And that’s a lie. A bold faced fucking lie. But Lela’s too much of a coward right now to try to argue with him. So she nods her head as she bites on her bottom lip.

Feeling awkward, wrong footed and like someone was about to come up and shove her down if she wasn’t looking, Lela asks, “So what’s up? Haven’t heard from you in a while.”

There’s a lot Lela wants to talk to him about. A hell of a lot she’s been meaning to say. A hell of a lot she won’t touch despite herself. But right now she just wants to know how he’s been holding up. If he’s alright with himself after what happened in his garage.

“I…I need to talk to you,” James tells her.

“Kinda what we’re doing right now, no?” Lela tries to be light, a nervous smile tilting up her lips.

Lips stretching into something that was too painful to be a smile, James shakes his head and clarifies, “I need to talk to you about us.”

“What about us?” Lela quickly demands. There’s a slow sinking feeling in her chest. A tight knot has formed in the pit of her belly. An ugliness sits on her throat in a way Lela can’t really understand.

Looking lost for a moment, James glances down at his booted feet before admitting, “I can’t…we
can’t…”

And oh…it hits Lela then what this is.

Late and fucking brutal. It hits her. Like a fucking punch to the gut when she’d been expecting a goddamn fucking kiss.

She knows what this is.

“Are you—” Lela starts, her voice small despite how she wants it to come out harsh and fucking loud, “Are you breaking up with me?”

James grows quiet at that. When his flash up though they are riddled with her answer. Like pain. Like regret. Like fucking sorrow. They scream at her her answer.

Shaking her head, hugging herself tight, Lela stumbles back as she heatedly said to him, “No.”

“I almost hurt you the other day,” James says, his face twisting up like he’s in physical pain over all this, “I had you clear in my sights and I almost took the shot. I…I almost killed you.”

“So!” Lela growls out, feels her heart twisting in her chest like someone's cut her open and started pulling.

There’s a chasm opening up at her feet. It’s jaws opening wide and threatening to swallow her down without a goddamn hitch in it’s breath. Lela digs her nails into her arms to keep from fucking falling into it.

“I can’t…I won’t hurt you Lela. I won’t.” James declares like he’s about to turn himself into the police to keep Lela out of his hands.

Something too fucking vulnerable shakes in Lela. A fucking fine tremor that builds into something violent. Lela feels it and half expects her body to mirror it. But instead, she’s gone stone still. Her back pressing up tight against the wall beside her front door.

“You—you can’t hurt me James, you’re good.” Lela tries to reason, tries to plea her case because this can’t happen.

James can’t fucking do this. He can’t just…he can’t leave. Lela was—is in love with him. Things between them, they aren’t supposed to end. They’re only supposed to go up from here. She’s supposed to tell him that four letter word. He’s supposed to say it back. They’re supposed to…they’re supposed to be together.

Wasn’t that the way things fucking went?

This wasn’t… This wasn’t…

“My mind…it isn’t my own,” James tells her lowly. His voice rumbling like thunder.

Lela doesn’t understand what that’s supposed to mean. But then she remembers what he’d told her. About the men that had taken him. The people that hollowed him out. About how he’d been mind fucked and turned into a weapon.

“But—” Lela starts, trying to grip onto the threads being yanked out of her hands, “You…you’re you James. And you’d never…”

“That day, I held the rifle pointed at you. I didn’t see you. I didn’t recognize you. I saw a body. I saw
“I can’t risk it Lela,” James shakes his head at her like its killing him to do this at all.

Every inch of her wants to fight this. She wants to kick, bite, fucking tear blood out of James. Because James not might want to risk it, but fuck if Lela did. She’d fucking risk a bullet to the brain for this, for them. Anything to not feel the fucking pain in her fucking heart that she’s got.

But when she opens her mouth, not a single fucking word falls. Nothing.

Because she knows, fucking feels it in the finality of his words, Lela can’t fight this. James was set, like a stone on a river. He wasn’t going to move. The stupid beautiful bastard had damned himself. Like everything else, he blamed himself. Guilt sitting high on his head.

So Lela does the only thing she can think to do. She fucking pulls all that she is and fucking buries it down low. She chokes the words on her tongue until she’s got only pain.

It’s familiar, that pain. Different in it’s shape, but familiar all the same. Like an old friend she can’t fucking get rid of. The pain and anger it springs grips her up tight.

Nodding her head, Lela grabs the handle of her door and opens it. Wordlessly, James walks over to it. He stills before her for a moment. Long enough that hope springs up despite her efforts. It coats the inside of her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” James whispers and then he’s gone.

Eyes burning, Lela slams the door and tries to fucking not fall to pieces. Shoving the palms into her eyes, Lela slides down onto her floor. Heart ache thrums in her. Pulsing madly until Lela feels tears slip past her palms and down her arms. Gritting her teeth tight does nothing to still the throb in her throat.

When hands touch her, gentle—so fucking gentle—Lela doesn’t pull her hands away to look who it is. But when the smell of orchid, jasmine and musk reach her she knows exactly who it is. Cradled in Tony’s arms, Lela grips tight and tries not to choke on the misery running through her.

“I got you kid, I got you,” Tony whispers down into the crown of her head.

A cry, so fucking pitiful Lela hates it instantly, slips past her lips as she curled up tight. Her heart aches, it aches so fucking much she can’t be bothered to stop the torrent of tears that come rushing out of her.

“It…it hurts,” Lela cries, her hands digging further into her eyes. She curls tighter into herself in his hold. Tries to pull herself so tight she hopes to be pulled into nothingness.

“I know,” Tony whispers, his boa bond twirling and slithering.

And Lela doesn’t care what her mother might have thought her her then, she doesn’t fucking care, she cries and fucking cries. Weeps for all the time she’d thought she’d had. She fucking mourns all the times she’d wasted. Because the love she has for someone’s just been thrown out. The love she’s been finding herself in is tearing her into shreds. Lela cries and swears never to fall for anyone this deep.
Because this pain just wasn’t worth it.

Chapter End Notes

DON’T HATE ME!!!!
I CRIED SO MUCHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
The notice comes in a little after three in the morning. The aircraft he’s in already has its ordinances. But when he reads out the message, he marches straight into the cockpit and demands that they turn around. The pilot blinks only once before complying with his new orders.

When he touches down on the rooftop of one of Tony’s brand-new buildings, he’s out before the propellers have even stilled. Rushing inside, he hunts down the sole person he’s come to see. His heart is in his throat. His mind whirling with worry because the last time they’d spoken, he’d been fine.

He’d been fine.

But now he’s got a notice, a damn message blinking at him, telling him that it’s not fine. It’s so very far from goddamn fine.

Standing in briefing room, Bucky sits with his eyes glued to the wall. A go bag is placed on the table before him. He’s wearing his tactical gear like he’s two seconds from shipping out into a battlefield.

“Buck?” he calls out, feels the name slip out of his mouth as soon as his eyes land on him.

Whatever’s happened—oceans of time between them—nothing would change the foundation on which they two were built upon. Bucky—Winter Soldier, Sarg—would always just be Bucky to him. He’d never be anyone else except the punk that could swindle a nun into letting them out of mass early. He’d never be anyone else except the kid who grew up thinking hot dogs were a perfectly reasonable meal for breakfast, lunch and dinner. He’d always be the kid that never looked down at him no matter how tall he ended up getting. He’d always be the kid that treated him like an Alpha and stuck close no matter the fact that it just wasn’t done then.

No matter what, Bucky would always be his brother. The guy who stuck around when he’d lost all his family months in between each other. Bucky would always be Bucky.

Slow, like it takes him a moment to get himself out of his own head, familiar gray eyes flash over to him.

He looks different than the last time Steve had seen him. It’d been months since he’d been stateside.
Months since Steve had flown out to deal with some secret operation deep in Europe. A lead had come in. Of the last remains of hydra hiding in plain sight.

For a second, Steve tracks the differences. Bucky looked healthier now. His skin no longer held that deathly shade he’d had. His hair was combed out, pulled into a loose tie at the back of his head. He looks better but there’s a look in his eyes Steve hasn’t seen before.

One that’s got nothing to do with trouble and hurt. It’s pain, raw and desperate. A pain Steve’s sure had never sat so heavily in his gaze.

“What happened?” Steve demands in an instant.

His whole body grows tight and tense like he’s about to spring in any direction Bucky sends him in. All of his Alpha instincts screaming that he’s got to defend his friend now. To push the very world down to its knees because pain like that…pain like that shouldn’t be in a person’s eyes.

“I—” Bucky starts, his eyes falling down to the table he sits at. His face pulls into something so broken it hurts to look at.

Bucky’s got none of the scent Steve remembers. These days, he smells of nothing. The scent of pomegranates and musk stolen from him by the evils of the world. His emotions, no matter how strong, never seeped out of his skin to coat the air. Steve’s sure it’s got everything to do with what they did to him.

In that moment, Steve thinks he can smell heartache anyway. But that might just be his own emotions wafting up and out to him.

“They came.” Bucky announces, doesn’t elaborate who they are because they both know who he’s talking about. Pulling in a rattling breath, Bucky says, “I almost snuffed her out.”

Confused, Steve steps forward until he drops into the chair beside him. Only when he’s seated does he ask, “Who?”

“I almost killed my girl.” Bucky confesses, his voice breaking with the guilt he feels. The guilt eating him up.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” the word slips past his lips on an exhale, like an old reflex. Running his hand through his overgrown hair, Steve drops back into his seat and asks, “Did you?”

Clenching his jaw tight, it takes a while before Bucky can answer. In that time Steve thinks the absolute worst but hopes for the best.

“I—I had her in my sights. I…I held the gun at her and almost pulled the trigger. Woulda been a kill shot if Stark hadn’t gotten in the way.”

Nodding his head tightly, Steve keeps his peace. He can’t imagine what that must’ve done to the alpha. To be turned against the dame he had been so doll dizzy for. He can’t imagine, can’t fathom the hate he must hold against himself for it, so he stays quiet for a moment.

Wetting his lips, Steve asks, “That why you’re heading to T’challa? To make sure it doesn’t happen again?”

“I won’t…I can’t be around her if I….I can’t hurt her Steve,” Bucky states, his tone firm and unyielding. Every line of him speaking to the way he’ll burn down entire worlds to keep himself from hurting his girl.
Trying hard to smile, Steve reaches a hand out and clasps it tight onto the other man’s shoulder. An old pack bond—that couldn’t really be called a bond at all—kicks up in him. It falls back into static when it reaches its tattered end.

“Hey, ya’ can’t go into the fish tank with your girl out there waiting for you.”

Shaking his head, pulling himself up to his feet, Bucky tells him stiffly, “She…I ended it between us. I won’t put her into that kind of bind and she…I don’t want her waiting around for me if I don’t make it back out.”

“What—Bucky that’s…” Steve starts as he pulled himself up to stand too. His eyes chasing after Bucky as he picked up his bag and headed for the door, “You’ll come back. You came back before, you’ll come back again.”

“If they can’t get the sequences out of my head then…I’m going back into the ice.” Bucky tells him like there’s no way around this. As if, Bucky was willing as ever to never wake up if he couldn’t be fixed.

Shock fills him at that because he knows—he’d seen it with his own two eyes—the fear Bucky had of going under. Of being trapped inside his own sleeping body as his mind remained active. Steve knows how much Bucky fear it and to hear of his want to do it again leaves Steve speechless.

“But Steve runs on faith. And so far, it’s never led him astray. So he puts it on his oldest friend without effort:

“You’ll come back.”

At that, Bucky says nothing else. He just throws his bag over one shoulder and steps out of the room. Steve follows because he knows not what else to do. He follows Bucky into the aircraft he’d just stepped out of and sits himself behind the empty wheel. It’s only them two as they fly their way to Wakanda. The silence between them loaded and heavy.

“Your main squeeze, what was she like?” Steve asks, because he doesn’t know what else to say. He fucking sounds like an old record, at least that’s what Stark always claimed. He’d had, back when he was a kid, a nervous tick of just running at the mouth when he found himself in a tense situation.

For a long moment, Steve doesn’t think Bucky is going to answer. But then slow, like he’s trying to put all the right words together, Bucky says like he’s pulling up a memory of something too delicate to hold:

“She’s…she’s a real spitfire, told you that. Hell couldn’t keep her down, bein’ all packed full of moxie. She’s—She’s got this smile that…it lights up her eyes. Makes her look like she’s made of gold. When she laughs I…she’s a dream.”

“Sounds like a hell of a girl to leave behind,” Steve murmurs, eyes flashing over to the small and soft smile painted across the other man’s face.

For a small moment, Steve wonders if that’s how he looked like when he recalled the image of Peggy.

“Best that’s ever happened to me, meeting her. Getting to know her. She’s…she’s all heart. Even if
she doesn’t know it.” Bucky admits in a tone that implies he’s resigning himself to never seeing her again. Like he’s giving up all hope on ever holding her again.

It pulls at Steve’s heart, makes it so his broken pack-bond rips into itself fiercely.

When he opens his mouth to wash away that resignation, Bucky pulls himself up from his seat and wanders into the back. Leaving the conversation dead and ended. Biting into the inside of his cheek, Steve quietly continues to steer when he knows damn well auto-pilot can get them there just as fine.

For all that Steve wants to offer care, assurance, and sympathy, he knows Bucky won’t take it. Not right now anyway. The pain was too raw. The ache too deep. Steve knows because when he’d been fresh out of the ice, no amount of comforting words thrown at him had stuck. No amount of care sent his way by those around him ever landed. His love, his Peggy, was lost to him by time. And it hadn’t mattered what other people could tell him.

So Steve knows, nothing that he says will soothe anything.

When the aircraft lands, Steve makes his way down the ramp only to be stilled when Bucky turns to him and asks, “If I don’t…if they can’t help, tell her—“

“Hey,” Steve starts, waving off all the doubt being flung at him as he smiled sure and steady, “You’ll come back Buck. You’re too much of a goddamn fat-head not to.”

A small weary smile stretches Bucky’s lips as he shook his head and accused, “Thought that was all you?”

“I’m pretty sure your momma called me determined.” Steve offers with a soft laugh.

“Sounds like you’re splitting hairs here.” Bucky huffs as he threw his duffle bag over his shoulder.

Reaching a hand out to firmly clasp his hand onto Bucky’s shoulder, Steve shakes the man and says, “I’ll come get ya’ when it’s done.”

Steve knows it’s a promise when he says it. A promise that things were going to work. That Bucky would be himself again. That he’d come back to the girl his heart was set on. A promise that he wasn’t going into the tank again. A promise that Steve doesn’t know how he’s gonna keep but is willing to fight for.

Lips slipping into a grim frown, Bucky nods his head tightly and heads off. Steve watches until his back fades into the darkness of the night. Steve waits until long after he knows Bucky has made it inside. Steve waits and sends his faith into the air because he’s got no doubt in his mind that Bucky won’t come back.

That man was unbreakable. for all that they had done to him, Bucky was still standing, still fighting. Steve’s faith in him was unshakable. Bucky would pull through. He’d come back and he’d find that happiness he’d left behind.

*~*

For all that she’s no stranger to feeling like shit, Lela’s unprepared for the absolute hell that James leaves in his wake. Every inch of her feels broken down, run ragged and gutted open. It reminds her of when she was all knobby kneed, buck toothed, and too fucking young to defend herself against the hands that whipped at her.

There’s a pain in her chest that becomes a constant. It beat a ragged rhythm against her heart. A pain
in her chest that won’t fade no matter how the days drag on and on and fucking on.

Something like a hole sits in her heart. Open and ugly it *bleeds*. The edges of it rubbed raw and sore. It makes her feel as if someones came up to her, pulled her chest open, clawed her heart up and just walked off. Lela feels like there’s a gap in her, a missing piece, that’s just been carved into her too. Though she can’t remember what used to fit inside it or why the holes there to begin with.

Instead she listens to the pain of it all. Can’t help not to when it fucking screams in her head every time she slows down and sits still.

The pain is different now. So very fucking different it fucking laughs at her. Reminds her she’s only just what she is and not the big bad she likes to pretend she was. It pushes and twirls in her until all Lela is left with is that pain and maybe…anger.

Lela’s angry and it’s only because she’s in pain. She’s angry because she doesn’t understand, can’t begin to understand, why James has ended it with her. She’s angry because she should’ve stopped him from leaving. She should have caught him and fucking gotten on her knees and begged him to stay. She’s angry because James wanted to leave in the first place. She’s angry because she never said that stupid thing she needed to say. She’s angry because if she’d just stayed where she was, not gone down to his garage, he never would’ve pointed that gun at her.

Lela’s fucking angry because she blames herself for the way he’d left.

But even that anger is different too. It’s form is different. It’s heat is different.

It thrums in her so violently Lela wants to walk back into her old haunts and pick the biggest Alpha fucker around to throw rounds. It twists her up in the late of night that Lela thinks she might catch fire and turn to ash. It pulses, like a living heart, down and into every bond she has.

And Lela gets that the anger is masking the sadness she feels. That it’s her shitty version of coping. The same shitty way her mother had dealt with her own issues. Anger staved off the pain. That rage, the one that twists her up tight, is the only thing keeping her standing. It’s her shitty way of not dealing with it the way she knows she should. The way her pack thinks she ought to.

Each and every single one of her pack-mates keeps looking at her like they’re hurting right on with her. Each and every one of them shooting her these looks that make Lela want to crumble up and die. They keep talking to her with such softness in their voices they think she’s about to shatter. Which, Lela gets, really.

Those first days, those first few days had been a goddamn misery. Lela had just cried and cried so damn hard her eyes had fucking *hurt*. Those first days…Lela doesn’t want to think about it. She doesn’t want to think of the pain and how raw it had all been then. In those first days, she’d curled tight around everyone of them and hadn’t gotten her ass out of her apartment for a single fucking thing.

But now, three weeks past it, Lela feels like punching every single on of them until they bled.

She hasn’t. Can’t. Fucking can’t bring herself to do anything else except bare her teeth at them. Because, she knows they can feel how fucked up she is on the best of days. She’s been trying to keep it locked up tight but sometimes she slips.

Dead in the night, when she’s lying in the same bed he’d laid on, Lela slips.

Her head fills up with all the things she doesn’t want to think about.
Of gray eyes. Of soft smiles. Of pomegranate kisses. Of wine filled mouths. Of hands that traced endless patterns across her back. Of silk soft brown hair. Of a laugh that sounded like thunder in the sky. Of a love she has that won’t fucking give her a moments rest.

Her head fills up with it all and it bleeds on down the line. And it never fails, that after she slips, they all come round her way to try to make her breakfast and fill up ever second of her day with something.

Clint refuses to leave her couch. Sam keeps asking her how she’s holding up. Natasha keeps cooking bullshit assed meals. Pepper keeps finding her during lunch and taking her out. Bruce keeps getting this sad look on his face as he fumbled over nonsense. And Tony, fucking christ on a goddamn pogo stick, Tony was the worst out of them all.

He kept trying to convince Lela to leave the fucking state. To fucking runaway to some nameless place with sandy beaches. Tony kept running at the mouth with pack vacations or something stupid like that.

And Lela loves them, she really does, but she’s just not in the fucking mood these days. She’s too caught up in the pain and the anger. Everything feels, sounds, looks like fucking shit because there’s someone who’s missing.

Fucking gone.

He was gone.

She’d been stupid, hunted him down in his garage and found shit all for it. James was gone. Two Beta’s were now in his garage. Working on all the trucks James was supposed to be working on.

He was gone and how that had fucking gutted her. That he wasn’t even around. That he had just fucking left. Packed his shit and just left her behind. Like she wasn’t worth the fucking heads up for it. And god, how Lela was fucking tired of fucking crying—so very fucking tired of it—and despite that, she’d cried in a goddamn storage room at the knowledge that he’d left.

That it was real, that he wasn’t coming back. That when he’d walked out, said his apologies, he’d meant for it to stick. And it kills her, hits her hard than she’s ever been hit in her whole damn life. It brings her to her knees in the dark of a storage room. Reminders her that Lela’s been built with spare parts and had been born backwards and wrong. And because of that, because she’s been cursed since birth, she wasn’t going to get that happy ending she’d been hoping for.

James, beautiful, soft, gorgeous and kind James, he was only ever made to remind her of that. And it fucking hurts, hurts so deeply Lela feels something in her grow heavy with it. Hurts so deep Lela has to take a solid three hours to pull herself up from that floor.

It hurts and it hurts, so Lela drowns it in anger and tries to ignore the way she’s bleeding out her chest.

*~*

Growling low, Lela wrenches her cart out of the storage room and heads down the hall. She only stills when she’s out into the open air of the night. The moon is a sliver of a thing. She stares up into it feeling a little lost as she does.

These days, Lela does her level best not to look up. She ignores the moon and the stars like she ignores the ache in her chest.
It reminds her of gray eyes, that fucking moon. The glitter and gleam of the stars remind her of the way his eyes sparkled when he laughed. So she ignores it as best as she can. Though, there’s only so much Lela can do to ignore the goddamn fucking moon and stars. Especially in the dark of night.

Glaring at the crescent shaped beast above her—like it’s got any kind of blame for what Lela’s feeling—Lela growls low in her throat in frustration. Shoving all the memories of his eyes away. She tries to think of something else. Anything else.

Instead, Lela focuses on the cold night air breezing past her. The way it slipped past her long sleeve shirt she’s got on and chilled her skin. The nights, as well as the days, were getting so much colder now. Summer truly on its way out the door. Leaving her behind like someone else. Autumn slipping in like a thief in the night trying to suck the heat left on her skin. Pulling away the heat his touch had left behind.

Growling at herself, Lela glances around the empty and dark yard. There’s no one around on account of the hour. So she figures it’s a good a places as any to catch a small break.

She’s working doubles again. That’s kind of why she’s out here in the middle of the night. Everyone had given her shit for it but Lela really wasn’t listening to them. The thought of staying at her place for longer than sleep made everything in her violent.

Working…working was a nice distraction if nothing else. Wearing herself so thin that when she dropped onto her couch she slept without memories biting at her. Dreamless sleeps were fuck all appealing. Keeping her hands busy made it easier to ignore the whisper of a voice she’d thought she’d buried a long way back.

But no, all it takes is for the pain to come biting back at her and Lela remembers what her mother sounds like. All it takes is for the anger to swallow her whole again and Lela’s sinking with all the things her mother had screamed at her. All the vilence of it, all the vulgarity. All the dark promises that Lela was as good as fucking dirt. That there wasn’t a thing about her that was worth keeping around except for the thing between her legs and the thing that made her lesser.

James leaving is all it takes for Lela to just slide on into the old version of herself.

Old hunger pangs claw at her from the inside out. Splitting her apart at the seam, stitch by fucking stitch.

It’d be easy, Lela thinks. To just run right out right now, score something from someone. To snatch something ugly and burn away all the mess of emotions wearing her down. To just slide a twenty and get so high her brain bleeds out of her skull.

It’d be easy, Lela had the cash, she had the want and she sure as shit had the heart for a dance with a needle and spoon.

It’d be easy, but, Lela knows what a back slide will probably bring on.

She doesn’t want to think about the looks her entire fucking pack will level her with. The fucking devastation on Pepper’s face. Clint’s solemn sadness. Sam’s gut wrenching despair. Natasha’s disappointment. Bruce’s hurt. Tony’s fucking heart wrenching pain.

It’d be easy, Lela knows, until it comes time to pay the piper. So she doesn’t.

She keeps herself still and forces away her mothers voice until it fades the fuck away as much as it’ll go sober.
“Lela!” someone calls out to her, way too fucking bright and chipper this late at night.

Turning from where she’s leaning up against the wall, Lela spots Amber and frowns.

There’s no real reason that Lela dislikes the gamma. No real reason except that the first day they’d met Amber had jinxed Lela’s entire fucking life. Amber had turned out to be a fucking cool ass coworker.

The gamma was nice even if it sometimes looked like she was about to have a heart attack when Lela growled out angrily. But for despite her fear, Amber just kept on coming like she was sure if she stuck around some, Lela might throw her a bone or something. It was weird but Lela definitely doesn’t care enough to think really about it.

Lela kind of liked Amber if only because the girl wasn’t bonded to her in anyway. There was a security of sorts to simply stand beside someone, shoot the shit with someone, that didn’t know shit about her except that they worked together. It was simpler than trying to talk to her pack about anything these days. Amber didn’t know her and Lela sure as shit didn’t know Amber.

And it was nice. Kind of like the way Lela had friends out on the street. Familiar faces to bitch and complain that the nights take was slow. Or that a cop was hassling them again. It was nice, Lela thinks, kind of like having a friend but not really.

“Yo,” Lela answers, dull and half lifeless. She’s fucking dead ass tired. Can’t really put any real effort to sound like a person most days.

“Ay, que onda, I thought you were leaving at three,” Amber asks as soon as she stills beside Lela.

Amber, as it turned out, was hispanic too—somewhat. Her mother Mexican American and her father Dominican. So while there was a lot that Lela understood from what came out of Amber’s mouth, sometimes, Lela didn’t get the other half. It was the slang that tripped her up sometimes. The differences of surrounding culture and the stretch of cities they’d been born and raised in.

“Nah,” Lela grumbles, pulling her smoke off her ear and sparking up, “Got a double. Ain’t you supposed to be gone already?”

“Gringita didn’t feel like finishing off her shift. Owens’ has me covering it,” Amber supplies as she pulled out her clove cigarettes and leaned up next to Lela.

“Pinche puta chingada,” Lela spit out in a hiss and a breath full of smoke.

“Why you taking on doubles anyway?” Amber questions as she slid her pack back into her front pocket. She holds her face out for Lela and Lela easily strikes her zippo to light. When Amber’s smoke has caught, Lela pockets back her zippo.

“Oh, ya’ know,” Lela drawls over the butt of her smoke, “Trying to get that fucking christmas bonus.”

Laughing, Amber nods her head and grins, “Did you put your name in the raffle? I heard el meromero was gonna give away a car or some shit!”

Lela knows for a damn fact that Tony is giving away a car for the christmas raffle, but it still sounds so fucking unreal. She hadn’t put her name in because she hadn’t seen the point of winning a car from her own Pack-Mate. She also doesn’t want the asshole to rig it some how and force her up in front of a crowd of people to collect it either. So she’s steering clear of it all.
Plus, Lela’s never been a real fan of the holiday. Only ever brought out the worst memories for her.

“Nah, what the fuck for wey? No point in owning a car in New York,” Lela huffs out, her face twisting up.

“I don’t know, be pretty cool to win a car, no? Could probably sell it or something.” Amber idly replies. Her face pulled into a smile as she ashed her smoke. Amber was all kinds of pretty when she smiled, rare as that was. Her left cheek dimpled prettily.

Shrugging at the logic of that, Lela flicks her dead butt away and shoves her empty hands into her pockets.

“What building you got?” Amber questions into the silence. Like she’s desperately pulling straws out to keep talking to Lela.

“Gyms, up in building B,” Lela answers simply while idly pointing her thumb in the building’s direction. “You?”

“Building L, they’re repainting or some shit,” Amber says simply, “Fire fucked up a lot of shit.”

Fire, that’s what Pepper had put out for the commotion of that day. A fucking fire and not a bunch of assholes with guns that had stormed the place. A fire that had caught James up into it’s hands for whatever fucking reason. A nonexistent fire that had burned Lela up down to her bones.

Shaking her head to rid herself of the thoughts, Lela grabs hold of her cart and throws over her shoulder a ‘later’ she doesn’t feel. Listlessly, she rolls over to her assigned sector. When she enters she finds the fucking place a totaled goddamn mess.

Those punching bags that had hung up were all torn to shit. Their sandy insides littering the floor in every which way. Tatters hang on chains like they’ve exploded from the inside out. There’s hardly a spot on the fucking floor that is visible. For a brief second, Lela contemplates turning the fuck around and not dealing with it at all.

But, she’s fucking working. This was her fucking job. One she’d pulled up onto herself without anyone asking her to.

Gritting her teeth, Lela pulls up close and sets to work with her broom. Distantly wondering what kind of asshole just did this kind of bullshit and walked away like it wasn’t their problem to deal with anymore.

*~*

There are days, now, that Lela feels raw and over exposed. Like a nerve that’s been cut open and scrubbed down with a brillo pad. There are days, now, that she feels entirely too small. Like maybe she’s guzzled down that mushroom from Pepper’s cartoon movie about talking cats and blonde little girls in worlds too fucking strange. Either way, Lela feels too small for the shape she’s known her body to be these past months.

The feeling grows in her belly like stones been chucked in through the hole in her chest. It grows more now with Clint looking at her the way he is.

At this point, Lela is genuinely starting to think taking some kind of religion up. Anything to get the hex off her fucking head. Because man, when the shit came it really fucking poured.

“We won’t go, not if you don’t want us to,” he tells her like he doesn’t have on this weird black suit
that could only be military issued.

Both Clint and Natasha were heading out. A mission they’d said. Something about some kind of attack in france or wherever the fuck. Some kind of disaster that needed her super spy babes and all the mighty feats to somehow fix.

There’s not a doubt in her mind, not a single one, that if Lela opens her mouth and says something—fucking issues any kind of complaint—neither one of them will leave. They’ll slip right into sweat pants and crawl back into her bed where’d they gone to sleep the night before. Lela knows all she’s gotta do is open her mouth.

But she won’t.

Can’t.

Both of the wonder dicks were who they were. They did what they did. And what they did was save the fucking world from itself. They were heroes and what kind of person was Lela if she fucking asked them not to go and save the lives of people she’ll never meet.

No more than in that fucking moment then does she feel like the biggest ugliest bitch on this planet. This entire fucking time, Lela’s been pushing all of them away from herself. She’s been snapping her teeth, biting into them, glaring at them—gripping tight into their bonds and yanking when all they’ve wanted to do was make sure she was okay.

Even now, seconds from walking out the front door, they were only worried about how she was going to hold with them gone.

Lela hates herself.

Hates herself so can’t stomach the sight of worry in Clint’s eyes or the concern pulling Natasha’s lips down into a frown.

Wetting her lips, Lela shrugs her shoulders and lies, “Hey man, you got a job to do. I told you I’ll be fine.”

Cutting her jade colored eyes to her, Natasha rans her fingers through the snarl of tangles Lela’s got. Her hair, most days, is a fucking mess. A goddamn tangle of bullshit knots. Lela doesn’t really care though. She’s been thinking of hacking it off anyway. Anything just to get the ghost of James’ fucking feeling off it.

She hasn’t done it. Some very stupid part of her hoping that James will come back and undo the tangle of her hair and the snarls in her heart.

“Sam will be here. Pepper and Bruce too.” Natasha states easily, her voice a cool balm to the ache in her, “Tony probably won’t move off your couch anytime soon.”

“Very true,” Tony gravely intones as he nods his head. He’s snuggled up on her couch again with all the blankets he’d brought up from his level mixing with her own. Bruce was probably going to tear him a new asshole, but hey, at least the alpha was comfortable.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” Lela tells the gamma currently trying to break her ribs in the death lock hold he’s snatched her up in.

“It’s too soon Nat, why can’t we outsource it?” Clint cries, his chest rumbling in whines and half purrs.
“That’s a no go bird-brains,” Tony calls over as he tapped at his cell phone, “This is black lettered project. Needs a light touch.”

“Ellian owes me a favor,” Clint tries, gripping her tight as he sunk his nose into her hair, “He can handle it.”

“Clint,” Lela pushes at him until she can breathe a little, “I’ll be fine!”

“No, it’s too soon,” Clint shakes his head.

Lela’s not sure what Clint means by that. If it’s too soon to leave her since they met or too soon since Lela’s gone and gotten her heart broken. Either way, it makes Lela feel all kinds of fucked over it. That Clint doesn’t want to leave because he’s worried what it might do to her. That’s he’s worried for her and instead of the shit he’s going to have to deal with out there in the real world.

“She’ll be fine,” Natasha breathes out on a sigh. Her banded bond sinking something heavy like strength through Lela.

Slowly, so slow Lela thinks he might think twice about it, Clint pulls her away from himself. His honey green eyes peers down at her like he’s trying to burn the image of her face into his mind. Like he doesn’t want to miss a single thing about her.

Smiling slow and careful, trying to keep every bit of emotions she’s got whirling around herself locked up tight, Lela tells him, “Just get back before your movie night. Tony’ll probably snatch it up.”

Narrowing his eyes, Clint grumbles, “I’ll be back and we’re rewatching She’s the Man.”

“Oh god,” Lela groans, hating that despite herself she wants to laugh.

Fingers slipping back into her hair, Natasha says, “Two weeks, we’ll be back. Try to stay out of trouble.”

Turning to her, Lela pulls a face and glares at the beta, “What the fuck kind of trouble would I get into?”

“I’ll be watching her like a hawk!” Tony calls out.

“That’s not as reassuring as you think it might be,” Sam’s voice floats up from the kitchen. He’s cooking up pork ribs even though Lela had told him she wasn’t hungry.

Rolling her eyes, pushing aside all the janked up way she’s been feeling, she grips Clint’s face and kisses him firmly on his cheek. And then Lela does the same to Natasha and demands of them both, “Two weeks assholes, you got two weeks to come back or I’m letting Tony redo the movie night chart.”

Laughing, Clint nods his head as Natasha rubbed her cheek onto the crown of her head. Walking to the lift, Clint throws out, “I’ll text you when we touch down!”

It’s not goodbye, nothing like when James had left, but it makes everything in Lela ache just the same. She’s got no doubt in her mind that they’re not coming back—no matter the danger they might face—because the devil couldn’t cut Natasha down and Clint just wasn’t the type to go out that way.

Putting on a brave face, she waves and hopes two weeks fucking flies past her. Because her wonder-dicks were leaving her for the first time and Lela isn’t as fucking prepared for it as she’d hoped she’d
be when the time came.

*~*  

Anger, anger’s easy. It comes as easy as breathing. Fills her up until that’s all she’s feeling.

Walking into the gym again—fucking training grounds, Tony had called them—she finds it in the same piss poor state she’d found it in earlier that week. It’s the fourth fucking time she’s found it like this. The fourth time Lela’s had to fight to get grains of sand into her scoop and into trash bags. It’s the fourth fucking time some nameless asshole has left her a mess like she was some kind of slave to their whims.

Gritting her teeth tight, Lela curls her hands into fists. Nails digging into the meat of her palm, Lela demands of the voice overhead, “J?”

‘Yes ma’am?’

“You know which asshole did this fucking mess?”

‘Of course ma’am.’

“You know where he’s at?” Lela asks as she pulled her broom out of it’s assigned place on her cart.

It turns out, there’s very little Jarvis won’t do for her. Lela’s not sure if that’s because of Tony or if that’s all Jarvis. Either way, Lela’s pretty sure she can knock down a building and Jarvis wouldn’t stop her one bit.

‘He’s currently in the main building, 36th floor in conference room 15D.’

Broom in hand, Lela hunts down the faceless fuck.

*~*

When she gets to where she needs to be, Lela doesn’t even bother to fucking question her actions. She’s lit up. Burning up with all the anger that’s been racing through her these days. When she’s standing before the door, Lela kicks it open and watches it swing on it’s hinges.

Walking into the room, Lela clocks at least six different figures. Two of which she knows in that they’re Tony and Pepper. The other four not so much. For a wild fucking moment, Lela rethinks what she’s about to do here. For all she knows it could be some fancy important meeting she’s just crashed. But then she remembers the mess waiting for her if she turns around now. And Lela finds her worry burn away with it all.

“Kid?” Tony calls out as he rose from his seat and Pepper jolted with a surprised, “Lela?”

“Which one is he J?” Lela calls out, ignoring her pack mates.

‘That would be Captain Rogers, ma’am.’

Eyes roaming over the four she doesn’t know, Lela bites out, “Which one of you assholes is Captain fucking Rogers?”

Looking all kinds of confused, worried and ready to defend himself, the blonde one slowly takes a step forward. He’s a tall fucker, Lela notes. Standing at six foot something. He’s got dark golden hair that’s been combed out and a face to fucking ruin peoples goddamn dreams. And damn if he isn’t built with a body that’s good for nothing else but to salivate over.
“Ma’am?” he calls out, his pretty as fucking sin face twists up as he squared his shoulders.

Everything from the way she squares his shoulders, plants his feet and steadies his gaze screams alpha. Every line of him telling her what he is. And it only serves to piss her off some more. Because of fucking course it had to be an alpha who’d left her that shitty mess. Of course it’s be an alpha that Lela had to come hunting down.

Glaring at him, Lela marches her ass over to him and throws at him her fucking broom.

The absolutely gorgeous man catches it with ease. His dark blue eyes weary as his blonde brows pinched tight on his face.

“You know what the fuck that is Rogers?” Lela spits out his name like it’s the worst fucking thing she’s ever held in her mouth.

“Uh…a broom…ma’am?” Rogers tells her, glancing to Tony like he’s not sure what the hell is happening.

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela’s face splits into a sharp toothed stretch of a thing that can’t legally be called a smile. Growling from the pit of her belly, Lela puts every ounce of her frustration at life in general into it. She growls and seethes at the man, “You know what a brooms for right? It’s to fucking clean, yeah? They got one like that in just about every storage room in the gyms. It’s simple as all fuck to use one. Just gotta move it side to side. Fucking kid could do it.”

Blue eyes wide, pink lips parted on words that don’t leave his lips, Rogers just stares at her like he’s unsure what the hell is happening.

And seeing as to how she’s angry—so fucking angry—Lela just keeps on going. She’s snarling as she talks, her fangs lengthening in her mouth as she spit her rage for everyone to hear.

“I swear to every fucking god out there, if I have to clean up after you one more goddamn time, I’m going to break your stupid fucking face,” and at that, Lela gets close enough to jam her fingers into his too firm chest, “You hear me, Rogers?”

It’s all kinds of an agressive move on Lela’s part. A move she knows her hindbrain doesn’t agree with. A move that’s born from all the shit she’s had to live with. But damn if she doesn’t feel like fucking someone up and herself for good measure.

This close, Lela can scent him. Though, with such a heavy scent, she would’ve gotten it from a ways back. He smells like…like sun baked skin. Like fresh rain on summer grounds. Like Juniper and fucking a worn book.

It makes the absolute bitch in her curl up. Her second nature breathing it down deep like she’s greedy for it.

Snarling, more to herself than anyone else, Lela exhales a growl built for nothing else except violence.

“Uh…” Rogers fumbles, as he stared wide eyed down at her. His mouth opening and closing as he tried to find something to appease her. In the end, he settles with a simple, “Yes—Yes ma’am.”

Sneering up at him, Lela walks backwards until she’s clear enough away from him and stomps out of the room. As she heads into the hallway, Lela can make out the mad cackles of Tony chasing after her.
It’s only when she’s in the elevator does Lela mildly think she might have overreacted just a tiny bit. Rogers, whoever the fuck he was, hadn’t deserved that. Not really. As she rides the elevator down, Lela thinks she can still smell the fucking alpha. The scent sticking in her mind and making her forget of the hole she has in her chest if only for a moment.

Chapter End Notes

CGKrows is an absolute godsend!!!! Words can not express how thankful I am for their help in writing Steve and Bucky's interaction!!!!

Okay, so STEVE IS HERE!!!!!

And yeah, Lela probably could've met him on better circumstances. But I think we're all well past expecting Lela to acting like a decent person. Let's be real. She's a goddamn raging bitch.

Anyway. I hope you guys liked this update!!! I'm real sorry for the way she's deep into her old rage filled ways. But she's heartbroken and she's not dealing with it because she's a mess of human emotions. And I promise shit between her and Cap is going to level out!!!!

Thoughts???????
Once bitten, Twice shy

Chapter Summary

But it’s gray here and now. The leaves on the tree’s changing into burning orange and reds. It’s beautiful, she thinks, now that she can witness them with a sober mind. Seasons changing…there was some kind of beauty watching it in motion. A kind of beauty Lela had never stopped to appreciate before.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If she had to choose, Lela thinks her favorite color is gray. There was something about that shade that made every other color just…pop. It’s why, she thinks—fucking knows—she’d fallen so hard for James’ eyes.

The sky overhead is a deep gray color. The kind that only started coming in when winter was well on it’s way. The sky back home, where Lela had grown into the budding bullshit she was now, it never got to be this color. Winter never graced them. It was summer all year round. Boiling heat that never cooled no matter how far deep they were into the last legs of the year.

But it’s gray here and now. The leaves on the tree’s changing into burning orange and reds. It’s beautiful, she thinks, now that she can witness them with a sober mind. Seasons changing…there was some kind of beauty watching it in motion. A kind of beauty Lela had never stopped to appreciate before.

Now, with the days dragging on endlessly before her, she’s got all the time to stop and look. To let her eyes run over the changes in the places that surround her. She’s got time now…alone as she finds herself on weekend nights.

Being alone, it never used to bother her before. In fact, Lela had often sought it out. Nowadays, not so much. Of course, with Chuckles and Red gone—two weeks bleeding into more and more days; Tony was steadily trying to keep her close like he couldn’t function if she wasn’t around. To keep from sinking her fangs into anyone, Lela slips out before anyone can catch her fully. A feat that had been impossible with two super spies around. A feat only accomplishable because Sam was too trusting and Bruce and Pepper never pushed her on anything.
Softies, both of them.

Kicking her feet out, Lela leans back into the bench she’s laid up on. Officially, Lela’s got no real reason to still be here at work. Her shift ended some ways back. But the sky had caught her up in all it’s gloomy beauty. And so Lela had sat her ass down and soaked it up.

Ignoring, with everything in her the face she hoped to spot upon the people that passed her by.

Lela hates that she’s still a fucking mess two months after the fact. She hates that she keeps hoping to wake up to find good morning texts. She hates that how much she needs all this to be a bad fucking dream. Lela hates how much she wants to forget all of him and yet is so terrified of losing the shape of his smiling lips.

Lela hates all of it.

“Oye perra!” Amber’s voice calls out to her.

Turning her head, Lela catches sight of the dark skinned beauty. Frowning, Lela tilts her head back and wishes she’d just gone home. Amber, as much as Lela was finding she liked the other girl, the gamma was a bitch of a thing to shake off. She was always way too fucking happy to find Lela anywhere.

Regardless, Lela grumbles out, “Que onda, puta?”

Tossing her head back, laughing with her whole body, Amber settles her twinkling pale brown eyes on Lela and grins, “Ain’t you got a fucking place to go back to? Why you always just hanging around here?”

“I ain’t got shit to do at home,” Lela states simply.

It’s a damn lie. Lela knows she’s got a mountain of clothes she’s got to wash. But the thought of heading back, being pummeled by Sam and all his anxious need to comfort Lela, makes her sink further into her seat. Bruce was spending way too much time at her kitchen baking pastries left and right. Like he was sure if he stuffed her full of sugar Lela might just shake off heart ache like it was rain water. Pepper, fucking shit, Pepper was a firm believer of pampering ones self after something like this. And Lela didn’t really have the patience to sit through another mud mask again.

Sinking into the spot next to her, pulling out her pack and offering it out to Lela, Amber asks, “You got plans tomorrow?”

Narrowing her eyes at the girls face, Lela remains quiet. She can’t remember the last time she went out with someone—pack excluded—to just…chill. It’d happened a lot back when she was a kid. Rolling as heavily as she was with all the worst kinds of people. Less so when she got herself hooked up with a certain dickies piece of shit.
Lela wonders why Amber is even asking. As much as they trade jokes in the halls—talking shit about someone or the other—they weren’t...they weren’t close like that.

So with that in mind, Lela demands, “Why?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Amber kicks her legs out and tells her simply, “Just ‘cus. You look...you look like you need a drink...a little.”

Pursing her lips, Lela ashes her smoke and glances up into the gray sky hanging over her head. Lela stares at it as she blows a long line of smoke out. She tries to come up with all the reasons she shouldn’t go and ends up with none. Eyes full of gray that hurts too damn much to look at directly, Lela shrugs her shoulders and mumbles:

“I guess.”

Jolting like Lela’s stuck her with something sharp, Amber rummages through her pockets until she unearths a phone with a crack running down the middle. With quick motions, Amber unlocks her phone and asks, “What’s your number? I’ll—I’ll hit you up with the address!”

Slowly, with her smoke pinched between her lips, Lela mumbles, “Just give me yours wey, I’m shit at remembering fucking numbers.”

And like that, numbers are exchanged. Before Lela can even think about backing out, Amber pulls herself and hauls off. She sends her a mega watt smile as she goes with her dark hair swaying in the cold wind.

Unable to hold back the scoff and eye roll the sight forces out of her, Lela lazily waves her hand. Smoking her smoke down to the filter, Lela thinks this might not be a good idea all around. But at this point, she really doesn’t fucking care.

She’s at this point now where she thinks if a car came round and ran her down, Lela wouldn’t even mind so much.

It’s got everything to do with the hole still thrumming in her chest and the missing smiles her dreams are made of.

Flicking her dead butt away, Lela hauls herself up to her pounding feet and heads back to her place. Readyng herself for whatever kind of bullshit awaited her there.

*~*

Licking her lips free of sugar Lela watches as Sam stirs whatever the fuck he’s cooking. Lela’s got a plate full of sugar cookies fresh out of Bruce’s oven holding her over for the actual meal.

“You know,” Lela mumbles over a mouthful of absolute heaven, “I can cook for myself.”

“I don’t know about that babe,” Sam throws over his shoulder without once looking at her, “You’ve been skipping meals since Clint and Nat left.”

Frowning, Lela opens her mouth to argue when suddenly Pepper is breezing her by. The blonde woman’s hand running down the length of Lela’s back easily as she goes.

“Don’t even try to argue miss ma’am, you haven’t touched a single bin of lunches Bruce put in your fridge,” Pepper accused lightly as she settled a bowl of fresh salad in front of Lela.
Feeling guilty as all shit Lela stares at the cookie in her hand. She knows for a fact that she’d been fucking spurning Bruce’s carefully constructed meals. The food sitting in pretty tuppawear going ignored because Lela was a petty little bitch at the best of times. Lela couldn’t stand how everyone was just trying to manage every inch of her life like it’d stave off the hurt in her heart.

But she knows they’re only doing what they’re doing because they care. Because they know how janked up she is most days and they’re trying to help her in the only way they can.

Huffing out a breath, Lela turns in her seat and watches as Bruce carefully arranges the kitchen table for the meal Sam’s cooking up. Bruce is trying, and failing, to keep Tony from making a mess of everything.

Pursing her lips up, Lela grumbles, “Whatever.”

Laughing low, Sam shakes his head and tells her, “If I didn’t know for a fact that you aren’t actually related to Tony, I’d swear you were his actual kid.”

The words, so simply uttered, make something strange twirl in her hindbrain. Heat explodes on her face as she snapped out an irritated growl. Because Lela cares for Tony and she can still remember the growling purrs that left his lips when Lela had been at her lowest. Lela can still remember what it felt like to be cradled against him as he kept her from shattering into a million pieces. Lela can still remember how safe, sure and fucking steady it had felt to be laid up in her couch with that alpha who refused to budge even for a moment.

It’d felt like home. Like safety and love. Knowing—with everything in her—that Tony would keep the world and all the dark that was in it away from her in that moment. It’d felt like nothing Lela had ever known.

Her hindbrain stilled ached for the safety of Tony’s arms.

Pushing herself off the seat she on she goes to pushes the beta away from the stove, “Shut up.”

Laughing louder, Sam allows himself to be man handled as he tossed her way, “Not really helping your case there.”

At that, even Pepper joins in to laugh. Each and everyone of their bonds flaring bright and warm.

Eventually it all settles some. Lela busies herself with stirring Sam’s red sauce as Pepper kept Bruce from beating Tony’s head in with a wooden salad fork. Only when she’s leaning up against the line of Sam’s body does Sam say:

“I was thinking about making some salmon tomorrow. Nat sent me this recipe this morning.”

And of course, Lela thinks, that even though there’s an actual fucking ocean between them—Natasha was still policing Lela’s life. It’d be impressive if it wasn’t so damn annoying.

Lela’s not sure what kind of covert top secret missions Clint and Natasha actually did, but, she’s pretty sure texting in the middle of them was some kind of dangerous. Either way, Clint hadn’t stopped blowing up Lela’s phone with random pictures of weird shit. Just ten minutes ago, he’d sent a picture of a pigeon wearing an ice cream cone as a hat that he’d come across. Natasha only ever texted her to harass her about taking her vitamins and drinking water.

Sometimes, it felt like they weren’t really gone.

But Sam’s easy words reminds Lela of the thing she’d agreed to earlier that day. Frowning, Lela
glances to the side and notices no one’s paying much attention to her at all. Figuring it’s the closest she’s gonna get to privacy in her own home, Lela tells him:

“I got… plans tomorrow.”

“What? Really?” Sam asks. His dark brown eyes settling themselves onto the side of her face. Something like worry rushes through their bond before it settles down low.

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela easily says, “Yeah, got invited to some drinks or something.”

Sam wears suspicion, worry and something else on his face as he looked her over. Lela’s got no doubt in her mind that Sam’s trying to work out all the whys, whos, whats, and wheres. If Lela was ever stupid enough to get caught up into something as fucking idiotic as love, she’s got no doubt, Sam would steer her clear of it all. It’s in his eyes, the way they look like they’re not so eager for her to walk out the door every morning. It’s in his touch like he’s ready to pull bubble wrap her and place her on a shelf for safe keeping.

Lela’s not entirely sure if she’s more warmed by that or pissed right the fuck off. She’s a big girl, she thinks, has enough scars on her to show she isn’t some kind of doll to put up and away. And it’s not like she was about to repeat her mistakes again.

James—he’d been a one off. Shit like that didn’t happen twice in a life time. Lela knows that. James was…he’d been a blessing. One she’d squandered by being too fucking afraid of just opening her mouth and admitting what she’d felt for him since their twelfth date. James—he’s been a one in a million chance.

Carefully slow, like he’s readying himself to wrap Lela up and throw her over his shoulder, Sam asks, “Like a friend or? Like a…dude?”

Narrowing her eyes at him, Lela simply bites out as calmly as she can manage, “It’s a chick from work. She wants to kick it or, you know, whatever.”

“Oh, okay,” Sam nods his head like he’s trying to process the rest of his words before saying them. He settles with a simple, “A friend of yours, then?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela mumbles down into the red sauce she’s stirring, “Not really. She’s that new hire I was training. Kinda been following me around lately. Wants to grab a drink or something from her cousins bar.”

“You don’t drink though,” Sam immediately argues like he’s trying to sound a good enough reason for Lela to throw this idea out the window.

“I’m going, stop trying to talk me out of it,” Lela snaps out, her eyes catching on his. For whatever reason, Lela isn’t about to back out now. She’s made the fucking plans already. Agreed to Ambers happy smile and she wasn’t about to be a bitch about it.

Heaving a tired breath, Sam nods his head and mumbles low, “Alright, Nat’s probably not gonna like this. Clint’s probably gonna wanna call you as soon as he finds out.”

No truer words had ever been said. The thought of Natasha calling her to talk her out of it makes Lela grip her spoon tighter.

Mirroring his breath, Lela tries, “Don’t tell’em then.”

Laughing, Sam shakes his head and bumps his shoulder with hers, “No can do girl. You know what
your beta’s like. She’ll tear my head clean off if I don’t give her the 411.”

Rolling her eyes, trying not to laugh, Lela knocks back into his shoulder and accuses, “Chismosa.”

*~*

“Why can’t I go?” Tony whines. Fucking full out whines. Like a child being denied the last piece of fucking candy.

“Because I said so,” Lela growls as she tries out walk around the alpha currently trying to piss her off.

“But I’m, like, the life of the party!” Tony informs her sternly. His eyes growing all big and doe shaped. And maybe that had worked once upon a time on her, but, no more.

Lela was quickly finding an immunity to them.

“Okay, first off, I highly doubt that and second—how the fuck do you even know what I’m doing tonight?” Lela demands, as she crossed her arms over her chest and widened her stance.

Narrowing his eyes down at her, Tony stands his ground in the hallway he’d ambushed her in. He’s got on a fine pressed navy blue suit with a shiny black tie. He looks, Lela thinks, every bit the handsome playboy billionaire the world worshipped on a daily basis. Turning his nose up at her, he casually deflects with a simple:

“I have my ways.”

Even if Lela didn’t have that bond with him, the boa on her spine, she’d know it to be bullshit. But seeing as to how Lela does have a bond with him she knows it for sure. His boa coils up into itself with static hissing all over her back.

Glaring up at him, slipping a growl from between her lips, Lela refuses to move on this. For a split second Tony mirrors her inch by damn inch. Like he’s meeting her head on for a challenge he’d set out to put on her. It’d be fucking interesting as all hell if not for the way Lela’s currently pissed off. When she goes to take a step forward Tony’s facade crumbles.

Easily, Tony throws out, “Sammy told me!”

Rolling her eyes, Lela spits out, “Fucking no good snitch.”

in all honesty, she’s not entirely surprised by the fucking infinitesimal betrayal. Sam was Clint’s goddamn bird brother. In between those two, Lela’s constantly finding herself sold the fuck out.

“Why can’t I come kid?” Tony immediately cries, his shoulders dropping as he resorted to groveling, “I can take you and your little friend out in my new audi! It’ll be fun!”

“Dude,” Lela starts off, pinching the bridge of her nose tight, “I…I honestly don’t even know where to start with you.”

She’s not even surprised that Tony was trying to bully his way onto Lela’s night out the way he was. It was just so…him. But it’s still a hell of a thing to deal with. Lela’s not entirely sure how Bruce and Pepper haven’t been driven fucking insane by him.

“That sounds like you’re changing your mind?” Tony happily chirps, his whole tone doing a 180.

Shaking her head and growling from deep in her gut, Lela smacks her hand out to knock hard
against the man’s chest. Relishing in the pain filled yelp he does, Lela pushes past him and threatens as she goes, “I swear to god, if you keep this shit up I’m calling Bruce to come get you.”

Lela dutifully ignores the whines that follow her as she goes. As she exits the hall and enters the elevator, Lela calls up to Jarvis.

“Hey J, you know where Sam’s at?”

Lela knows for a damn fact Sam’s here, on Stark grounds. The flare of her bond had told her. As had Pepper via text.

“Yes ma’am. He’s currently in building B. Training room 34L.’

Rolling her lips between her teeth, Lela nods tight and pushes a button to get her down to ground levels.

“Thanks J.”

“You’re very welcome Miss Lela.’

*~*~

When Lela walks into training room 34L, she half expects to find a shit ton of people crammed inside. Or at least, for some kind of weapon to be firing off. For all that Lela’s been charged with cleaning up after the people that came and went from here, she’s never seen anyone actually using it. When she opens the door Lela’s meet with a small beat of silence.

Eyes roaming around, she finds it in the same condition she’d left it the night before. Not a single fucking bag is busted or littering the ground. That small fact bringing her some small bit of relief. Cleaning up sand was the worst possible fucking thing Lela’s done in her whole long life, which was really saying something, all things considered.

She’s just about to call up to Jarvis if Sam’s moved but then he hears voices somewhere in the back.

Following the familiar rumbling laugh she knows belongs to her beta, Lela goes. She finds him in some kind of boxing ring. His dark toned body slick with sweat as he bobbed and weaved effortlessly. His cherry red gloved hands flashing out to land into the body that he fought with. And as pretty as Sam looks—narrow eyed, face pulled into determination and body coiling up with strength—Lela was here to exact her pound of flesh.

Without preamble, she calls out, “Hey asshole!”

Freezing mid swing, Sam whirls around and looks over at her. Lela can clock the exact moment in which realization hits Sam. Like Lela’s thrown him a hook he hadn’t been ready for. His face twists up as his arms fell to hang at his sides.

Lips pulled tight into a line, Lela motions with two fingers for the dick to come on down. Her eyes glaring murder as he came.

“Hey Lela, what’re you—what’s up?” Sam huffs out winded as he slipped between the black ropes of the ring.

Without an ounce of hesitation or even a smidge of guilt Lela reaches up and grips tight onto his left ear. Twisting it roughly, Lela yanks him down and growls out close to his face, “You fucking sold me out Sammy-baby. To fucking Tony of all people!”
“Ah! Sorry!” Sam calls out as he tilted his head to keep Lela from yanking his ear right off his damn head. He doesn’t even bother to fucking deny what he’s done.

Releasing his ear, Lela pushes him back and bites out, “He’s been trying to convince me to let him tag along for two fucking hours…straight! He’s being a pain in my ass Sammy.”

Sheepishly pulling a face Sam yanks off his gloves and tells her like an excuse, “It sort of just slipped.”

“Bullshit,” Lela hissed up at him. She tugs harder on his ear for that flat out lie.

There’s no doubt Sam had gathered up the pack and let them know of her plans. He was a goddamn no good snitch.

“Oh! I might’ve told him because I was worried. But it’s not like it’s some big secret! He just wanted to know what we were doing for the night!” Sam defends himself.

Rolling her eyes, Lela pushes the sweat slicked man before her. She thinks about yanking his ear again but her anger is slowly washing away. She’s pretty much given up all kinds of hope that her pack won’t be intrusive assholes about everything. So instead she huffs out a breath and throws at him one last time, “Asshole.”

“You love me though,” Sam laughs out with a wide grin.

Pulling a face, Lela bravely lies, “Yeah, but like, very little. You’re such a fucking…chismoso!”

Grinning wide and beautiful with his perfect gapped teeth, Sam hauls her into a hug. Lela lets herself if only for a moment before she remembers how fucking sweaty he is. Punching at him, Lela ducks out of his hold and spits irritated growls.

Laughing, Sam reaches a hand out to ruffle her hair and mumbles, “You know Tony’s just worried about you right. He thinks he’s gotta baby proof all the sharp edges of the world.”

Ignoring the flare of fucking emotion that swells in her chest, Lela rolls her eyes and shoves her hands into her pockets, “What the fuck kind of good’ll that do?”

Opening his mouth like he’s got sound reason in his mouth Sam stops short. The clear sound of someone dropping down from the ring draws both of their attentions.

For the first time since she’d spotted Sam, Lela glances over to the only other person in the training room. What she finds is a half familiar face.

Gold, that’s the first thing Lela spots. Darkened golden hair. Golden sun baked skin. Oro.

It’s that alpha from before. The one that had been making Lela’s shifts pure fucking hell. The one with the pretty as fucking sin face. The one that was built like a mountain and just as tall. The one with dark blue eyes and pretty pink lips. The alpha who smelled like sun baked skin, fresh rain, juniper, and musk.

The one that had twirled up Lela’s hindbrain for the solid five minute interaction they’d had. There he was, Captain fucking Rogers. Bathed in a soft sheen of sweat that did nothing else but accentuate every hard muscled line he had. The stupidly hot bastard wasn’t wearing a shirt. He only had these baggy gym shorts that did not a single thing except outline the thickness of his fucking legs. And damn if you couldn’t bounce a quarter off that ass.
As smoldering hot as he was, Lela can’t help the utter distaste she houses for the man. Because, seriously, he was stupid hot. No one needed to look like that. It was fucking excessive.

Plus, Lela’s done with the whole pretty boy shit. She’d gotten her ass handed to her by another kind of dark beauty and wasn’t up for doing it again.

Looking all kinds of excited, Sam pulls Lela close, winds his arm over her shoulders and calls out into the open, “Hey Cap! Want you to meet someone!”

Having little choice but to be dragged, Lela demands of Sam, “You know this asshole?”

Confused, Sam stills in his steps and glances down at her before questioningly answering her, “Yeah, do you?”

“I—uh, she chewed me out the other day,” Rogers carefully puts out there as his lips broke out into a wobbling smile. His dark blue eyes flashing away from Sam’s face and down to her.

And Lela’s not entirely sure why, but the simple glance makes something in her burn. Like she’s gotten too close to a flame; heat swells up in her chest like humidity. It makes her grind her teeth together.

“What? Why?” Sam asks, pulling Lela closer to him like he’s about to defend Lela against something she did.

“He deserved it,” Lela huffed out as she pushed Sam away and narrowed her gaze onto the alpha, “Place looks a lot better. You been putting my broom to use?”

Nodding his head, Rogers levels out his shoulders like he’s bracing for a fight, “Yes ma’am.”

Grinning wide and sharp toothed, Lela takes a step forward, a need to push overwhelming her, she throws out, “Good. Keep it that way, Rogers.”

Setting his jaw, Rogers nods only once. He’s got this weird look in his eyes that makes her stomach grow tight and ugly. There’s a fluttering in her chest she’s half familiar with when he keeps his eyes trained on hers. That feeling only grows because Lela can smell him. The way his scent is just rolling off him in waves. The way it hits her feels like a goddamn slap to the face. It makes her hindbrain spill all stupid and brainless.

Rogers has this weird look on his face, like he’s willing as all shit to take on every bit of Lela’s rage. Like he’s half welcoming it. A half starved look in his ocean blue eyes makes everything in Lela want to pull herself up to her fullest height.

Instincts of the past making it so Lela meets the alpha with every bit of strength she has. Keeping her neck straight, Lela wills away every stupid thing her hindbrain is screaming for.

He looks at her…he looks at her like she’s some kind of wild fire scorching the land. Like he’s entranced but very aware of the fact that she can hurt him. He looks at her and just…he straightens up his shoulders and refuses to be cowed.

Something dark—new and old—twists in her. It makes her want to push, to kick and growl and show the very worst side of herself. To show him how hot she burned. Her fangs lengthen in her head without her consent as she bared her teeth in a flash of vicious rebellion. A growl slips out between her mouth, an ugly rabid thing no better than a wild beasts. It spills into the open air and pulls at her face as she widened her feet and dared the man to take a step closer to her.
But, however ugly Lela can make herself look, Rogers just keeps on looking at her like he’s watching some terrible and great thing in motion. He keeps looking at her like…like…like he’s caught under some kind of stupid spell.

Hunger—so vicious and raw—grows until it forms fangs and claws. In that moment, Lela’s not sure what she wants to do more. Hit him—bust her knuckles across his pretty mouth—or fucking bite them bloody between her sharp teeth. The force of that hunger almost knocks her back. But Lela plants her feet and refuses to budge an inch.

Sneering, Lela twitches her lips and spits out, “Fucking alpha’s.”

Refusing to be the one to break the stare, Lela walks backwards until she’s far enough to not show her back in a sign of weakness or submission. When she’s walking over to the door she’d entered, Lela throws over her shoulder like an after thought:

“Well, shit ain’t over Sammy.”

She’s out back in her assigned sector in building M when that knot in her belly finally undoes. Lela does her level best to ignore the lust that had rushed beneath the hate she’d felt for that man.

A small part of her, deep down and still sore, twists tight in something that might be guilt.

Lusting after someone that wasn’t James…it felt…it felt like *betrayal*.

*~*

Lela can’t really get her head around it, but, she finds herself in a decent enough mood. Which is surprising because she hadn’t started the night off like that. She’d been as irritable as usual when she’d gone out of her place and ditched Tony to deal with Bruce and Pepper’s disapproving glares.

Plus, when it came down to it, Lela wasn’t in any kind of mood to be having any kind of fun. Recently dumped as she is. The hole in her chest throbbing hard enough to knock the rhythm of her heart off. Lela’s just not in the mood for drinks and a few laughs. Not at all.

But low and behold, here she was—nursing a beer in a skeevy little dive bar with Amber making her laugh.

Amber as it turned out, was much prettier when she wasn’t stuffed into Stark uniforms. She’d done her face up, with glittering golds and shimmering highlights. Her dark face a masterpiece that outdid the golden dress she’d pulled on.

The girl was way more dressed up than Lela who had pulled on a simple pair of black skinnies and a simple white v neck cotton tees that she’d stolen from Pepper. She’d only done her eyeliner and painted her lips with a burgundy colored lipstick she’d stolen from Natasha. Her hair was a wild mess pulled into a messy bun upon her head. On her feet she sported her chunky heeled black boots that peeked out because she’d rolled the ends of her pants a little. Her leather jacket hanging on the back of her chair.

“And then, she just sat there, fucking looking at me like I was peeing on her baby jesus statue!” Amber laughs out, her pale brown eyes glittering as she waved her ringed hands around dramatically, “I just, I fucking threw it out the window and it landed right on my brothers head!”

With her sides aching from all the laughter she’s been doing tonight, Lela shakes her head and tells her, “*Pendeja!* What did your moms do?”
“My moms old school catolica, she made me go to church and repent! But only after she washed my mouth with agua y jabón!” Amber announces with a twist to her lips. Letting Lela laugh to her fullest, Amber eventually asks, “Didn’t stop me from getting high as shit with my cousins on my quinceñaera.”

Shaking her head, Lela teases, “No shit? Never pegged you for a pot head.”

“I’m not, shit smells too much,” amber tells her with a wrinkle of her nose and then adds on as if she’s trying to sound tougher than she is, “But, I’m not like, a prude or anything.”

Raising her brow, Lela says, “Never said you were. It’s just, you kinda look too nice to do anything like that.”

“Hey!” Amber starts out, looking defensive, “I used to be pretty wild when I was a kid.”

And maybe Lela would be inclined to believe her—considering how they don’t know each other all that well—if not for the way Amber’s only been drinking strawberry margaritas all night. The blue umbrellas they came with littering the table.

“Anyway,” amber says as casually as she can manage, “How’d you end up working at the Stark’s?”

Shrugging, Lela tells her easily, “Got a job offer, didn’t have shit else for options, so I took it. You?”

Some part of her always had her a little cautious about explaining how she got her job and why. The thought of people knowing she’s up and personal with Tony, Pepper or Bruce made her a little uneasy. People thought she was fucking Tony and they hated her. Lela doesn’t want to know what they’ll do when they find out she’s actually pack bonded to the assholes.

She’s got no doubt her privacy will go up in smoke if they ever do.

“My cousin, Beto, he works maintenance, he actually hooked me up. Took about a year before my application went through. I was working at a bodega when I got the call. I quit that day and went in for training the next.” Amber tells her.

“This one of the cousins who smoked you out?”

Full out grinning, Amber nods her head as she took a long gulp of her pink bullshit, “Yup! But like, he’s not into that shit anymore. He’s married now to some Gamma dude from Queens. I think he’s looking into getting a bigger place cause their cat is pregnant.”

Wrinkling her nose at the thought of a cat, Lela shakes her head and downs the last of her beer. It taste like shit going down, but, Lela’s never had the stomach for liquor of any kind. The smell, she knows, reminds her too much of people she hopes to forget. So she’d gone with beer and was regretting it now.

“Hey, so, I’ve been curious, what’s your deal with the gringita?” Amber asks as she flagged down the lone barmaid for another of her drink and one more beer for Lela.

Knowing full well who Amber’s talking about—Claire—does shit for all to wash away her confusion. So she questions, “Nothing, why?”

“Oh, cus she hates you. Like full on, just, fucking hates you.” Amber informs her like Lela’s unaware, “On my first day she told me to, like, stay away from you because you were, like, feral or something.”
Grinning, Lela laughs out, “No shit? Is that why you always fucking looked at me like I was gonna bite your head off?”

“I didn’t look at you like that,” Amber defends herself before sheepishly admitting, “But you kind of have that face, you know?”

“What kind of face?”

“You have, like, a serious fucking mean as fuck bitch face! Plus when you growl, that shit’s pretty intense!”

“Hmm, I try,” Lela says around a wide smile as she took up her dewy beer.

Ducking her eyes down to her dwindling smoke, Amber admits, “I thought you were a bitch at first, but, you’re actually pretty chill.”

Brows pinching, feeling a little weird, Lela awkwardly throws out, “Thanks?”

“No, I mean, it’s just—with the way you are, it’s pretty scary. I mean, you’re an alpha, I get that your growls are supposed to be scary and shit, I just thought you’d be like an alpha-alpha,” Amber stumbles out.

Her words throwing Lela for a loop because…what? Wide eyed, completely fucking shaken to her core, Lela tries to wrap her head around what Amber’s just told her.

For all that she knows that people can get fucking confused with the way she acts, Lela’s never once thought people might confuse her for an alpha. Like, sure, she growled like one—held herself as one—but Lela’s never thought it actually worked. But Lela guesses that’s got everything to do with the fact that people can’t scent her any kinds of right. The way her true scent is hidden underneath the stench of her smokes and suppressors.

Either way, the fact that Amber thinks she is…it makes something old in her twirl with that half resembled dark pride. But it also twists something in Lela’s hindbrain that makes her want to confess that she isn’t. That Amber’s wrong. That Lela’s actually the lowest of the low. A fucking Omega playing at pretend.

“Alphas…they can be assholes sometimes,” Amber suddenly admits, her eyes falling down to the umbrella she’s twirling through her pink drink.

And damn if Lela didn’t know that for a damn fact.

She’s got scars lining her body from alpha’s. She’s to a hole in her chest from one who had done his best to soften her up before he sunk the knife into her.

So yeah, Lela knows. But the fact that Amber does too, the way her voice is riddled in something like old pain, makes Lela sit up and take notice. Well on her way to buzzed, Lela’s brain is still firing on most cylinders.

“I ain’t an alpha,” Lela confesses despite good reason. Leaving it at that, Lela then says, “But yeah, I know what they can do.”

Looking all kinds of shocked, Amber suddenly spits out, “Sorry, I just—I thought cause of your growl and the way you don’t bare your throat…”

Pulling her lips up into a half sneer, Lela simply states, “Ain’t gotta be an alpha to do that. Moms
taught me how to keep my head straight when I was a kid. Made sure I didn’t do it even for her and she was a bitch of an alpha to not wanna go belly up with a single look.”

Wide eyed, Amber opens her mouth only to close it on nothing. Slowly nodding her head she apologizes.

“It ain’t hard, you know. To just not do it. If you don’t wanna, you don’t gotta,” Lela grumbles as she drew long pulls off her beer.

It’s not a lie but it’s not the truth either, Lela knows. She still has to fight against the need to roll over when an Alpha was around. She had to grind her teeth together every time Tony came too close to keep her head from spilling to the side. It takes a hell of a lot of effort, but it isn’t impossible.

Some part of her wants Amber to know too. That if the gamma girl ever found herself between a hard rock and an alpha, she didn’t need to tilt her head to the side just cause she’s expected to. That Amber could ignore the voice in her own head and just stand her ground.

“My family’s kind of, you know, traditional. They buy into the whole fixed order. Alpha’s being the top and everyone else just needs to fall into line,” Amber tells her, her eyes dimming in the shitty light overhead.

“Fuck that,” Lela spits out because she doesn’t really know what she’s supposed to say to that. But Amber takes her words as an encouragement to spit out:

“Right! I mean, it’s real hypocritical, if you ask me. Like they’re both gamma’s and shit. But they want me to run out and find a good Alpha husband and just stay home barefoot and pregnant until I just die or something! They even tried to sign me up for one of those matchmaking services. You know the ones that’re all approved by the NOCDP? It’s bullshit.”

And nope, not really. Lela’s never—ever—been in the position to be enrolled in one of those matchmaking services. But she’s heard about them because, shit, who hadn’t. It’s about the first thing one does when they’re fresh out of high school. Alpha’s and Beta’s eager to snatch up some young and unmated Omega running around unclaimed.

The National Organization of Certified Dynamics and Pack establishments. The literal fucking bane of Lela’s existence. The sole fucking thing built to fucking expose what she is to the world what she’s trying to hide. If anyone ever found out she wasn’t registered, Lela’s got no fucking doubt in her head, she’d be arrested and properly processed. She’d get her picture taken, all her personal info taken down and broadcasted to anyone who was looking for an Omega would know where she’s at.

It makes everything in Lela snarl at the thought.

“My papi wants me to go to one this weekend because he thinks I’m too old to still be unmarried. I’m, like, 26! But what the hells marriage supposed to do for me? He never tells my brother he’s too old to still be jumping back and forth from puta’s all week long! But I gotta get married and have kids before I get too old?” Amber bites out, her words laced in gamma growls of displeasure.

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela growls out again, “Fuck that.”

Squaring her shoulders, looking like she’s already taking Lela’s advice to fight the need to cower to heart, Amber nods her head and repeats Lela’s own words back at her, “Fuck that.”

And then, slowly, Amber raises her strawberry drink up, she declares, “To being young, unmarried, unclaimed and unmated!”
Thinking to hell with it, Lela clinks her beer to Ambers glass and firmly fucking agrees, “Fuck yes.”

Only when they’ve pulled a drink down, does Amber shake her head and pull the tension from the air. In two seconds flat, the serious air they’d sat in for a spell goes running out. With Amber’s expert hand, she starts weaving some kind of story. One about how she’d gotten robbed at gun point in her old job. One where she’d had to use a wooden duck—a mallard she’d insisted—as a weapon to save her life.

By the end of it, Lela is full out laughing. Her face aches as she gripped her stitching sides and tried not to fall out of her seat. Her buzz slipping into something a little more like plastered as Amber kept up with the jokes and the drinks never stopped coming to them.

The hole in her chest fading if only for just a moment.

*~*

Heaving a tired sigh, Lela drops onto her carpet. Her whole body singing with fatigue at having to drag Amber most of the way here. Those Six or so inches the girl had on her had made themselves apparent the entire way.

Drunk as they both were, Lela’s got no doubt in her mind their trek up the stairs hadn’t gone unnoticed by her pack. Or at least, she knows of the wonder dicks had been here, they’d have clocked it the moment she opened her front door. But for whatever reason, not a single one of them had peeked their heads out.

Which was good, Lela thinks, because she didn’t want to have them look at her all sweaty and sloppy as she feels she looks. She doesn’t want to think about what Red or Chuckles would get told if Sam saw her this way.

Probably mild disapproval from the beta woman and amusement from the gamma man.

Mind wandering about what they would think inevitably runs back to what James would think about how she is now. Lela wonders what he might’ve thought. She wonders if he’d be amused or disappointed. If he’d have gone with her if she’d asked. If he’d have sat through Ambers stories and laughed with Lela.

Drunk as she is, mind foggy as it is, Lela thinks about James and finds herself swimming in memories she wouldn’t otherwise touch sober.

The memory of his sad eyes, his soft smiles, his impossibly gorgeous face—it doesn’t hurt so much when she’s drunk. But the hole in her chest still twinges in something like remembered pain. Like it aches for him to come back and make her whole again.

The sigh that slips past her dry lips is all kinds of forlorn and shit. Lela can hear her own heartache in that single sigh.

And maybe so does Amber—as plastered as the gamma girl is—because it prompts the other girl to ask:

“So wass’up wit’chu anyway?”

Confused, Lela tries to ask through a beer heavy mouth, “Whadda’ya mean?”

“Bitch, don’t play,” Amber grumbles, as she flopped her head hard onto Lela’s couch.
The couch had been the furthest the two of them had gotten.

Raising her brow, Lela shakes her head and regrets it when her whole world goes tipping despite being laid up as she is.

“You’s got tha’ look on yer face.” Amber states, her glassy eyes falling to half lidded as she waved out an uncoordinated hand out to motion Lela’s face in general, “You look’s like yer all—like fuckin’ heart broken and shit.”

Maybe it’s the fact that she’s drunk or maybe because she’s been trading stories with Amber all night, but, Lela feels her loosened tongue move before she’s registered it:

“Got dumped.”

“Fuck,” Amber grumbles, her dark brows pinching tight before she stated, “Asshole.”

Shaking her head, regretting again in an instant, Lela runs a tired hand over her face and sighed out, “Nah, he’s—he was a good guy. Jus’ he left, fuckin’ walked out ‘cus he said he didn’t wanna hurt me or nothin’.”

“Tha’s stupid,” Amber slurred, her voice growing low as she propped her chin on her forearm and asked, “Breakin’ yer heart ’s hurtin’ yo-you.”

Shrugging her shoulders as much as she’s able, Lela admits, “I fuckin’ loved him, ya know. Like, full on fuckin’ loved him. An’ I jus’…I jus’ wanted him to stay. Didn’t fuckin’ care if he…ya know, hurt me or whatever tha’ fuck. I jus’….I jus’ wanted him to stay wit’ me.”

Beer makes it so the words just slip out of her mouth without effort. Beer makes it so she feels a little outside of herself as she admits something so fucking close to her heart. Beer makes it so she doesn’t feel like a goddamn weak bitch when tears spring up in her eyes and roll sideways over her temples and into her messed up hair.

The hole in her chest thumping underneath the balm of her drunken state.

Humming, like she understands, Amber mumbled, “Tha’s fucked up, wey.”

And did, Lela knows, it really fucking did. Scrubbing hard at her eyes, Lela closes them and resolves herself not to think about this anymore.

“Broke up wit’ a boyfriend of mine too.” Amber tells her easily, like she’s all for digging up the past hurts of their lives in the middle of a drunken night, “Pinche bastard, he used to, like…he was mean. I couldn’t do it no more. Kicked him out. Trust me girl, better he be gone than like, he fuckin’ hurts you or something.”

And that’s when it hits her. Turning her head so she’s looking at Amber fully, Lela understands now what always pissed her off about the gamma girl. Her drunken mind putting two and two together faster than she can make sense of the results.

The way Amber jumped at every growl. The way she always submitted when there was no need for her to bare her throat. The way Amber had said what she’d said in the bar.

Amber’s had her run-in with an Alpha who used everything that made them an alpha against her.

The thought rankles something in Lela. Makes it so she’s angry for the girl and a little for herself too. Because fuck, there it was sitting in her face, all the possible facts that it didn’t matter—gamma or
omega—sometimes people got the shit end of the stick and that was fucking that.

“Fuck’em,” Lela growls out.

An old kind of confidence filling her up. James…beautiful soft James—he’d hurt her. Maybe not with his words, or his fists, but he’d hurt her. Torn her open and left her bleeding without a glance back. His apology didn’t mean shit when she was left here lying on the ground trying to move on when everything in her wouldn’t—couldn’t.

So yeah, fuck him. Fuck him and his pretty smiles. Fuck him and his rumbling laugh. Fuck him and his pomegranate and wine kisses. Fuck him.

Nodding her head, or at least trying to, Amber agrees sleepily, “Fuck’em.”

Taking Ambers solid reassurance for what it was, Lela closes her eyes and hopes that come morning, she’ll still be this brave against the memories of the man.

*~*

Somehow, having a few—a lot—of drinks and spending the night at Lela’s place translates to them being friends. Like solid whole assed friends. Or at least, it does to Amber because now she was always hitting Lela up with weird texts and fucking memes all goddamn day. And as much as it should bother her, Lela finds she doesn’t mind so much.

At least, she doesn’t mind so much that she tells the girl anything. She just shoots back a simple ‘lol’ or some funny bullshit she finds.

Either way, they’re closer now that some truths between them have been revealed. Though none of it had really been on Lela’s part—aside from talking about her recent break up—it’s a friendship she hadn’t had before.

None of which goes unnoticed by her too fucking observant pack mates. Even the ones that were currently halfway across the world had called her up to ask her what was going on. (Lela has no doubt though, that Sam hadn’t given them the 411 the moment he’d found Lela hungover in her kitchen. Fucking snitching bastard.)

Fiddling with her phone, eyes trying to make sense of the image on her screen, Lela walks into the training room she’s been assigned to deal with this night. Her attention is all kinds of wrapped up with the weird grumpy face of the cat Amber found hiding in one of the storage rooms. Mind miles away from what she’s doing it takes her a moment to clock the scent that sits space heavy in the air.

But when she notices it—breathes it in deep—Lela’s head whips up to search for the face that went with fresh rain, sun baked skin and juniper.

Sporting a thin white tank top, muscle bound arms on full display as well his thick as fuck neck, the alpha stands at the far left of the room. He’s got on another stupid pair of gym shorts that hugged him in all the kinds of ways that not even the best kinds of porn could pull off. His dark golden hair sits damp and messy on his head. A few strands falling over to stick to his stupidly good looking face.

And seriously, Lela thinks, what was it with fucking Alpha’s looking the way he did?

There was absolutely no good fucking reason on this planet for this asshole to be that pretty. Everything from his ocean blue eyes to the line of his nose and chin was chiseled perfection. Everything from his heavy scent and musk screams prime Alpha prowess. Everything from his golden sun tanned muscles and his insane height and width was gorgeous.
Briefly, Lela is reminded of the stories of gods made of gold and who pulled the sun into place with chariots made of fire. She’s not sure what the names of those gods had been but Lela remembers their stories—somewhat—and she thinks this one fits the bill entirely.

Stuffing her phone back into her back pocket, Lela pulls her cart fully into the room and tries to ignore the inherent need to bare her throat. His scent was so thick in the air Lela felt like she was choking on it.

Cheeks a faint shade of pink, the man stops, his eyes flashing over to where Lela stands by the front door. His body comes to a stop where he’d been wailing on a punching bag like the thing owed it money. His two ham fists wrapped up tight with white bandages to keep his knuckles from tearing open. Slowly lowering his right arm, his left catching the black bag that comes swinging back at him, Rogers looks at her. His pink lips opening as a small huff of air slipped past them.

It’s insulting, really, how fucking pretty this asshole was. Despite the twist in her belly, the squeeze of her chest and the obvious fucking lust currently pooling down low, Lela feels her lips pull up into a sneer. Because fuck that.

No good ever came from someone who looked like that. Nothing but hurt ever came from pretty faces with eyes as captivating as his. History’s taught her as much.

A growl filled with distaste falls from her lips. A dismissal of him entirely.

Pulling her eyes away from him, Lela yanks her clipboard out of it’s place and heads off to where she knows the storage room is. Aside from actually cleaning things today, Lela’s been tasked with running inventory on all her assigned sectors. A job Lela hadn’t been trusted with before but was now—for whatever reason—allowed to do. She doesn’t mind it but fuck if it wasn’t tedious as all fuck having to fill out the empty spaces of the forms all proper and shit.

Angling her body so her back’s not to him entirely, Lela runs over the shelves of the room. She’s in the middle of counting the bottles of disinfectant sprays when the familiar thump of blows landing makes her turn. Her eyes catch on the sight of Roger’s punching on the black bag before him. His whole body moving fluid—effortlessly like water in motion—as he punched.

The sight of it shouldn’t be as gorgeous as it is. But Lela finds herself watching it entranced. Her eyes tracking the way he twists his right foot and his strength ripples through his entire body. Her hindbrain thumps with each hit he lands. An ugly rhythm that has the worst parts of her dynamic aching to be set free from a cage Lela’s unwilling to so much as crack open.

Lost as she is in the sight of him, Lela is able to spot the moment the bag tears straight through the middle. His punch—a fucking punch—splits the bag in half. Sand explodes everywhere. The bottom half of the bag falls to Roger’s stupidly big feet. Shocked, all Lela can do is stare wide eyed at what he’s managed to do.

Spinning fast—impossibly fast for someone so big—Rogers holds his hands up in the universal sign of peace. His deep blue eyes are wide as saucers as he declared: “I’ll clean that up!”

For a long beat, Lela doesn’t say anything. Mainly because she’s too shocked by what she’s seen but also because she doesn’t really understand why he’s said what he has. And then it hits her, fast—like the sand currently still falling down onto the ground.

Snorting a laugh, Lela can’t help the way her lips pull up into a smirk as she told him, “You sure as
shit are, Rogers. I’m a fucking janitor, not a fucking maid.”

Nodding his head, Roger’s slowly lowers his white bandaged hands. Only when he’s sure Lela isn’t about to chuck something at him—probably—Rogers ducks his head down and walks over to where Lela’s long forgotten broom leans against the wall. Lela’s smirk becomes a full blown grin as she watches the alpha begin to sweep up his mess. He makes quick work in making a large pile. When it’s all gathered up he slowly makes his way over to her cart and motions to it as he tentatively asked:

“Do you mind if I borrow your scoop?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela turns away and throws out, “Knock yourself out, wey. Just don’t fucking break anything else.”

It’s only when he’s done dumping the sand into a trash can that Rogers slowly rumbles in his richly timbered voice, “I, uh, i hadn’t meant to leave the mess behind. Stark—he said it’d be alright.”

Turning her head to narrow her eyes in the man’s direction, Lela bites out, “I don’t give a fuck what that fucker says or doesn’t say. It’s rude as all fuck to punch open bags of sand and leave’em behind for someone else to deal with.”

It’s weird—all kinds of fucking strange—to watch a mountain of pure muscle awkwardly shuffle. It’s even stranger—fucking otherworldly—to watch an Alpha do it. But for whatever reason Rogers pulls it off easily. He shuffles in his laced up trainers as he scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck. His head ducking down as a weary smile graced his stupidly pink lips.

The sight of him, kicking at something that wasn’t there, looking all kinds of human and…soft makes her hindbrain twirl dangerously. Apparently, her hindbrain refused to learn from past mistakes. It was very willing to lay itself open for that weary smile he sported.

It tears into her with it’s chipped teeth and jagged claws. Makes her notice all the ways Rogers sinks into himself to display something as none threatening as his immense bulk could possibly become. It forces her to notice all the things she’s been willfully ignoring because she’s not ready to look at anyone the way she’d looked at James.

But by the clench of her belly, the thump in her chest and the rush in her veins Lela can spot all the want to run down the same path that fucked her up more than twice. Roger’s face—so goddamn fucking pretty—was a mistake in the making. One that her hindbrain was twisting itself in preparation for.

Heaving out a tired and frustrated sigh—one that had little to do with Roger’s less than stellar fucking common decency—over herself, Lela grumbles as she slammed the door of the storage room shut:

“Whatever.”

And Lela knows she’ll probably catch shit for it later, but she tosses her clipboard onto her cart and wheels it out of the training room. She knows she’s got to clean the room but fuck if she was gonna be around this pretty fucker longer than strictly necessary. That’s how she got in it deep with the other one.

Better to walk the fuck away while she still had the chance.
Chapter End Notes

She's being way too hard on Steve if you ask me.
And she's way too fucking scared to take the first step. So guess who's gonna do it?????

I hope you guys liked the update. For whatever reason this part was hell to get down onto paper. Lela's so reluctant to move on from James. Like seriously, she's so hung up that whenever I pushed her at Steve she snapped her teeth at me.

Let me know what you thought and if you have any ideas on how to approach the unapproachable demoness Lela has become, let me know!!!!
Chapter Summary

The memory of him still hurt though. Would always hurt, she guesses. But Lela’s had her life picked up, thrown down until it shattered, a handful of times before. She’s been laid low by people she thought she loved. She’s been kicked, hurt, broken, left bleeding and betrayed by others. James was now just one of them. And damn if that doesn’t sting. That James—who she could’ve sworn would never hurt her in any way because he was so damn good—was just another on her long list of people who cut deepest. A memory filled with barbwire wrapped smiles. A memory that hurt her the longer she held onto it in her hands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He blames the girls eyes and maybe everything else about her too.

Those eyes, Steve thinks, were as dark as ink dropped into pure water. The bow of her full dark lips made his palms itch with the need to recreate them. The high rise of her cheek bones and the slight up tilt of her nose reminds him of those old stories his mom had whispered to him when he was still being tucked away at night. Of creatures with tar wings and too sharp teeth. Her full and thick wavy hair dark enough to gleam blue and violet in the sunlight.

She’s beautiful in all the ways sirens were said to be. A dangerous kind of beauty that spelled danger for all those dumb enough to wade their way into the ocean. The gleam of her sharp teeth, the rough drag of her husky voice, the sheer weight of her growls stood as a testament to that fact.

And despite knowing it’s all kinds of dumb, he finds himself glancing down corridors trying to steal a single glimpse of her. His heart races in his chest when he runs across her smokey scent. It makes him feel like he’s a spinning top—that scent. It makes him want to run it down. He’s damn near doll-dizzy, is what he is.

But he feels all kinds of stupid and reckless with the need to run up to her, make her look at him a little more. Even if it’s for her to sneer at him or growl. His heart thumps in his chest when Steve catches the rough husky draw of her voice spilling down the halls. Alpha instincts roar in his face with the need to run the girl down and prove he’s worth at least a second look.

In all honesty, he can’t explain it—can’t force it into reason or logic. But it’s those eyes—he blames
her dark eyes.

Steve didn’t have to hear her ungodly growls to know she was strength incarnate, Samson in the flesh. It was in her eyes. Steve didn’t need to fill his lungs with her harsh scent to know she was built with a will that could outdo his own. It was in her dark eyes. Steve didn’t have to be confronted with the full brunt of her attitude to know she was built with a vibranium spine that bowed her head at no one. It was in her eyes.

Defiance and strength sat in her dark eyes. Like a dark promise of all the hell she could unleash at the slightest of push.

It made everything he was, alpha or not, want to snatch her up and lay his scent on her. To claim her as fast as possible. To have her as his as much as he wanted to be hers.

Lost in this era as he is, Steve doesn’t know how he’s supposed to strike up a conversation that didn’t end up with him looking like a total ass. Or worse, he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do when those eyes only ever glared in his direction. Leaving her that mess, four times in a row, Steve knows probably soured the idea of him to her.

(Steve doesn’t know why he listens to anything that comes out of Tony’s mouth. At this point, he thinks the other man is giving him shit advice on purpose.)

Plus, he doesn’t really know how to go about this. The world had changed so much since he was pulled up out of the ice. Most of it for the better. He knows there’s no hang ups now where their had been before. But Steve’s not sure how he’s supposed to walk up to her and just…say something suave like Hi, Sugar, are you rationed?

For one, he doesn’t have much experience with it. He’d been all of five feet and six inches of gangly malnourished skin and bones before the serum. The few dames that had paid him any kinds of attention had only done it because Steve had been a packaged deal. Buck had only ever gone anywhere with him so long as they both had dates on their arms. Bucky was kind like that. Never left him behind even when maybe he should’ve.

Steve’s well aware of all the things that had once made him an unacceptable choice as a proper Alpha mate. The serum changing every inch of his body did little to wash away all the awkward insecurities he still had now looking the way he did. Underneath the suit—underneath all of it—it—Steve was still very much the kid from Brooklyn with a chip on his shoulder.

But those eyes fill him up with a confidence he only ever really felt out in the middle of a gun fight. Those eyes, like the dame herself, were unlike anything he’s ever had the good fortune to come across.

Not even Peggy and all her Beta force could ever match the way that gal…burned. And that thought, always, throws him for a loop. That thinking of Peg in the same breath as he did her didn’t make him feel any kind of guilt. Not in the way it had when Steve had entertained the thought of Sharon.

It’s different, Steve knows—feels—because Peggy had been a bulwark built to withstand the worst of the tides of their war stricken times. Ms. Margaret Carter was a fifty foot wall that dared those around it to climb to the top and test their luck. This—with dark eyes and rain drenched, earth colored skin—she was the equivalent of a volcano eruption. Her rage spilling out of her like red hot molten lava. Her growls spewing black ash into the sky and choking all those that got caught in her wake.

It’s different. So very very different.
That girl was as wild and unfringed as the world he found himself lost in. It’s different because where he’d hadn’t wanted to take the leap with Peggy—beautiful and amazing as she was—Steve found himself wanting to take a powder towards the dame with fury in her veins. It’s different because everything in him—alpha and man—wants those eyes to settle on him and not move.

“Hey Cap!” the familiar rumble of Sam’s voice calls out to him.

Turning, away from the suit he’s currently cleaning off, Steve takes notice of the beta man happily making his way towards him. When Sam stills beside him all Steve can make out is the scent of brushfire and cigarette ash. Sam’s usually soft scent of honey, lilacs and oak wood completely disregarded by Steve’s whirling need to sniff out every trace of those dark eyes.

Grinning softly, Sam sits himself down on the bench across from Steve. He’s got a plastic bowl in his left hand as he twirled a fork with his right. Sam was, in general, always in a happy mood. More so now, Steve notices, that brushfire and cigarette smoke seemed to sit on his skin.

Jealousy, so vulgar and gnarled, twists his belly up tight at the fact.

Steve’s been meaning to ask—has been trying to work up the nerve—how Sam knows that girl with five tons worth of moxie pumping through her body. Everything in him is hungry to know if she’s Sam’s or how they know each other. Steve aches to ask—to know if he’s even got a shot before he takes it—but he hasn’t been able to get the words out of his mouth.

“So what’s up? Heard you were looking for me,” Sam mumbles over whatever he’s filling his mouth with. His brown eyes pinning themselves on Steve’s face.

Carefully slow, slow enough to look natural, Steve shrugs his shoulders and drops his gaze back down to his working hands. He’s running a cloth filled with a water sealant in it down the right pant leg when Steve says:

“I…I was, uh…I was lookin’ to ask you for some advice.”

With a wet slurp, Sam tilts his head in question and sloppily tells him, “‘kay, shoot.”

Eyes firmly fixed on his hands, Steve wills himself to be brave and asks, “How do you…that girl from the other day—the one that chewed me out. How do you know her?”

Laughing, Sam puts his bowl of food down on the bench he’s seated on. Only when his hands and mouth are empty, does Sam tell him with a wide grin, “You mean Lela?”

Steve’s hands still on their own accord at the sound of her name. Glancing up, Steve nods his head as the name echoed in his mind. Lela. Lela. Lela. It bounced round like a bullet ricocheting off vibranium-reinforced walls.

“She’s my packmate,” Sam announces with no small amount of pride, like he’s the killer-diller of the hour. His chest puffing out as he leveled his shoulders and grinned for all he was worth. His eyes are brimming with something like pure happiness when Sam continues on to say, “All five feet of pure fury, that girl.”

Packmate, relief floods Steve so fast and harsh that he feels his body go loose; like a piano wire that’s been yanked until it snapped. The girl—Lela—was pack to Sam. That’s why her scent sat on his skin.

Everything in him revels in his relief. That the girl isn’t Sam’s. Not in that way.
On an exhale, Steve nods his head and wearily agrees, “I noticed.”

“What’d you do anyway? She was all kinds of pissed off when she found out I knew you,” Sam asks as he kicked his legs out and leaned up against the row of metal lockers at his back.

“I, uh, I broke a few bags and left her the mess. Tony said it’d be alright but…”

“Aw Cap!” Sam barks out a laugh even as he face twists with some kind of compassion, “Way to put yourself on her shit list.”

“Any time I come across her she glares at me hard enough that I’m surprised I haven’t up and caught fire. Busted my chops completely,” Steve tells the others man with a small laugh of his own.

“I bet!”

“I’ve been meaning to apologize, it’s just that—she’s not exactly…” Steve starts to explain, his task abandoned as his mind filled up with the way her glaring eyes always pinned him down.

Lela—such a pretty name to go with such a wildly pretty woman—always looked at him like he was something not worth her time. Like she was seeing something so below pleasing she hated it on sight. All of his alpha instincts always rushed to the surface at her clear dismissal. The way she sneered at him as if there were to be a fight she would be the clear winner. Like he had no real chance to stand up to her at all.

It made his blood race in his veins even if he can’t explain why.

Pulling a face that seemed to spell out his regret, Sam dutifully informs him, “She’s like that. Only ever seen one guy get off her shit list while still having his throat intact. But he’s pack to her too, so, you know—goes without saying.”

And Steve may not know a single thing about her, but he doesn’t doubt Sam’s words. Her eyes showed that Lela wasn’t built out of forgiveness. She was built of vengeance, of retribution and all the hellfire of revenge. So he understands, if a little.

“I, uh, do you have any…advice? I really didn’t mean to leave her that mess on purpose, or anything. I just—” Steve starts only to get waylaid by the way Sam waves his stumbling words off.

“Uh, not really, man. She can hold a grudge like nobody's business.” Sam tells him simply with a shrug of his dark shoulders as he leaned his weight onto his elbows and knees.

Fumbling for anything to throw out, Steve asks, “Does she…do people still like going out to get a cup of coffee?”

Face shrugging Sam opens his mouth like he’s about to answer only to still immediately. His brown eyes narrow as he shrewdly stares in Steve’s direction. For a long while, Sam looks at him like a beta about to fight for territory. A beta ever willing to defend all that was his and his packs. The sight of Sam’s expression makes Steve’s shoulders level out and his chest puff up.

Determination rushes fast and mean through him. He knows he’s got no real reason—seeing as to how the dame doesn’t actually like him one single bit—to buy the farm for the right for her. But damn if he wasn’t willing to try.

“You know,” Sam starts, as he pulled himself to sit ramrod straight in his seat, “Lela’s all kinds of tough as nails. But she’s my pack and the last time I let anyone get close to her, she got her heart broken. So, if you got any funny ideas running around in your head, Rogers, you better tell me
Shock follows Sam’s words. Steve can’t begin to understand what kind of person could take that girl’s heart and break it. Steve can’t begin to understand what kind of person saw fire in the sky and tried to douse it. Steve doesn’t think he ever wants to meet a person like that.

What kind of fool saw a face like hers and gave her heartache?

“I…uh, I just wanted to—you know, apologize. I’m not really sure how to go about this,” Steve admits, his mind choking on the truth he’s skirting around.

Staring at him through a suspicious look, Sam pulls his lips into a frown and slowly mumbles, “That better be it, Steve. I’m not ready to be thrown into jail over kicking your ass any time soon.”

That startles a laugh out of his lips as Steve smirks, “Even if you could, I doubt you’d go to jail.”

“I could totally kick your ass, Cap.” Sam announces like he’s got no doubt in his mind he could and would, and then slowly, his lips tip upward as he tacked on, “And I’m pretty sure defacing a national monument is still a felony.”

Laughing, Steve shakes his head and throws out, “I’m not a national monument.”

“Yeah, yeah, save it for when you gotta’ testify at my case,” Sam waves away his words as he slowly picked his bowl back up and started eating again. He’s quiet for a spell, his eyes tracking Steve’s face when eventually he mumbles, “Coke.”

“Coke?” Steve repeats, confused as he stilled in his task again.

Shrugging his shoulders, Sam nods his head and says like he’s imparting some closely vetted secret, “She’s a sucker for it. Any time anyone of us fucks up, we slide her a drink and she glares a little less. If you’re serious about apologizing, get a twelve-pack and pray it helps.”

Brows pinching tight on his face, Steve dutifully nods his head and tries to finish off his suit. His mind whirling on the fact that he’s keeping something from someone he’s only ever been honest about everything with. Steve doesn’t think it’s lying, really. Just…skirting the truth a bit.

But now he’s got a solid idea to run on. One that might get those dark eyes of hers to settle on him and not glare murder at him. And that thought makes his heart race with excitement.

*~*

Out in their usual smoke spot, Lela kicks her legs out and lets her feet rest for a moment. She’s seated on an upturned mop bucket with Amber laying flat on her back on the concrete. Under the dim light of the midday sun they shoot the shit.

“aint you hot?” Amber asks as she tossed her arm over her eyes.

Frowning, Lela shakes her head and spits out, “It’s fucking cold wey.”

“ the fuck you talking about, bitch? It’s fucking 75 degrees out!” Amber half shouts. Her arm never coming away from her face.

“Yeah, that’s fucking cold where I come from perra.” Lela grumbles as she did her level best not to shiver beneath the white thermal long sleeve she’s got on underneath her uniform shirt.

It was barely the first days of September and already, Lela was feeling the chill down to her bones. A
reminder that she’s been sun burnt and she’s on strange lands.

“No shit?” Amber snipes, one lone eyes peeking out from her forearm as she asked, “What the fuck was hot then?”

“Solid 101’s if we were fuckin’ lucky.”

“Carrajos!” Amber spits out as she bolted upright and stared wide at Lela, “Where the fuck you from?! Hell?”

A wide self deprecating grin spread across her lips, Lela jokes, “Pretty much.”

Laughing, Amber says, “Explains a lot about you. Fucking _diabla._”

Lela’s about to say something, probably vulgar and filthy, when suddenly she’s interrupted by the drawl of a low baritone husky voice. Turning to her right, Lela spots the face she’s been doing her best to forget about.

Gold.


Lela knows—before—there’d never been such a thing as too pretty. But working here, in Tony’s sprawling compound of excess, Lela knows there’s a line somewhere that this fucker just ran right over the moment he was born. Too fucking beautiful. Too fucking gorgeous. Too fucking pretty. Too fucking big. Too fucking tall.

Just as beautiful as James. Just as gorgeous as James. Just as pretty as James. Just as fucking big as James was. Just as fucking tall as James had been.

All of it being too much. A reminder and not. A warning if nothing else of what damage this fucker here could do to her if she let him.

And as much as lust pools in her belly—her hindbrain stretching out like a two cent bitch—Lela wants to scratch up that face bloody.

His eyes, dark ocean blue, settle on her easily. He’s got this look on his face like he hasn’t got a clue what he’s supposed to do now that she’s looking at him. His stupidly pretty face twists up as he opened his dumb stupid pink kissable lips and closed them on nothing.

Irritated beyond reason because she’s gotta be staring up at gods handiwork in the light of the flattering sun, Lela bites out around the butt of her smoke, “‘the fuck you want, _Rogers?_”

Sitting low on the ground as she is might be considered some kind of submission. But there’s no doubt in anyone’s mind that Lela’s issuing nothing but a dismissal up at the way she’s holding her body. The way agitated growls slip out on white smoke help too.

It’s a trick she’d learned from her mother long ago. Passive aggressively declaring herself a winner of a challenge that still hadn’t been issued. Lela doubts she’s doing it in the easy way her mother had, but fuck, Lela really wasn’t about to get to her throbbing feet for this thoughtless pretty asshole.

“I was, uh, I had——” Rogers starts as he tripped over his own tongue. Face twisting up and his cheeks staining a soft pink, he eventually settles on a rushed out, “I got you this.”

Pushing his right arm out, Rogers holds out a red coke aluminum can.
Confusion overrides her surprise. Staring up at him, Lela ashes her smoke and tries to put as much indifference on her face as humanly possible.

Pretty as Rogers was, he’s not completely dumb. He seems to read her expression just fine because he slowly bends down and places the drink close enough to Lela that she might take it but not close enough to get into her personal space as he does it. Like he’s well aware of the fact that she’s not welcoming him any further, sugary drink or not. When he’s standing, his eyes flash over her face before he shuffles awkwardly on his feet.

That shuffle, his right hand scrubbing at the back of his neck, paired together with the stain of pink on his cheeks…it’s—well—it’s all sorts of kind of cute. It almost has Lela smiling because it makes him look nothing like the alpha she knows him to be. The way he pulls his body—half baring his throat yet not—makes it so he doesn’t like like this wall built of solid fucking muscle and more like a person. His eyes fixing themselves low on the ground like he’s not sure he’s allowed to glance up and look at her. Like he’s half worried if he does, Lela might sink her fangs into him for it.

It almost makes her smile despite herself. Only, she catches herself fast over it. She bites it down as far down as it’ll go. Chokes it down like a bad case of acid reflux. She smotheres the small upward tick of her lips with a rough drag off her smoke.

Slowly, so slowly, Lela can read every bit of his reluctance as he did it, Rogers nods his head and slowly backs away. He’s gone just as randomly as he’d appeared. A faint trace of his alpha musk stirring in the afternoon air.

“Who the fuck was that?” Amber demands from where she watches Roger’s retreating back. Her pale brown eyes wide as saucers. Her lips popped open in an appreciative little ‘o’. Shrugging her shoulders, Lela pulls another drag off her smoke and mumbles through a plume of smoke, “That alpha fucker that left me that shit-fest in the training rooms.”

Shocked, Amber whips her head over to her and spits out, “You made an alpha apologize to you?”

“First off, I didn’t make him do shit.” Lela growled as she ashed her cig and then threw on for good measure, “And second, he didn’t fucking apologize for shit.”

“Uh, yes the fuck he did!” Amber argued as she crawled closer to Lela on her knees to firmly tell her, “He did that thing Alpha’s do when they’re apologizing to another alpha.”

“What thing?” Lela asks, confused as all shit. Her mind whirling on the fact that yet another dumbass was walking around believing all of her lies.

Waving her hand out, Amber tells her, “You know, the thing. Not getting into your personal space. Ducking his head down and shit. That’s a total Alpha apology! He even brought you a peace offering!”

“It’s a coke.” Lela dully informs the gamma girl. Her eyes running down and over to said object. It shined in the midday sun as inconspicuously as an inanimate object could.

“Obviously! But he bought it with the clear intention of apologizing to you because he fucked up!” Amber shouts out. Her face splitting into an overexcited grin, “He thinks you’re an alpha so he apologized like he figures he shoulda. That’s—that’s fuckin’ insane!!”

It takes a while for Amber’s words to register in Lela’s head. A long while for them to make any kind of sense. But even when they do, Lela can’t understand half of it. Not really.
For one, she’s not entirely over the fact that people are fooled by half the shit she does. Like, she gets that her growls are Alpha worthy. That if push came to shove, her growls paired up to the ugliest of alpha fuckers in a dirty bar. She knows when she bared her fangs, kept her head steady, and refused to be cowed people might confuse her for a Dom-Beta.

Never once, though, did she ever think it might fool people enough to make them think she was an actual Alpha. That...that was all kinds of fucking shocking. Half unbelievable, really.

But here’s her proof, sitting right in front of her. Amber for one had thought she was an Alpha—had admitted it plainly—and the gamma was saying so did this other dude. A fucking Alpha himself fooled by all the bullshit Lela’s created for her survival.

Her mother would be fucking proud.

“Fucking shit!” Amber exclaims with a too happy cackle that was just a tad bit hysteric. Her head throwing itself back as she gripped the cloth over her belly. When she’s gotten most of her laughter out, she goes on to say, “Insane, you’re fucking insane, pinche diabla chingada!”

A slow smirk spreads on Lela’s lips at Amber’s pure happiness for this fact. If anyone was fucking proud of Lela’s near impossible feat it was Amber. It was in the girls soft brown eyes and the wide smile she sported. It was almost as if Amber was the one being offered the apology instead of Lela at all. Like Amber was watching water get turned to wine, she was just happy to be a spectator if nothing at all.

Reaching a hand out, Lela snatches up the drink next to her and pops the tab. She’s just about to take a drink when she holds it out for amber to get the first sip of the soda. Grabbing hold of it like it was a cup full of gold, Amber takes a sip and happily laughs as she demanded:

“Fuckin’ teach me how to do what you do bitch!”

Laughing, Lela shakes her head and tells her honestly, “Anytime babe, won’t even fuckin’ charge you.”

Grinning, Amber takes another drink and holds the drink up to her eye line like she’s waiting for the drink to magically disappear.

*~*

She can’t explain it. Not really.

For the past week she’s been walking around with this nasty feeling in the pit of her belly. Lela’s got this ugly feel of eyes on the back of her head anytime she’s walking down the halls of building L. Like someones watching her but every time she turns around no ones around.

It makes her feel like she’s being tracked...hunted. A feeling she’d gotten used to when she was on the street. The eyes on the back of her head kept her alive when people pegged her as a quick meal and an easy score. Dark instincts kick up at the familiarity of that shitty feeling. So Lela does her level best to not go around building L unless strictly necessary.

The fucker with the pretty face, thick as shit muscles, and heady scent had little to do with it. Or at least, that’s what Lela liked to tell herself.

But Owens—the complete and utter asshole that he was—wouldn’t give that building to anyone but her. So she’s got little choice in the matter.
Slowly, she pushes her cart into the training room she’s gotten used to spotting that blonde alpha in. On edge as she is, Lela’s eyes flash around the whole of the place. The first thing she spots is the absolute absence of a sandy mess. Second, she clocks the fact that everything fucking gleams. It looks, for whatever reason, like someone’s already run through the place with a fine toothed comb. The floor’s been mopped and the mats have been half polished.

For a long second, Lela thinks she might’ve gotten something wrong. She thinks she might’ve gotten her schedule fucked up, somehow. Someone must’ve come by this place already. But then, Lela knows, Owens was a thorough fucker. He wouldn’t have issued her a level if someone’s already gone through it. So…Lela’s not sure what the hells going on.

Eye’s darting back over her shoulder, Lela carefully makes her way in like she’s waiting for a trap to be sprung.

It’s only when she’s standing in the middle of the room does she spot something out of place. Over by the boxing ring, the one Sam and that blonde Alpha had been sparring in, sits three separate 24 packs of sodas. The red of their cardboard standing out against the harsh white of the ring’s floor. A note folded in half sits on top of it all.

Confused as all fuck, Lela walks over to the neat stack and snatches up the slip of white paper. Unfolding it carefully, Lela looks it over with suspicious eyes.

’Lela, sorry for the mess. - S. Rogers’ the paper reads. At the bottom is the simple sketch of a her broom—the one she’d thrown at a blonde head.

Three separate kinds of emotions swell in her chest. One being confusion, obviously. The other being surprise and the third something like laughter. Glancing away from the paper she takes one good look at all the sugar drinks laid out before her. Briefly, Lela wonders how the hell the alpha even knew what kind of drink she liked.

Her hindbrain does a queer kind of twirl. It stretches it’s knobby spine out and then in. Like it’s half pleased with the stack of drinks. The worst part of herself aching in a way Lela’s never felt it go.

Teeth worrying her bottom lip, Lela glances back at the paper in her left hand. Her eyes roam over the simple words. The elegant scrawl of her name looks out of place. She know for a fact her name has never before been written that…prettily. The looping L’s and the small outward swoop of the ‘a’ making it look like calligraphy. But more than that, Lela looks at the little sketch of her broom.

Her hindbrain does a queer kind of twirl. It stretches it’s knobby spine out and then in. Like it’s half pleased with the stack of drinks. The worst part of herself aching in a way Lela’s never felt it go.

Teeth worrying her bottom lip, Lela glances back at the paper in her left hand. Her eyes roam over the simple words. The elegant scrawl of her name looks out of place. She know for a fact her name has never before been written that…prettily. The looping L’s and the small outward swoop of the ‘a’ making it look like calligraphy. But more than that, Lela looks at the little sketch of her broom.

It’s pretty, even if it’s made up of simple lines.

The thought of that beautiful man sitting somewhere, pen in hand, sketching out her broom for her makes her heart go squirrely. Something too hot to touch—too familiar to name—makes her chest grow too small and tight. The thought of Rogers—pretty as he was, stacked as he was—putting in any kind of effort to write out something as stupid as her name…it makes her heart stutter for a half a beat.

Pursing her lips up in a frown, Lela resolves herself to ball up the piece of paper up and throw it in her cart bin. But the moment her grip tightens, the edge of the paper crinkling, everything in Lela screams for her to pause. The thought of ruining that stupid little sketch—one that had obviously been drawn for her and her alone—makes her feel…well shit, it makes her feel like an asshole.

Willfully ignoring the fact that she’s folding the paper up with more care than necessary, Lela slides it into her breast pocket and tries to figure out how she’s supposed to take all these drinks out with her. Because like fuck was she going to leave them behind for someone else to fucking grab.
In the end she ends up calling in Bruce who helps her carry them over to one of Tony’s cars. He asks only once where she got them. But when Lela awkwardly offered a shoulder shrug, Bruce leaves it be. Though, Lela’s pretty sure now the good doctor probably thought she stole them from someone.

If Roger’s note ends up sitting on her dresser later on that night, that’s Lela’s business and no one else’s.

*~*

Grinning, Lela enters the training room walking backwards. She’s pulling her cart in with Amber following with her loud laughter.

“You’re lying!” Amber accuses, her brown eyes glittering as she reshuffled all the bottles in her arms.

Shaking her head, Lela tells her, “Nah bitch, I’m dead ass serious!”

Laughing, Amber grins and hedges, “What’d you do with it in the end?”

“What the fuck else? I fucking pawned it! I ain’t gonna keep a fucking virgin mary statue even that shit was gold plated.” Lela informs her with a wide smile.

“You’re going to hell!” Amber shouts as she passed Lela by and did a half ass job of crossing her chest, “First you stole from the church and then you pawned god’s baby momma. Vas al infierno, Lela.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela shrugs and says through a wide shit eating smile, “Prolly, but I’m going down having as much fun as humanly possible.”

“Oh my god! My mami knew I was hanging out with you she’d have me baptized all over again,” Amber snickers as she bent over to drop her cleaning bottles onto the empty bench.

 Pretending to be offended, Lela puts a hand to her chest and demands, “Are you trying to imply that I’m a bad influence?”

 “Who? You?” Amber starts, trying and failing to keep the smile off her lips as she shook her head, “Never. You’re a fuckin’ saint!”

This time around it’s Lela who laughs. She tosses her head back and lets her laughter fall from her lips no matter how loud she’s being.

It’s getting easier, even if she doesn’t want to admit it out loud, to laugh and just…be. It’s getting easier to move past all the pain and heartache that used to choke her up. Time, she thinks, has a lot to do with it. The hole in her chest only ever throbbed when she laid awake at night and thought about gray eyes and soft smiles.

Time and maybe, good company. Talking with Amber is easy. As easy as talking to her pack. And her pack, fucking saint’s every last one of them, swallow up her free time. (More so now seeing as to how Red and Chuckles hadn’t made it back home yet.) They remind her that she isn’t alone where she’d felt abandoned before. Left broken on her floor by a ‘I’m sorry’ and a solid goodbye.

She’s not over it though, not like she half hopes to be. Lela doesn’t think she’ll ever get over him. But she’s letting go of him or, at least, the idea of him and the future she thought she’d had with him. Slow and steady he was becoming a memory of a past Lela can’t believe she lived through at all. She’s letting go because James had left and wallowing in shit that couldn’t be changed did nothing
for her.

(Or at least, that’s what Amber had told her when they went out for drinks some ways back.)

The memory of him still hurt though. Would always hurt, she guesses. But Lela’s had her life picked up, thrown down until it shattered, a handful of times before. She’s been laid low by people she thought she loved. She’s been kicked, hurt, broken, left bleeding and betrayed by others. James was now just one of them. And damn if that doesn’t sting. That James—who she could’ve sworn would never hurt her in any way because he was so damn good—was just another on her long list of people who cut deepest. A memory filled with barbwire wrapped smiles. A memory that hurt her the longer she held onto it in her hands.

He’s become a scar she was learning to not look at too closely. A scar that ran through her heart. A scar that was too jagged to be covered up.

Either way, it’s getting easier to not look at all the shit she’s burying down low. Easier than Lela thought it’d be. A slow progress she wanted to speed up because she was so tired of feeling like half of a person these days. A slow progress she feels guilty is even happening at all.

It’s complicated. Lela never thought it’d be so damn complicated. To move on. To want to move on. To want him to show up in the middle of the night and slip pomegranate and wine into her mouth. It’s so fucking complicated.

Laughter slowly fading, Lela shakes her head and pulls her new broom out of it’s usual spot. It’s only when she’s halfway through sweeping up the entire place that Lela realizes she’s back in a familiar training room. One that didn’t really need a pass through but Lela’s all for an easy task these days. One that didn’t need Amber’s help at all but Owens could eat a moldy dick, Lela wasn’t about to send Amber away.

When she makes her way to the ring, in the same spot she’d found all those sodas before, Lela finds yet another white note and yet another soda. Ignoring the uptick of her heart, Lela reaches for the white paper and reads it.

This time around it only reads ‘Roger’s’ with a pretty little doodle of a some kind of butterfly. The wings of this black and white creature flaring out like it’s caught mid flight. So realistic that Lela half expects it to flutter up and off the page if she’s not careful. Her fingers slowly trace the elegant lines and swoops of the butterfly’s wings. Lela takes care not to smudge the ink just in case the ink is still fresh.

Her heart does that weird little flip in her chest at the thought of the blonde man sitting down to create this image. She wonders why the fuck he’s leaving her doodles at all. Obviously, he’s already fucking apologized. And seeing how she hasn’t actually followed through on any of her threats, he doesn’t have to do this.

But a small part of her, too fucking fragile and tender to touch and name, twirls around her throat and squeezes like it’s ready to snap all the bones in her neck. She’s never gotten little letters like this. Letters made specifically for her and her alone. Letters with drawings of random little things—pretty and beautiful drawings that could very well be tracings.

“Ойййййй,” Amber calls out from where she’s managed to sneak up on Lela’s left. Head snapping up, Lela stares at her friend as amber grinned wide and suspiciously, “Is that from the hottie with the body?”

Pursing her lips up, Lela very delicately grumbles out, “Yes, why?”
“What’d he draw this time?” Amber asks as she tried to use her taller height to her advantage and sneak a peek at Lela’s paper.

For whatever reason, Lela pulls the paper closer to herself and juts her chin out and growls out in annoyance. Amber, the bitch she was becoming under Lela’s easy teachings, didn’t even blink at her growl. If anything, her grin became wider.

“C’mon, don’t hold out on me, did he draw something cute?”

Fighting to keep the paper nice and unwrinkled, Lela ducks away from Amber’s reaching hands. The whole while Lela ignores the thump in her chest and the weird smile that twists up at her lips.

*~*  

>>Several notes later<<

When Lela enters the training room this time around, she makes quick work to make sure she’s alone and then books it to the boxing ring. Her hearts thumping ugly and mean in her chest. Her belly’s all kinds of knotted up in excitement and something like fear.

She’s not sure when she started fucking looking forward to white folded papers and pretty little drawings. She’s not sure when she started holding them all on her bedside table. She’s not sure when it started becoming he highlight of her fucking week.

But sure enough, every time she’s gotta come in here, clean up a room that’s already pretty much fucking sanitized already, her heart thumps and warms over.

Sitting at the ringside is the usual aluminum coke can and a white note. Greedily, she snatches up the paper and lets her hungry eyes roam over what lies upon it.

So far, she’s gotten a broom, a butterfly, some kind of little bird, a flower of some kind, two boxing gloves and a tree with leaves scattering down to the grassy floor. Each and every last one of them too damn pretty to be free hand sketches. Either way, she keeps them all on her dresser and stares at them until she nods off.

This time around she’s been given a sketch of two steaming cups. She figures they’re coffee what with the way Roger’s pretty looping words read out ‘Drinks? - Rogers’. Beneath the coffee cups sits an address with a time and date next to it.

Excitement, nervousness, and something like warmth twist up her belly until Lela feels she’s about to puke up that pasta Bruce had packed her for lunch. Lela’s dumb in a lot of ways that really mattered but she’s not fucking brain dead. She know damn well what this fuckers asking. She knows because it’s written out in black and white.

He’s asking her out for coffee.

The first thing that rushes across her mind is a solid and vicious ‘no’. Because…because Lela’s not about to do that again. She’s gotten her heart broken by two different kinds of Alpha’s. Lela’s been down this road and she knows it only leads to fucking devastation on her part.

Plus, she’s not ready. She’s not…she’s still got that scar on her. Freshly healed and barely pink. She’s still dreaming about gray eyes even if it’s not every night. She’s still wondering about his wellbeing when the days grow long and her feet ache too much for comfort. She’s not…she’s not ready to go through anything right now.
But then, slowly and way too carefully, her hindbrain extends it’s claws and sinks them into her. Hard enough to draw blood her hindbrain reminds her of all the ways her she’s been caught up in the little stupid notes. The way her heart thumps in her chest when she finds them. It reminds her of the way she drinks those sodas slow enough that they fizz out completely by the end of it. It reminds her of the way she rushes in here and hopes to find one despite knowing that one day they’ll stop completely.

The absolute worst of who she is—of what she’s been born as—twists harsh enough Lela wants to shift in place to keep from snapping in half. Logic and reason go to war with everything else. She knows it’s a bad idea—the fucking worst—but a good part of her wants to go despite that.

That part of her, the one that searches the papers for the scent of fresh rain, juniper and musk, wants her to go if only to just ask why he’s leaving out little notes for her to find. A great big part of her wants to just know what kind of person belonged to deep navy blue eyes. There’s an ugly need inside her to know what kind of person lurked beneath golden tanned skin.

Maybe, Lela thinks, if she just spoke to him—got to know him a little—she might figure out what she’s supposed to really feel. Maybe then the flutter in her chest will die down some. Maybe if she just spoke to him--stopped thinking of him of some too pretty mythical creature--she won't want him so much.

Bitting her lips, Lela stares at the paper and fucking wishes she wasn’t who she is.

Because she’s stupid in all the ways her mother fucking said she was. She’s stupid, no good and a sucker for pain apparently. Because she wants to go even if past experience has told her it’ll probably only end up as a shit fest.

She’s going, she knows, even if the scar on her heart thumps in something like betrayal for it.

Chapter End Notes

I seriously cannot thank CGKrows enough!!!! For editing Steve's mess of emotional nonsense and all his romantic thoughts. The dude turned out to be way more into Lela than I had initially planned him to be. I am so set on Lela and him Lust fucking. But apparently, Steve's already have in love and Lela's well on her way too. These assholes never do anything by halves apparently. They're not in it for the slow burn this time around, so watch the fuck out people! I think they're both well aware of the fact that time is a luxury and not something to be squandered. So they're probably gonna push this into the last gear possible. Idk, just a theory.
Anywhoooo, I hope you guys enjoyed this tiny snippet. I'm trying to post as much as I can but work picked up for me (THANK THOR ODINSON!!!!) so they're might be pauses in between. But I swear I'm still working on this story! Haven't given up on this and I refuse to do it!!!!

Either way, I hope you guys really liked it. It was way sweeter than I anticipated. But I've given up trying to wrangle these assholes to do what I want them to. they're all dead set on what they want to do. Can't talk'em outta anything.

I'm gonna stop now cause I feel like I'm rambling.
Let me know what y'all thought!!!
Taking a Chance

Chapter Summary

The parts of her that still ache, still sluggishly bleed and are too raw to touch hungers for the kindness in his eyes. It looks like a balm to her. A smooth soothing tempting thing that calls to every twisted thing in her. There’s a promise in his eyes, on the bow of his stupidly perfect lips and strangely in his scent that he’s not the kind of person that hurts for the sake of hurting. A promise that sits like a stone etched decree because Roger’s knows what it’s like to lay broken on the floor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She’s nervous. There’s a fine tremor running through her body that refuses to slip out into her hands. Excitement and something else makes it so Lela smokes half her pack on the long walk there.

It’d been a hell of a thing to ditch her pack back at home. She’d told them she was going out and Tony had kicked up a fuss as she knew he would. Sam hadn’t argued much and neither had Pepper or Bruce. But then, she guesses, they just assumed Lela was heading out to meet Amber or something. Seeing as to how Lela was frequently meeting the gamma every other weekend.

Lela’s got no doubt in her mind, if she’d have told them exactly where she was going and with who, they’d have tried to talk her out of it. Or at least, they’d have called Red up that very moment and forced Lela to sit through a FaceTime call. One where the redhead demoness would’ve demanded all the information instantly. Lela doesn’t even want to think what Clint might’ve done. (Probably abandon whatever task he was currently entangled in.)

For a solid day, Lela had contemplated not going. But the moment she’d told Amber, she was given little option on the matter. Amber had insisted—demanded—that Lela go on this little meet up. If not for the pretty face, Amber had told her, then for the amazing ass the alpha sported. Which, Lela thinks, shouldn’t have been so damn encouraging.

But that ass could make a nun sin. And it sure as fuck had Lela willing as all hell to get her heart wrecked for a chance to look at it again.

Flicking her ash off her smoke, Lela eyes the coffee shop from the other side of the street. It’s a tiny little place, with a tiny little sign. One of the rare places that looks to be independently owned and not part of a big chain. People filter in and out on a slow rhythm.
Gritting her teeth, Lela does her damnedest to peek from where she stands so far away, for the familiar head of dark golden hair. But Lela's always had shitty eyesight. She can't spot anything even remotely golden. With a frustrated huff of smoke, Lela tosses down her filter and slips her empty hands into her leather jackets' pockets. Grinding her the bottom of her boots into the concrete underneath her, Lela wills herself to be ay kinds of brave.

It's not a date, not at all—no matter what Amber said—so she’s got no real reason to be so damn fucking nervous. But she’s nervous as all fuck either way.

Stuffing away every stray thought that skitters across her mind that tells her she should just turn the fuck around and head home, Lela moves forward. It’s not a date. Not at all. But…some part of her half hopes it is. The little notes sitting on her nightstand keep her from leaving. Those notes always make a smile slip over her face as she looked them over in the dead of night. Those notes…they make her feel entirely too young and dumb.

Like she’s all of fifteen years old again. Her heart thumping a hundred miles a minute.

So she’s not going anywhere except inside that coffee shop. If only to ask why the hell she was being asked here at all. And maybe—definitely—to find out what kind of man left notes like that for a girl like herself. Some part of her is hungry in her eagerness to find out why? She’s hungry—the ache in her chest thumping for the reason as to why—he’s seen her in only anger and left her little notes littered in beauty. She’s hungry to know what kind of man set out little doodles on sodas meant to apologize for something Lela had gotten over around the first offering.

The bell rings overhead when Lela pulls open the door. A jangle of noise that goes completely ignored by the pink haired barista slinging out coffee like he was born for it. Eyes flashing about, Lela catches on a golden head and then navy blue eyes. Dressed in a nice navy blue long sleeved button up and dark slacks, sits Captain fucking Rogers. His golden hair has been perfectly combed out of his face and half slicked back. Some kind of old school vibe just oozing out of him as he stared wide eyed in her direction. His too damn pretty face a mixture of surprise and relief that pulled his golden brows up high and popped his stupidly pink lips open on a silent 'o'.

He’s way too fucking good looking, Lela inwardly curses. Too damn handsome to just be a regular ai breathing human. Lela wouldn’t be surprised at all if he turned out to be some kind of love child born from the burning sun and summertime goddesses. Lust pools like liquid fire deep into the very pit of her belly at the sight of him.

Her dark eyes track his face like she’s looking for some kind of knife hidden on the bow of his stupidly plump lips. She finds none. But Lela’s been fooled by a pretty face once before. So she knows there’s gotta be some kind of hang up here.

Still, the sight of him, all dressed up like he’s about to grace the cove of some magazine waiting for her….it makes her heart thump a little harder in her chest. Seeing him, straining the seams of his stupidly tight button up makes Lela’s belly swoop out. Her mouth runs a little dry at the way he stares at her like she is a magic trick in motion. Like, if he looked away for too long, she’d vanish into thin air and leave him hanging.

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela slowly makes her way over to him. Ignoring the inherent need to fucking turn right the fuck around and split. Instead she squares her shoulders and juts her chin up as she tosses herself down into the seat on the other side of Roger’s little table. Her abrupt drop startles Rogers out of whatever little spell he’d found himself in.
Leaning against the back of her seat, Lela attempts to be as casual as possible despite the ugly knot in the pit of her belly. A knot that’s built of lust, of want, of her nervousness and every other dumbass emotion she’s housing within herself. She crosses her arms over her chest and kicks her legs out underneath the table between them. Her left foot knocking against the table leg causing the little vase on the table to clatter and wobble. The pink and red daisy’s inside bump delicately into one another. Their scent kicks up but settles down underneath the heavy push of coffee grounds in the air.

Every line of her body speaking to aggression barely held together. Her nervousness spilling into all the behaviors she’d thought she’d gotten out of her system. But, clearly, she was pretty much the same ugly little shit her mother had created so long ago. Her body only ever feeling her’s when she was posturing all the feral behavior that ensured she wasn’t a thing to be touched.

“Uh, I—I didn’t think you’d…I wasn’t sure if you’d come,” Rogers fumbles, his right hand reaching out to still the dance the daisy’s were still doing.

Running her tongue over her teeth, Lela gruffly spits out, “You asked me to.”

Which was a lie. All Rogers had done was drawn coffee cups and written down a time and place. An invitation that could’ve easily been ignored. More than half of her wonders why the hell she hadn’t ignored it at all.

Soft pink staining those stupidly chiseled cheek bones of his, Rogers ducks his head as a small crooked smile slipped onto his lips, “I—yes, ma’am. I did. Thank you for coming.”

And there it is, half the reason she hadn’t ignored the offer for a drink. Rogers didn’t make sense. Not at all. Not to her. There he was—an alpha built to roll over any and all others of his rank—ducking down shyly and gently. Like he was really some sweet natured gamma or something.

There are days, when she’s looking over all her little notes, that the image of him swirls her brain. The way he curls into himself, makes himself smaller under her eyes, both pleases the worst in her and makes the absolute vile within her ache.

The monster she’s become singing with victory and the omega in her begging to lift his face up by her own two hands.

It’s weird. Fucking confusing.

But Lela ignores that as much as she’s able. She focuses on his words because his words are oddly formal. Way too formal for Lela’s comfort. No one speaks to her in ‘ma’am’s or thanks her for shit. Only time Lela got ‘ma’am’ed was in the free clinics she used to frequent back in the day. And even then not so much.

It’s weird and it’s even weirder how her hindbrain trips on it’s dirty feet as it uncoiled within her. The way Rogers seems to curl in on himself in something like self consciousness makes her crossed arms loosen up just a tad bit.

Not knowing what she’s supposed to do here and now, Lela settles on simply asking, “So, what’s up?”

“I, uh, I wanted to apologize, formally, for what happened that day,” Rogers tells her. His face growing stern and somewhat contrite, “I—I shouldn’t have left you to clean up after my mess. My ma’ raised me better than that. I just…I wasn’t thinkin’.”

Face shrugging, Lela shrugs her shoulders and unwinds her arms so she can place her elbows onto the table. She’s swallowing up more space than she ought to considering she’s on the other side of an
Alpha. But she’s never been one to back down from higher dynamics. She’s never given them that space everyones told they’re supposed to just hand over.

The move is half deliberate and half instinctual. To not relent a single inch of space around her for others to encroach upon. To make it clear as all hell that she was a Dom something or the other.

Navy blue eyes track her movements easily. Understanding settling in he is eyes like he had expected nothing less from her and was willing as all hell to move back and let her take more from him.

It makes her hindbrain both sink and swim in a way she’s never felt it go. Half of her aches to pull back and see what he does while the other half wonders how much further the man will pull himself away for her.

“It ain’t shit man. As long as you don’t leave me that shit no more. We’re good. Yeah?”

Opening his mouth, looking like he’s about to swear up and down that he wouldn’t—Rogers gets silenced by the waitress that appears by their little table. Buzz cut, lips and ears pierced, tattoos on each of her forearms, the Beta waitress doesn’t raise her eyes to either one of them. She ducks her head down and asks softly what they’ll be having.

For a split second, Lela wonders who the waitress is baring her throat for. For Rogers or for her. Lela wonders if the waitress was looking at Lela’s aggression and was pegging her as an alpha like Amber and Rogers had too. But that thought gets washed away by Roger’s deep and rumbling voice.

Roger’s orders himself a coffee with a pump of caramel and then looks at her like he’s waiting on Lela to just up and refuse drinking anything around him. Like he’s prepared as anything to get tossed aside by Lela’s refusal. It’s weird but Lela keeps her peace about it and orders herself a sweetened tea and hopes it’s sugary enough. They lapse into an awkward silence after that. Neither one of them looking like they know what to do now.

Personally, Lela’s not sure what she’s supposed to do. What she’s supposed to talk about with someone she doesn’t know in the middle of a coffee shop. Her tongue sits dead and weighted in her mouth. Held in place by sharp white teeth of all the jumbled up bullshit she can’t make out on a good day.

The last time Lela was caught up in something like this had been with…well, with him. And even then, they had…they had known a little of each other before they sat down and shared anything. She and Rogers were perfect strangers. Strangers with an ugly start of things. So she doesn’t know what she’s supposed to do.

What was she supposed to do here and now? Lela briefly regrets not asking any of her pack mates what she was getting herself tangled up in.

Only when the waitress has returned and placed their drinks between them does Rogers eventually break the silence:

“So, have you been working at Starks for long?”

Twirling her straw through her drink, Lela thinks his question over. She doesn’t rightly know how long she’s been working in the tower anymore. The days have blurred with all that’s filled them. Making it so it feels like an eternity and much too short.

“I guess, you?”
“I, uh, I don’t actually work there,” Rogers admits. A strange kind of smile pulling at the right side of his lips, “I work with Stark. Sometimes.”

“Ah, so you’re like into the whole saving the world bullshit too, huh?” Lela sums up as she took a sip of her drink. The moment the liquid hits her tongue she makes a face full of distaste. The shit was way too bitter. Grabbing hold of at least seven different packets from the sugar tray, Lela tears them open with her teeth and dumps the grains into her drink.

“Ha, yeah, you could say that,” Roger says with a wide grin as he took a sip from his steaming mug. His blue eyes glitter over the rim of his mug as he shrugged his massive shoulders, “Never heard it be called bullshit before.”

For all his well mannered formalities, there was a twinkle in his too deep blue eyes that spoke of mischief. A twinkle that spoke of a man who enjoyed all the worst kinds of filth Lela herself did. It makes her belly grow tight—that twinkle.

“Just calling it how I see it, Rogers,” Lela tells him without apology as she lazily stirred her drink with her straw. A small smirk tilting up the edges of her mouth.

“Uh, it’s Steve—I mean, I’m Steve. Steve Rogers,” Rogers—Steve—fumbled out. The pink on his face growing a touch darker.

Doing her best not to smile at the man’s fumbling nature—and fucking failing—Lela nods. Her heart crashing against the battered bones of her ribcage.

Despite having his first name now, Lela’s not about to go using it. Not even in the safety of her own mind. She knows better now. Knowing the names of devils didn’t stop them from ripping ones heart out. Getting all nice and familiar had been what had started the whole shit with another she won’t name now in the privacy of her own mind.

Chewing on the inside of her cheek, Lela wrenches her eyes away from the man and over to the shop she’s found herself in. She focuses on that instead. She lets her mind fill up with her surroundings because that was safer than all the shit she doesn’t want to touch these days.

The place is an odd combination of classic old school vibes and new age progression. A weird splash of retro blending into the spunk of hipster bullshit. Up close, Lela can spot the fresh faces of college kids and all their makings. Tattoos, piercings and shit making Rogers—in his blue button up and black slacks—look like the odd man out. Made him look all the more prettier, to be honest.

Like a bar of gold amid a river of dull gravel.

“You come here often?” Lela asks, because she’s having some difficulty picturing the man coming here on a daily.

Shrugging his shoulders, ducking his head in slight embarrassment, Rogers mumbles, “Not really, no. I, uh, I asked around and someone suggested it.”

Refusing to feel any kind of way at the fact that Rogers had attempted to find a place for them, Lela dutifully glances down at her drink. It’s only as she’s looking down at her drink that she notices the little napkin set before him. There’s some kind of drawing printed on it. A half made image of flowers in bloom.

The sight of it reminds her of all the drawings sitting on her night stand. It reminds her of all the doubt she had that he’d managed to create them all on his own. This pretty daisy’s in black ink and white background, tell her Rogers was gorgeous and fucking talented too.
Which, honestly, was all kinds of unfair in Lela’s opinion. Like he needed more of a reason to be set higher above her.

Wetting her lips, feeling something choke up her throat, Lela gruffly demands, “What’s with all the little pictures you’ve been leaving out for me?”

Blushing—full on fucking ruddy faced—Rogers drops his eyes down to his half empty mug. He chews on his bottom lip as he delicately asked her, “I don’t know. I just…I thought you’d like them? Did you?”

Maybe it’s the blush on his stupidly handsome face. Maybe it’s the expression currently twisting him up like a kid who’s pretty sure he’s about to get shit on. Maybe it’s the fact that Roger’s had made them out for her on the off chance Lela might like them. Maybe it’s the rabid rhythm of her heart thumping like Lela was flat out running.

Maybe it’s all of it and none of it.

Either way, it makes words slip out of her mouth before she knows she’s saying them.

“The birds my favorite.”

And it was. The strange chunky little thing always made Lela smile even if she didn’t really know why.

“Ah, the robin?” Rogers asks, a wide wobbling smile spreading on his face as his shoulders evened out. Something like pleasure and pride fill his dumb blue glittering eyes.

“That what it is?”

Grinning wide, Rogers nods his head and says, “They’re supposed to be good luck, or something like that.”

Jutting her bottom lip out, Lela face shrugs and admits, “Never been real lucky. Moms always called me ‘shit blessed’. Kinda stuck.”

“I, uh, I never bought into that whole…thing,” Rogers offers off handedly. Like he’s struggling to sound any kind of casual.

Brows furrowing on her face, Lela tilts her head and repeats, “You don’t buy into what? Luck?”

“Not really, no?” Rogers admits with a crooked smile as he leaned his elbows onto the table. The bent angle of his arms flexing the seams of his shirt half obscene, “I like to think we can all make our own luck if we try hard enough.”

Arching a brow, Lela purses her lips up in just a tad bit of annoyance. His words make something old in her—abuse born and lesser dynamic made—twist in bitter resentment. Because what the hell did he know about anything? Rogers was a fucking Alpha. An Alpha built to rule over all other alphas by the looks of it. Of course he could bend the will of life itself and beat out a better version for his own likes. It’d be easy for him to walk into anything with his head held high and walk out the clear winner.

The rest of the world—Lela included—had to fight for the right to survive. Everyone else—Lela especially—had a hell of a lot to prove. That they weren’t stepping stones for those ranked higher above.
Everyone else had to take what shit luck came their way and thank the stars cause they all knew it could be worse.

“Yeah,” Lela drawls out sarcastic and entirely too fucking bitter, “Not all of us are stacked like fucking mountains here Alpha. We take what shitty luck we got and roll with the punches.”

Looking like he regrets opening his mouth, Rogers pulls back and away from the table. A slight frown mars his face. It pulls at his brows until a little wrinkle forms between them. Slowly, so very very slow, that it looks like he’s putting a hell of a lot of thought into it, Rogers says:

“I…life’s hard on everyone,” Rogers tells her, his rumbling deep voice pitched low. His eye’s losing some of their gleam as he seemed to speak of experience, “More so on some than others. But, we can all make the life we want ours. I mean, I wasn’t always—” at this he waves awkwardly at himself before continuing on “__this way. I used to be a scrawny kid when I was younger. Probably only about a couple inches taller than you and probably half your weight. Being an alpha didn’t really help me then. Made it worse, kind of. People thought I was easy to knock around when they wanted to.”

“Was it?” Lela asks, surprised by the honesty sitting in Roger’s voice.

For all that Rogers was an alpha of impeccable making now, there was an old kind of pain in his voice and eyes. The kind that said he hadn’t always been the one standing at the end of a fight. The kind that told her they were probably a lot more a like than Lela wanted to know. Like Rogers knew exactly what it felt like to be the one pushed down and expected to stay the fuck down or else.

It makes her bitter resentment die almost instantly. Something small and delicate twirls in her mind at his words. Understanding settles on her like it had with Amber. The world was cruel to everyone and it didn’t matter what dynamic they were.

Sometimes, people were just as shit blessed as Lela seemed to be. Alpha, Beta, Gamma or Omega, sometimes the world was just as much a bitch to everyone else as it was to her.

The realization of this ugly knowledge makes Lela a hell of a lot less angry in a way she hasn’t really gotten over. Even with her pack at her back and the options rolling out in front of her. It settles down that bitter resentment she finds herself still wallowing in some days. This realization makes it so Rogers doesn’t feel like he’s standing so high above her on the fucking moon. That he’s standing on the same planet and walking through the same shit she was sometimes.

Grinning wryly, Roger’s wobbles his head in a so and so manner before admitting, “Kind of. I was all bones then. I could take a hit easy but wasn’t so good on throwing one.”

His words force a small snort out of her because, yeah, that was Lela back then too. She could get wailed on pretty bad and still get herself moving an hour later. Broken ribs, broken fingers and a busted nose never kept her down too long. Knowing that Rogers was something like her makes some of her nervousness boil away and evaporate like steam.

Gorgeous as he was, Rogers was still only just flesh and blood. Human just like Lela. If not the same rank.

“Not now though, right?” Lela hedges, her smile growing sharp, “Ya popping bags like they owe ya something.”

Ducking his head, scrubbing at the back of his neck, Rogers laughs out, “It’s always an accident, I swear.”
Hating how much she likes the way his perfect white teeth sparkle with his smile and the sound of his laugh, Lela watches him. Her heart tripping in her chest because she wants to see more of that smile and hear more of his rumbling deep laugh. Her hindbrain—the dirty backstabbing bitch it was—chasing that sound like it was starved for it.

Putting her hands up, Lela leans back into her seat and declares, “Long as I don’t have to clean it, you can kill as many fucking bags as ya want. Stark’s probably got enough on him to keep replacing them till the world stops spinning.”

Which was probably true. Last she heard from Bruce, Tony was on another level of fucking rich. One only he himself alone stood upon.

“He—he actually started giving me a limit on how many punching bags I demolish per month,” Rogers informs her with a small crooked grin. His blue eyes glittering again as he admitted slyly, “I’m actually already in the red.”

Laughing, Lela nods her head, because, yeah Tony would. He probably set that limit the moment Lela had kicked up a fuss about it back at her place. Apparently, everyone of her pack mates was well aware of Rogers existence. Each and everyone had shot each other knowing looks as Lela spit growls every which way. Sam actively talking her down like he was scared Lela would truly kick the man’s ass.

The memory sparks up the question Lela finds herself asking.

“So, how’d you know Sam?”

“Wilson?” Rogers starts and then goes on to explain, “We, uh, we work together. Sometimes. He’s a friend. We go back some ways.”

“No shit?” Lela mumbles as she took a pull off her purple straw.

“He helped me out of tight spot. He’s…he’s a good man.”

Nodding her head firmly, believing the words like they were an absolute fact, Lela licks her lips before agreeing, “I know.”

She figures that’s how Rogers figured out her name and exactly how to properly bribe her. Fucking Sam was a no good fucking snitch.

“He said…he told me you two were pack?” Rogers says but his eyes hold some kind of question he doesn’t seem up to asking.

Something strangely possessive flutters in the pit of Lela’s belly. The need to hide and protect what is her’s flares.

Slowly, so slowly Lela hopes it comes out natural, Lela shrugs her shoulders and glances out and away to the window at her left. She watches people walk past for a long moment before she admits:

“Yeah, he’s…he’s pack.”

And as much as the words are true they feel like they fall short. Like they don’t really encompass all that Sam is to her. Like they do him a disservice. Like they do all of them a disservice. They were pack and she loved them all but they were more than that too. Friends and yet not. Pack and yet more.
Her mind whispers a word Lela’s been too afraid to use since her mother was laid into the ground in a wooden box. A word Lela doesn’t feel like she deserves to say much as say. A word Lela won’t say because she’s superstitious even if she doesn’t want to be. Too afraid to say it and have her whole world come crashing to the floor in flames.

They’re quiet for a spell, both of them. Locked in the things they won’t say and all the things neither of them seem brave enough to force out of their mouths. But eventually, Rogers seems to girdle whatever courage he’s built of and asks:

“I uh, I know we don’t know each other and I haven’t exactly had the best first impression on you—but, I was hoping I could, uh…” Rogers pauses, his hands nervously spinning his dark mug between both hands as his eyes met hers, “I was wondering if you’d be up to seeing me again?”

Wide eyed, Lela stares at the man and feels her throat choke up. Her hearts thumping in her chest. Her belly growing tight all over again. Her hindbrain screaming for a yes while fear crept slow and careful through her veins.

Every inch of her wants to snatch up the offer Rogers is dangling out in front of her. to grip it with both hands and run in whatever direction it pulled. It’s weird—a goddamn mind fucking thing—that she wants to run for it. To scoop it up before he pulls it away from her.

Because he’s a nice guy underneath his Alpha musk, fresh rain, and juniper scent. Rogers was kind, Lela could see it in his eyes. He held in his gaze the kind of knowledge of what it felt like to ripped open and slowly put back together with pieces that had already scabbed over.

The parts of her that still ache, still sluggishly bleed and are too raw to touch hungers for the kindness in his eyes. It looks like a balm to her. A smooth soothing tempting thing that calls to every twisted thing in her. There’s a promise in his eyes, on the bow of his stupidly perfect lips and strangely in his scent that he’s not the kind of person that hurts for the sake of hurting. A promise that sits like a stone etched decree because Roger’s knows what it’s like to lay broken on the floor.

It knocks her off balance. Makes it so Lela doesn’t know how she’s still sitting on her seat at all.

Slow, so damn slow, the hole in her chest flares with something like old pain. A dull throb of a break in a bone when the chill of winter set in. Betrayal rings inside of her like an echo from somewhere far far away.

It strikes Lela as all kinds of fucking strange that only now—only when she’s ready half way into the end of this—that the hole in her chest thrums with anything. It hits Lela really late how much she’s wanted to come here at all. It hits her fucking delayed how Rogers—all of him—had washed away every inch of gray eyes, soft smiles and pomegranate kisses.

But now, sitting at the other end of Roger’s promise and half hopeful expression, Lela remembers the man that broke her heart in half. Lela remembers all the reasons that this wasn’t as good an idea as she had hoped it’d be.

Feeling her face twist with all the things that sits heavy on her head, Lela glances down at the drink in her hand as she forced the words out of her mouth:

“I, uh, I just got out of relationship not too long ago.”

Whatever expression Roger’s wears, Lela doesn’t know because she doesn’t look. but she figures she doesn’t have to because she hears his disappointment in his words:

“O-Oh, I’m…I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to over step.”
Huffing out a sarcastic laugh, Lela twirls her straw through her sugary tea and shakes her head as she mumbled, “Don’t be. I…it is what it is, ya know?”

“Well, I know it ain’t my place, but, he sounds like a damn idiot ma’am.” Rogers states with such firmness Lela is forced to look up at him.

What she finds is an infinite belief of his own words sitting on his face. His brows are pulled together as he wore a rigid frown on his pink lips. Confused Lela just stares at him because she’s not entirely sure what she’s supposed to say to that.

Lela settles on an eloquent, “What?”

Face full of a bravery he hadn’t been wearing before, Rogers squares his shoulders and raises his chin like he’s willing to fight anyone over what he says next, “Anyone that can look at you and walk away ain’t worth much. He’s the worst kind of idiot.”

The insult flung at Jame’s currently missing head makes something in her pull back and away. As if a part of her still didn’t want anyone bad mouthing him broken up or not. And yet, the part of her that’s hurt—that’s still so fucking raw over it all—unfurls at the way Rogers seems to be looking at her and saying what he’s saying.

Heat explodes across Lela’s entire face. Something like shyness makes Lela want to duck her own face away. To hide herself from Rogers and his stupid words. But mainly those swirling deep royal navy blue eyes of his. Honestly, Lela marvels, who the fuck said that to someone like her?

Lela’s a realist, she knows her face wasn’t anything to write home about. She’s the wrong shade by the way of this worlds appreciation. She’s rounded out all kinds of wrong now that she’s got some weight on her. She barely fills out her B sized bras because most of her weight sits on her hips, ass and thighs. (A token from her mothers side of things.) Her face was a touch too youthful to be any kinds of pretty. Having a shot with James had been all kinds of miraculous, she knows. Lela doesn’t know how she managed to score that fallen angel the way she had. But she won’t question it for the life of her.

It’d been a blessing wrapped within a curse. A fucking one off. Life rewarding her for all the shit it’d piled on her only to yank him away because she was just so fucking shit blessed.

Sitting across from Rogers—beautiful and gorgeous in all the ways gods of old had been rumored to be—Lela wonders what the fuck he sees that he believes his words so much.

Her stupidly racing heart runs gooey at it all. Everything in her turning to mush in a way she was sure she wouldn’t ever go again.

Coughing into her closed left fist, Lela gruffly brushes off his words with a simple, “He was outta my league anyway. Shit was destined to fucking implode anyway.”

“No,” Rogers disagrees, stern and serious as he shook his head and leaned his weight back onto the table. There’s a challenge in his gaze that says he won’t back down even for her as he said, “You’re a dime sweetheart, if anyone was out of someones league—it was you for him.”

Face growing hotter over such a ridiculous set of words, Lela awkwardly laughs and runs her hand over her face and grumbles, “You don’t even know me man. You ain’t really qualified to say any of that shit.”

“That’s true,” Rogers starts, a small smile working it’s way through his grime frown, “But, I only gotta look at you to know he was the lucky one to have you on his arm.”
Taking a sip from her drink, Lela shakes her head and deflects all of that bullshit, “Why you asking after me, anyway? ain’t you got like a long line of people throwing themselves at your feet?”

Half of her is pretty sure Rogers’ interest is purely out of pity. No way in fucking hell did a face like that—ocean eyes like that—not have roves of people fucking desperate for the man. If Lela was any kinds of right, she’d have rushed after him day one. There’s a great big part of her that wants to run after him regardless of her mismatched limbs.

Smile twisting into something that was like old sadness, Rogers admits, “I, uh, I haven’t really met anyone like you before. The last time I felt…anything for someone was…it was so long ago. And she, uh…she—“

Lela’s heart slows, the heat on her face fades as she watched Roger’s trying to work out what he’s set on saying. Dread sits on Lela’s chest at what might come spilling out of his mouth.

“What happened?” Lela finds herself asking. A dark part of her hungry for the knowledge of what he’s trying to say anyway.

Eyes dimming dark, Rogers wets his lips and stares at his drink as he confessed, “She died.”

Wide eyed, Lela feels the words slip out of her lips like they’re yanked out of her with rusty fish hooks, “Fuck.”

It takes him a while, but, eventually Rogers lifts his eyes and offers her a delicately curved smile as he said, “It was a long time ago. And she…she wasn’t ever mine. Not really. I lost her before I had a real chance.”

It’s only now that Lela understands that sadness that sits on his face and in his eyes. Rogers was heart broken too. Ripped open and still raw by something that time was trying to heal. Something like compassion, like sympathy and empathy combined pulls Lela towards him until her elbows are perched upon the table too.

“I’m sorry,” Lela offers him, if only because she can see the heaviness in his dark blue eyes. If only because she can’t imagine what he must feel like in this moment. Can’t begin to imagine it. Won’t because as much as she loved James—if he died, she’d be gutted and fucking waste away from the pain of it.

Lela can’t imagine how someone can carry on through that and still smile so sweetly as Steve did. Lela wonders what kind of strength the man must be built with to still be standing as tall as he was. What strength laid in him that he was still sitting here with her asking for a chance after heart ache like that.

His smile is soft when he nods his head and tells her, “Don’t be. She had a good life. Got herself Mated. She was happy when she went.”

Pinching her lips between her teeth, Lela bites off all the questions that want to bubble out of her. She doesn’t think it’s her place to ask how he’s so heart broken for someone that seemed to have moved on with her life without him before she died. It ain’t her place and it sure as fuck wasn’t the time.

Actually, Lela thinks, none of what they were talking about seemed to be built for a first meet and greet. If this really was a date, it was pretty fucking heavy. She doesn’t really know what it is, or why, but it doesn’t feel as invasive as it would be with anyone else. Lela knows if someone had slit open their guts and laid them at her feet like Steve had, she’d have booked it a hell of a lot sooner.
It’s his eyes, Lela thinks. Dark as the deepest parts of the ocean blue. They swallow her up and keep her stranded like an island in the middle of it all. It’s his soft smiles built of spun gold that disarm her the most. It’s everything else about him that makes her stay. The heart he seems to have that’s built of just as many scars as her own. His lips—so fucking pretty and pink—fill her head up with the need to find out how soft they are. Lela wonders what it must feel like to kiss the sadness off those fucking lips.

All of it confuses her as much as it fills her with excitement. That offer he’d held out for her with a hopeful smile screams at her.

If anyone knew what it was like to be kicked to the curb as she had, it’d be him. To be left behind to pick themselves up in the quiet of a raging storm, it was him.

As much as they stood on the opposite ends of the world, Lela thinks there’s a lot about them that was similar. The only difference being that while the world had molded Steve into being a better version of himself; Lela had let the world beat her into a shape that was much too sharp.

And god, Lela was so tired of letting the old part of her take hold of wheel and steer. She’s not who she used to be. Not the monster her mother had bred. Not the victim she turned out to be by her first love. Not the mongrel the streets had spit out. Lela’s a strange new creation of all of that and all the things her pack and James had created. A thing that hoped despite knowing no good ever came from that.

These days, all Lela wants is to be able to walk into something new and just…just hope for the best.

And it’s with that, that she makes up her mind before she can really think better of it.

“Fuck it,” Lela curses with a heavy sigh as she rummaged through her back pocket. Slapping a twenty onto the table, Lela jerks her head to the side and gets to her feet.

When she’s standing on the busy sidewalk, smoke pinched between her lips, Lela whirls around and stares up at Steve and spits up at him:

“You gotta know one thing about me before we do this.”

Looking completely confused, Steve just looks down at her in silence. But slowly, his face grows determined as his eyes shined with bitter sweet hope.

That hope gives Lela’s waning confidence a boost as she told him, “I’m a bitch on most days. Like, seriously, I’m an asshole. I fucking spit curses more than people think is fucking proper. And I’m like the last person you wanna be around when I’m hungry, tired, fucking sleep deprived or jonseing for a smoke. I hate fucking mornings and I swear to god if you’re the kind of guy who expects me to go all honey sweet just cause you’re an alpha, don’t even fucking try this shit. I ain’t gonna be baring my throat for you even if you fang out and growl my way. I’ll fucking rip your throat out if you fucking try that shit with me. And, my whole packs probably gonna try to gun you down when they find out—like no fucking joke—they’re pretty mean fuckers when they wanna be.”

Lela’s not sure why she’s saying what she’s saying only that she is. The words fall fast and messy out of her mouth. Both a warning and like a disclaimer just in case all this shit goes sideways. They feel, if nothing at all, like all the reasons in the world to dissuade Steve from even looking at her the way he is. Reasons to make him turn right the fuck around and not try.

They seem to have the opposite effect, truth be told. The more Lela speaks the wider his smile grows and the more his blue-blue eyes sparkled with mirth and excitement. As if he’s eager as all shit to run
towards Lela no matter how many landmines stand between them.

But then, just as fast as she’d gotten her courage, it slips out of her as she stares up at his insanely high placed face.

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela pulls in a deep drag and exhales poisonous fumes and words, “I’m not entirely over my recent fuckin’ heartbreak. Like, I’m still working out all the reasons why he left. I’m…I’m probably gonna be all kinds of fucking insecure about shit, or whatever. But…But if you’re up for it then…then I’m fucking game. Just know it ain’t gonna be simple. It ain’t gonna be all roses or shit.”

Smile wide enough to split his pretty face in half, Steve stares down at her as he squared his shoulders and adopted a familiar alpha stance. The kind that said he welcomed the entire world to try to push him back from whatever he was trying to take home with him.

Briefly, and wildly, Lela wonders if that’s just something he does or if it’s because of her. That he’s willing to fight for her no good ass. Darkly, her heart races because everything hopes inside of her that it is for her. That Steve is willing to fight for whatever Lela’s suddenly signing herself up for. Because the last time her heart tripped like this, the other person hadn’t fought like she’d fought. He’d walked away and left her hanging in the wind. Lela doesn’t want to be abandoned like that again. The fear of it keeps her up at night. Fucks with her head more than she’d like to admit.

The thought of going into this—whatever this was—with Steve only to have it end as abruptly, as fucking painful—as it had with James makes everything in her twist. She doesn’t want to go into anything if he was just gonna walk away when the going got tough. What the fuck was the point of any of that?

Pulling his hands out of his pockets, extending his right, Steve holds out his hand for Lela to take as he swore—with a promise built of iron will: “I’m in this until you don’t want me to. I’ll follow you until you send me away. All I’m asking is for a chance. Just one.”

Heart in her throat, Lela places her smoke on her lips and takes his held out hand with her own. The dry roughness of his palm scratching against Lela’s own. Steve’s hand is bigger than her own. It swallows it up and makes something too hot to touch pool in the pit of her belly. When he grips her hand tight enough to clasp her in a firm hand shake Lela can read all the strength she’d seen form him when he’d exploded a punching bag.

Not knowing how to end this—whatever this was—Lela nods her head and slowly pulls her hand away from his. The action making every inch of her second dynamic roar in protest. There’s a need inside her that screams for her to snatch up that hand and keep it tightly clenched in her own. To keep him close lest he turn to a smokey memory too.

But Lela takes his promise to heart even if she knows she doesn’t know jack shit about him to believe it. Steve was a golden built mountain and hell or high water may come, but, he wasn’t the type to walk away or back down. She knew that much from him now. She could see it in his eyes.

“You got a pen?” Lela asks, as she asked her smoke onto the ground.

Nodding his head, Steve reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a strange marker type shit. An elegant little black thing that Lela suspects was how every one of doodles came to be. Steve hands it over to her without an issue or an ounce of question. Waving her hand for him to come closer, Lela
uncaps the pen. Quietly, Steve does as he’s asked. He steps closer to her and allows Lela to grip his hand up again. He makes no effort to protest her actions as she unfolded his hand and held it palm up.

Smoke pinched between her lips, Lela can barely make out the scent of him. But damn if she doesn’t try to sniff him out. Fresh rain, juniper and his Alpha musk assault her senses. It makes her head swim as much as it makes her abuse born instincts want to push him away. Making quick work to scribble out her number, Lela caps the pen back up and slips it into her back pocket without thought.

Pulling her smoke away from her lips, Lela offers him what she hopes is a confident enough smirk as she exhaled smoke laced words, “See ya around Steve.”

It’s only until she’s halfway back home that Lela wonders when the fuck Rogers became Steve. It’s only when she’s more than halfway back to her building does the full weight of her entire afternoon hit her. Her feet stutter beneath her until she’s made a full stop. Wide eyed, she stares down at the concrete beneath her. Lela’s mind whirls with all of it. Desperate, Lela searches inside every spinning emotion she has. What she finds is excitement, a strange set of joy and something like hope too.

Not an ounce of regret ever surfaces.

She takes it as a good sign and forces her feet back into motion. Because she’s tired of second guessing everything in her life. For once, Lela was gonna just move and not think of all the ways she could get fucked right the fuck over.

---

This whole thing got away from me, I'm not gonna lie. I tried to cut it down because I'm
not too happy in the direction it went but in the end I left it all in. Mainly because I don't
know how else to go about Steve and Lela's beginning if not with some hard open
honest truths between them. Steve and Lela are going to be way different than Bucky
and Lela.

For one, Lela seems to be running on an all cards on the table state of mind right now.
Sure she's still fucked up by James leaving, but it's only making her want to be real with
herself and those around her. Someone as important as James had left with things unsaid
on her part and she's not about to do that twice in a lifetime. So...yeah.

I really hope you guys liked it.
Let me know what you thought!!!!!!

Next up, Lela going about dating someone who just about everyone is gonna be dead
set against. The joy!
**Some truths spilled**

**Chapter Summary**

But, Lela’s not stupid, or at least not by that much. She knows it’s probably all kinds of insane to be this attached so early on. But there’s very little she can do on the matter when Steve smiles at her the way he does. When he looks at her like she’s the best thing since sliced fucking bread. When he laughs loud and long at something filthy she’s joking about. It’s stupid considering she’s fresh out of another relationship but damn if it doesn’t feel great to be this happy again.

**Chapter Notes**

Fair warning, SMUT here lies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So what’s with you?” Tony demands in a way only he could ever ask. His dark eyes assessing her from where he stands in her living room.

Feigning confusion, Lela furrows her brows and shrugs as naturally as she can possibly manage, “Whadd’ya mean?”

Lela’s not stupid. She knows damn well just about everyone of her pack mates is wise to the fact that she’s actively hiding something from them.

Each and everyone of them have tried to weasel it out of her every chance they could. Pepper was trying—and failing—to get it out of Lela every time they did their routine spa days in Tony’s level. Bruce asked only once while they baked a pineapple pie and let it go when Lela had easily deflected. Sam was getting harder and harder to dodge because of the guilt that rose in Lela’s chest. Even Red and Chuckles have been calling her nonstop these past few days.

Sam the no good fucking gossiping bitch that he was had let them in on Lela’s shifty nature early on. Lela’s not entirely sure how Natasha’s glare felt weighted and cold even through her laptop screen. But there it was. Chuckles was not above using his big puppy dog eyes and so Lela was already caving on that front.
Tony, as always, was the only one being as direct as only he could be. It’s heartwarming as much as it is upsetting.

Because Lela knows they’re only worried for her. But despite all that, Lela won’t her mouth up and say a damn word.

Pursing his lips, Tony settles his hands on his hips and glares up at her, “Don’t make me come up there kid. I will not be ignored.”

Heaving a tired sigh, Lela pulls away from the railing and tosses herself on her rumpled bed as she tossed back at him, “Boss man, I really—really—doubt anyone or anything could ever ignore you. Like, ever. You’re too much of a pain in the fucking ass.”

“I’m taking that as a compliment even though it sounds, suspiciously, like an insult with the way you’re saying it,” Tony tells her as he stomped his way up her stairs and over to her bedroom space.

Rolling her eyes and the rest of her body, Lela sprawls on her belly as she stared at Tony making himself known. His whole body’s puffed up in that way that says he’s determined to get something he wants. Both an alpha trait and something so inherently Tony.

“Don’t get me fucking twisted babe, it’s a fucking insult,” Lela smirks at him as she tossed at his stupid face one of her pillows.

Catching the stupid thing with grace, Tony narrows his eyes on her and accuses, “You’re keeping secrets from me kid. What’s up with that.”

Despite the guilt that rings in her chest over that, Lela staunchly denies him with a simple, “No I’m not.”

“Yes you are. Four times this past month you’ve vanished and skipped out on dinner. Something you don’t do at all when it’s Brucie’s turn in the kitchen.”

And, oomph, wasn’t that damning evidence. If there was one thing Lela loved more than her smokes it was the way Bruce could whip up home cooked meals that did nothing for her health except shave a few years off of it. It was a guilty pleasure she was taking full advantage of while the Red Baroness was out of town. Lela knows Natasha’s gonna put them all on a strict nutritional diet of some sort when she got back.

“You’re ditching us for something,” Tony states with all the gravity of a lone ranger about to lay down some serious wild west law and order, “So spill.”

“I’m not ditching you assholes, I fucking live with all of you. I literally have breakfast with each and everyone of you every goddamn day. It’s physically impossible to ditch anyone of you,” Lela growls out in annoyance, “Plus, I have a fucking social life now. Is that not allowed? I thought Pepper was like on board for me going about having normal human experiences?”

None of what she’s said is a lie. Lela isn’t ditching them. She lets them know in advance she’s heading out that afternoon or night. Though she hasn’t been telling any single one of them the who’s or where’s.

Lela’s not entirely eager for any of them to meet the person she’s been running around all of town with. She’s not entirely sure why, only that she is. Something inside her wants to make sure Steve’s not just some casual fling that’s bound to fizzle and burn out. Lela doesn’t want to bring him around if that’s the case. She’s pretty sure the next dude that she brings over and winds up breaking her heart is gonna wake up with busted knees or something equally disturbing.
So she’s playing it safe.

Well, as safe as something like this could be.

Which is to say, not at all. Because it’s only been a couple of dates and Lela knows she’s fucking head over heels for a dude she knows almost nothing about. It’s half his scent, half his eyes, half his smile, half his fucking dimpled right cheek, half his fucking incredibly stacked body and everything else that has her tits deep into the messy feelings she has now.

And god how they’re messy. So fucking complicated and intense Lela aches to take a step back because she’s always two seconds away from tangling her fingers into his golden head and crashing their lips together.

But, Lela’s not stupid, or at least not by that much. She knows it’s probably all kinds of insane to be this attached so early on. But there’s very little she can do on the matter when Steve smiles at her the way he does. When he looks at her like she’s the best thing since sliced fucking bread. When he laughs loud and long at something filthy she’s joking about. It’s stupid considering she’s fresh out of another relationship but damn if it doesn’t feel great to be this happy again.

Because Lela is happy. So very fucking happy that her chest sings with it. Her bonds go thumping hard for it. She’s happy because Steve makes her smile. He makes her laugh like it’s all he ever wants her to do while he’s around. He holds her hand like it’s the first time he’s ever held one. He opens doors for her, pulls out chairs for her, lets her get the last gummy in the bag because he’s too fucking nice for his own good. And he makes her happy.

Happier than she’s felt in a good long while. Not since…not since he who Lela refuses to name now.

And it feels good. So fucking good that Lela feels a million times lighter than she ever remembers being. Like she’s a whole new person with a different set of bones making her up. Bones that didn’t have healed over cracks. Bones that didn’t know what it felt like to be twisted into a shape they weren’t supposed to go.

Pursing his lips up, pulling himself taller than Lela’s ever seen him go, Tony mulls over her words as the gears in his head spun. Lela can make out the exact moment that Tony seems to piece everything together. His eyes grow wide on his face as his mouth popped open on a silent exclamation.

Fear makes Lela jolt up in place upon her bed. She’s sitting ramrod straight as she narrowed her eyes and growled out a warning, “Tony…”

“It’s a boy!” Tony announces, too loud for all the nosey assholes that wander in and out of Lela’s place on a fucking daily.

“It’s not!” Lela screams. Which isn’t a lie. Nothing about Steve could legally be labeled boy or boy like. Maybe his charm but even then, not even close. Fucker was too fucking hot to be done dirty like that.

A strange mixture of anger and betrayal slip across Tony’s face as he raked his fingers through his messy hair. He looks two seconds away from pulling fistfuls out before he pins her with a determined dark gaze and demands, “What’s this assholes name?”

“First off, he’s not an asshole,” Lela bites out, well past the point of denying it and feigning ignorance. That ship has shipped out, hit an iceberg, caught on fire and fucking sunk to the deepest pits untouched by man, “Second, no. No way in hell are we doing…this.”

With that, Lela tosses her feet over to the side of her bed and stands up. She makes for the stairs and
down to her fire escape.

She’s already out on her fire escape, smoke pinched between her lips, when Tony ducks his head out and scowls in her direction:

“Fine, don’t tell me.” When Lela simply nods his head, Tony shoots her an affronted expression as he half screamed, “You’re seriously not going to tell me?!”

“What aren’t we telling him?” Sam’s voice filters in from the inside of Lela’s level. In less than two seconds, Sam’s head joins Tony’s as he peered through the open window.

“She’s got a secret boyfriend, did you know that? One she’s been keeping a secret! A secret boyfriend Sammy!”

Brows pulled up high on his face, Sam looks all of surprised for about a whole second. And then, like a flick of a switch, his face grows somber and serious as he leveled Lela a firm stare and demanded, “What’s this guy’s name?”

“Oh my fucking god!” Lela shouts up into the pinkish sky overhead.

“She doesn’t want to tell me. She’s keeping him a secret,” Tony repeats, like maybe it’d been lost on Sam since he started raving. And then a suspicious look over takes him as he demanded from Lela, “Is he like…does he roll with a bad crowd? Is that why we haven’t heard about him? Is he some kind of criminal and that’s why you haven’t introduced him to us? Do we have to call Nat? Oh my god, Clint’s gonna shit a cow when he finds out you’re dating a criminal! Kid, you can’t do this. Dating baddies is always bad news. Trust me. I’ve had my fair share of flings with babes from the other side. It never ends well. WAIT, is he luring you to the dark side? Is he filling your head up with questionable things? Do I have to pick him up and toss him into a cell? Talk to me kid, blink if you want me to get my suit!”

“For the love of god Tony!” Pepper calls out from somewhere inside. Her voice ringing with something like exasperation and full out annoyance filled beta growls.

Spinning in place, nearly clipping his head on the window ledge, Tony shouts, “Pep! Thank god, Lela’s dating some kind of secret mobster dude. She’s in deep Pep! Talk to her! She needs to be scared straight! I have pretty good lawyers, she won’t serve time, but I can’t take the chance that she does! She won’t make it Pep! She’ll come back a different person! She’ll get a face tattoo! Do you know what they make ink out of in prison? Pee Pep! Actual pee from a persons body! It’s unsanitary! It’s not right! Talk to her! Make her see the light! she can’t get a pee face tattoo! It never ages well!”

And it’s ridiculous, fucking insane, how keyed up Tony’s gotten in a span of two minutes. His boa bond hissing static as it coiled tight around her spine. His words, more than anything, are fucking crazy.

The thought of Steve, fucking sweet as sin Steve, who didn’t know what the fuck a dildo was until Lela explained it to him, was anything other than a fucking boy scout was just…it was just funny.

So Lela laughs. She laughs long and hard until she’s gripping her sides and the cherry on her smoke fizzes out. She laughs and laughs until she can’t breath and slowly slips down to sit down on her fire escape.

Face split in half by a wide grin, Lela wipes tears from her eyes and huffs out, “You’re a fucking idiot Tony. I cannot believe half the shit that comes out of your mouth sometimes.”
Wearing a smile that shows his agreement, Sam nods his head and says, “Relax Tony, it’s probably not that bad.”

“Then why haven’t we heard anything about him until now?” Tony demands as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Pinning her with a look that said he wasn’t about to let it go so easily, Sam shrugs his shoulders and says, “She’ll tell us when she’s ready.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela runs her tongue over her lips and snarks, “I was worried y’all would overreact. Clearly, I was wrong. You guys are totally capable of acting like grown ass adults.”

“Hey, the only one who over-reacted here was Tony!” Bruce throws out from inside. His voice ringing with his insult at having been lumped in with his Alpha’s over dramatic ass.

“My bad doc,” Lela snorts a laugh as she relit her smoke.

“Seriously though,” Sam starts as he pinned Lela with a no nonsense gaze, “Why didn’t you tell us you were talking to someone?”

Chewing on her bottom lip Lela shrugs her right shoulder and mumbled over her smoke, “I…I didn’t want to bring him around in case…in case he wasn’t—you know.”

Lela’s unspoken fear of the proverbial rug being pulled out from under her two times in a row going unsaid but not unheard.

Lips pinching up into a sad grimace, Sam nods and then runs his left hand over his head as he announced, “Nat and Clint are gonna be all kinds of peeved about this, you know. You wanna call them or…”

Thumping her head against the iron railing, Lela glares at the beta man and demands, “Anyone ever kick your ass as a kid for being such a fucking snitch?”

“A bit, yeah,” Sam tells her with a small laugh. His brown eyes glittering unrepentant.

Rolling her eyes, Lela tells anyone who’s listening, “As soon as Red and Chuckles come home, I’ll invite him over. You guys can do the whole scary shovel talk thing then.”

The flower on Lela’s heart unfurls it’s roots easily at Lela’s words. Worry seeping out of it to be replaced by acceptance.

“I’m wearing my suit!” Tony announces instantly. Dead serious as his boa slithered back into proper place. There’s an argument had over all that but Lela doesn’t even try to get involved. She steers clear because it just isn’t worth it. Sometimes Tony was a dumbass no matter how hard everyone tried to stop him.

When Lela climbs back inside she finds herself in the kitchen with Pepper and Bruce’s knowing gazes locked onto her head.

Heaving out a tired sigh, Lela waves her hand in a motion that pretty much spelled out: Just ask.

“I trust you to make the right decisions for yourself,” Pepper tells her easily. Her face is all kinds of soft in the easy way she wears acceptance and kindness. Her baby blue eyes shining with something like fear that Lela’s got no doubt Pepper wore for Lela’s sake and not her own.
It makes the hand on her up arm thrum softly with warmth.

“I, uh, I’m not going to sit here and lie to you. I have my...reservations, what with what happened with...” Bruce stops himself, his tan face twisting up in something like anger. A look Lela only ever saw on his face when a nameless person was mentioned in passing. A look Lela has grown to understand Bruce felt slighted as much as Lela had been hurt by the abandonment, “I just, I’m happy you found someone again. As long as he makes you happy, I’m always gonna be here if you need me to. Even if he is some secret mobster.”

The hand on her upper left arm throbs with all the emotions Bruce usually kept under lock and key.

Heart swelling in her chest, Lela nods her head and laughs at Bruce’s attempt at making this all lighter. Shaking her head she tells them both, “He’s a good guy. Wouldn’t fucking knock over an empty beer can if you asked him to. As soon as Red and Chuckles come back, you’ll meet him.”

And as much as she wants both beta and gamma to come home already—two weeks turning into two and a half months—Lela hopes it’s not too soon. She’s no way ready to face the music just yet.

*~*

Laughing, Lela tilts back into her seat and drops her cinnamon roll. She’s full out grinning when she manages to ask, “No shit? How the fuck does that even happen? Like, what the fuck was running through your head dude?”

“Honestly?” Steve hedges, half embarrassed as he abandoned his caramel coffee cup and sent her a crooked little smile, “Not much. I was scared outta my head. I thought for sure I was damned. I mean, it was my church shoes I was wearing when it happened. My ma was so riled I thought she’d loose her head!”

Snickering, Lela rubs her right fist into her eye and tries not to bark out more laughter. The knowledge that Steve—Steven Grant Rogers—was a a former choir boy with a hell of a lot of dumbassery in him was all kinds of pleasing. In a weird way that made Lela think it was adorable and kind of hot when he looked like he did now.

Every time Lela met up with him, somewhere—anywhere, Lela’s always fucking blindsided by all the softness and sweetness that made the man up. Steve was like the literal sun. He glowed bright and true. His smile made his golden face fucking shine. It always had this heart stopping effect on her. Always had Lela spinning in place like he’d hit her square in the face with it.

The more she gets to know him, the more they meet and run through shit together, the more Lela becomes acutely aware of the fact that she likes all that she now knows.

Because Steve’s nothing like she thought he’d be. Nothing like she had assumed he’d be.

For one, he’s fucking so sweet. Golden and sweet like summer time days. He’s kind in all the ways a person could be while still being mortal. Warmth radiates out of his smile no matter the bleak wintery chill that grows heavy in the air. He had such a tenderness in him that she’s sure must be fake but she hasn’t caught the break in character yet.

Half of her is waiting for him to turn around and just be what she thought him to be when she first laid eyes on him. Half of her is sitting here waiting for the shoe to drop on her fucking head the way it had with...with him.

“You’re kinda a little shit, Steve,” Lela tosses at him, her lips still spread wide as she reached for her water bottle.
Shrugging his wide shoulders, Steve admits, “So I’ve been told. Multiple times. On several occasions. By enough people I’m starting to think they’re on to something.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela waves off his words as she swallowed down her mouthful of crisp clean water, “Alright, alright, you ain’t so hot choir boy. You had a little brawl in a church, I’ve heard worse. I’ve done worse.”

“You’ve done worse than pick a fight with two alpha kids, in a church, and accidentally set the pastors robe on fire?” Steve asks dubiously. But his blue eyes are glittering like he’s half eager to know if maybe she’s just as bad or worse than what she’s promised him.

Wetting her lips, Lela leans onto the table between them and nods her head, “Kinda. Wasn’t so straight edged as I am now. Was running from police sirens long before someone told me the boys in blue were supposed to be the good guys. So, fuck yeah, I’ve done worse.”

At that, Steve stays quiet. His eyes running over her as if his trying to track down a lie somewhere on her face. When he finds none—his pretty and big—hands coming up empty Steve pinches his brows together before he asks:

“Yeah?”

Tilting her head to the side, feeling a little like pushing the man—forcing his sweetness away from herself—Lela draws nice and low as she flashed him a fangy smirk, “Fuck yeah. ain’t nothing… sweet about me Steve. You should know that up front. I got a bad history, worst kinds of shitty—you ask me. Been through a hell of a lot. None of it real pretty.”

A soft beat of silence follows her words as Lela sits there with him. Lela’s done skirting around the truth of who she is. If this shit with Steve was gonna keep on going, the man had a right to know who he was getting tangled up with. Had a right to know that the girl he’s chasing after ain’t nothing more than a reformed junky and ex-hooker.

She reasons, the worst he could do was turn tail and run. And while that might scare her a bit, it was better it be done early on then late in the game.

Or at least, that’s what she tells herself as the silence stretches onward.

Blue eyes burning dark, Steve takes in all of Lela’s challenging posture and gaze. He doesn’t blink as he leans forward, close to her, and exhales a challenge of his own:

“We all got a past Lela, everyones got something on their hands, even mine. But, I told you, I’m in this until you send me off. So, do you’re worst. I can handle it.”

Blinking in a bit of shock, Lela jolts as if to move away but freezes before she does so. She stares into royal blue eyes and tries to find the lie. She does her best to search it out but finds none. What she finds instead is that promise from the coffee shop.

The one that said Steve wasn’t about to walk and he wasn’t about to be run off by Lela and all the shit she threw at him. He was standing in place like the great big mountain man he was. Unmoving and unyielding.

His words, that promise shining in his eyes, settles something that had twisted in Lela’s belly since she opened her mouth. It settles and lets her breathe. She doesn’t know how good Steve’s word is but she’s running on this new thing where she hopes for the best.
“So what’s the plan here Stevo, you gonna pull a cult classic and try to win me a prize or some shit?” Lela asks with a sly smirk as she stepped over dropped funnel cake.

Ducking his head, scrubbing at the back of his neck, Steve blushes that pretty pink Lela’s come to be obsessed over. She’s never known a blush could be so fucking alluring. But here she was, looking for any chance humanly possible to make the shade appear. Usually it happened when Lela was a soft form of bitch.

“Ha, busted,” Steve laughs, as he politely walked around a crowd of teenagers. Lela pushes her way through them without a care.

tongue in cheek, she tosses over to him, “Yeah? You think I’m the kind of girl to fall for the whole big teddy bear shtick?”

“You saying you aren’t? Cause if that’s the case we just wasted a perfectly good night,” Steve jokes, his smile spreading into something less shy and far more gorgeous.

Feeling like a little shit, Lela sighs completely put upon and tells him, “Hey man, if you ain’t got the kind of skills to win a fair game, just say so. I ain’t gonna think any less of you. Well, maybe a little. But I won’t hold it against you none. Ton’s of kids can’t get the big bear.”

Laughter, low and rumbling, spills out of Steve’s lips as his shoulders shook with it. Big bright smile on his face, Steve grips his belly and tosses his head back.

For a solid moment, Lela thinks Steve never looked so damn beautiful than when he laughed like this. All the heaviness he carried trapped within his own eyes melting away. Hearing his laugh always makes something twist and unfurl in her chest. It never failed to make her feel lighter than she’s ever felt. Brand new and fucking shiny.

“C’mon,” Lela says through a smile, her hand reaching out to tug at the man’s shirt hem.

Wandering aimlessly, Lela spots a familiar game and stills. It’s one of those things with the water guns and the spinning tops. The ones you had to shoot at to get it taller than whoever you’re playing against. It’s a game Lela hasn’t played since she was a young and so very dumb.

Settling herself down on an empty seat, Lela slaps down a couple of tickets and jerks her head at Steve to join her. He hands over his tickets when the stall attendant comes his way.

Wordlessly they fire off their water guns and fight to get the top to spin all the way up. They’re neck and neck the whole way, Lela wins by a hair and fucking grins for it all. She winds up winning four more games before they move on to a game of darts and paint filled balloons. Lela turns out to be shit at that game. Steve not so much. He nails all the green goop filled balloons and gets himself a weird little shamrock keychain that’s not worth the six dollars worth of tickets they pumped out for it.

Holding his prize up for her to see, Steve silently gloats. To which Lela only rolls her eyes. Because yeah, lucky shamrock for the man who didn’t believe in luck.

In between all the games they play, all the jokes they share, all the moments of Steve’s laughter and sunny bright smile—Lela finds herself wishing for the night never to end. For there to be more of these moments like this shared between them. In this moment, under the gleam of a star filled sky, surrounded by the Steve’s laughter and the twinkling lights of the fair, Lela is glad she took a chance on Steve.

Lela’s not so sure she’s as shit blessed as she thought she’d be. Not when Steve turns to her and hands over every stupid little fucking trinket he wins. Even when Lela rolls her eyes at him each and
That feeling in her chest, which is hunger of two different types, floats up into her mind and clouds her up. It makes itself known, becomes a bitch to ignore no matter how hard she tries. She knows she’s falling for the man. A steady descent that feels less like a trip and more of a free fall.

It’s got everything to do with the man’s pretty face and everything else about him too. Steve’s easy. Easy as fucking breathing. He feels familiar to her even if he’s not. Familiar like Lela’s known him for a lot longer than she has. Familiar like her hearts peeking up and saying ‘oh, there you are again’. And it’s confusing as much as it is exciting.

Eventually, the night growing later, the stalls begin to close up shop. Very little is open and running when they run across a familiar game. A tried and true staple to a fair grounds. It’s a high striker. A big thing made up of lights that announce the might of those dumb enough to lift the hammer and strike down on the fixed shit.

Seeing as to how Lela’s never been exactly strong, she’s never bothered to try to play the game. So it’s not the reason why her eyes linger. It’s got everything to do with the stupid big fat lumpy thing hanging on a wire. It’s a soft shade of rose with lavender colored spots and tentacles. A piss poor imitation of a jelly fish.

But there’s something about it’s mismatched little legs half made of cheap ribbon that make Lela want it.

Spotting exactly what she’s looking at, Steve stands at her side and mutters low enough for only her to hear, “You like it?”

“It’s ugly as shit,” Lela tells him, but then shrugs her shoulders as she admitted, “But I want it.”

With that in mind, she walks up to the man sitting by the high striker. The hammer needed to win the game laying across his open lap.

“How much you selling the janked up jelly?” Lela questions, hands firmly in her pockets as she motioned to the plush hanging over her head.

“But for sell. Gotta ring the bell,” the man says, eyes all kinds of blood shot and tired.

And Lela’s all kinds of confident with her ability to win unfair dirty street fights, but, she knows she’s not strong enough to make the dinger hit the bell. She knows she’s not built with that kind of strength no matter how hard she tries. So she takes a step back and silently wishes the jelly plush a goodbye. She ain’t about to embarrass herself for it.

Stepping up, Steve calls out, “I’ll play for it.”

Turning to level him with a dry look, Lela snipes, “I thought I told you I ain’t the kind of girl to fall for that kind of shit.”

“Never said it was for you sweetheart.” Steve defends himself. Though the smile stretched wide across his lips, his blue eyes twinkling in the flashes of colorful lights, speak to his mischievous lying nature.

Rolling her eyes, Lela waves a hand with a flourish as she dared the alpha to step right up and try to win a rigged jig.

Slow, and all kinds of reluctant, the game attendant gets to his feet. he takes Steve’s tickets and hands
over the hammer in his hold. Twirling the bulky hammer in his right, Steve settles himself before the strike pad. In that one smooth way he twirls the hammer Lela finds a familiar hunger rushes right through her.

Muscles in his arms bunching, coiling, and rippling beneath his golden skin have her half panting. The way his big strong hands grip the pommel of the hammer make her head swim with lust. Because damn if the fucking alpha wasn’t built like a walking wet dream. What with the way his military green shirt clung to his thick torso and his dark blue jeans looked half painted over his strong legs.

It was unreal, really. Fucking unfair. No one that fucking hot had any reason being as sweet as Steve was. It physically hurt her to look at him sometimes. Most times.

All of the fucking time.

Ignoring the rabid beat of her heart, Lela pulls her smokes out from her pocket and lights one up as she mumbled, “You know, shit’s prolly rigged, right?”

“You doubting me already?” Steve teases, his blue eyes glittering as he eyed her with confidence leaking out of him.

“I’m just trying to help ya save face here,” Lela offers as she exhaled a cloud of smoke.

Laughing, Steve tells her with a wide smile, “Have some faith in me sweetheart, I’m walking outta here with that thing.”

“It’s a jellyfish.” Lela informs him as she stepped back and waited.

With one last twirl of the hammer, Steve pulls it up and hits down. The pin rises only halfway, lights flashing to life and then blinking off as the dinger fall back down.

Not even bothering to hold back her snort, Lela ashes her smoke and raises a brow at Steve’s confused expression. When he looks over at her Lela teases, “I’m guessing all that strength you had to pop those bags don’t translate so good here, huh?”

Narrowing his eyes, lips pulling into a small little displeased frown that was all kinds of cute, Steve straightens his shoulders. He adopts the tall tale posture of a confident alpha as he turned to the game attendant and paid for another turn. Stone cold determination line his squared shoulders and shine in his royal blue eyes. Like Steve isn’t about to walk out of here without that damn plush toy.

This time around, Steve doesn’t bother with a twirl of the hammer. He’s all business now, no theatrics. He just lines up, lifts it up high and strikes down. The dinger rises maybe a little higher than before but never rings the bell.

Barking out a laugh, Lela shakes her head and calls out like the shithead she was, “Ou, so close yet so far!”

Jaw setting, Steve doesn’t bother answering her as he paid for yet another turn. Both hands on the hammer, he widens his feet beneath himself and plants them down. Hands tightly clenched around the hammer, Steve brings it up high and slams it down much faster, much harder, than he had the two previous times.

This time around the bell dings but not without a flash and a bang.

The bell goes flying along with the dinger. The hammer in his hands breaks in half as the lights all
flared to life in one go and sparked violently. They short circuit dangerously with bright orange and red flecks falling all around.

Steve’s won the game but completely demolished the fucking thing in the process. Which, Lela guesses real fucking late, was the only fucking outcome to be had. The dude could, after all, punch open fucking punching bags with a solid hit. What else was supposed to happen here?

Wide eyed, Lela stands there, smoke in hand and watches as the game attendant rushes forward in anger.

Looking all kinds of embarrassed, contrite—fucking flustered—Steve drops the broken handle in his hand and scrubs at the back of his neck. His pretty golden face staining itself pink as he tried to apologize to the game attendant.

“What the fuck!” the game attendant—an alpha by the sounds of his growls—railed on.

Pulling her smoke from her lips, Lela marches her way up the older man and announced easily, “Yo, he rung the bell.”

“What—he broke my fucking game!” the man argued, a crowd forming around them.

No one had missed the way the lights had sprung up and fucking exploded. Who would?

Tsking her tongue, Lela levels the man a dry look and ashes for smoke before shrugging easily, “Ain’t my fucking problem man. He rung the bell, he won the prize. So hand over the fucking Jelly.”

“Ah, no,” Steve starts, intervening with a wave of his hand, “I’m sorry, I’ll, uh, I’ll pay for the damages. It was an accident.”

“Damn right you’re fucking paying for the damages!” the older alpha screamed up at Steve, “You got some fuckin’ nerve! This is my livelihood here! How am I supposed to—“

And after that, Lela tunes it all out. She doesn’t bother to hear the man out as she walked over to the toy line and yanked her plush down. The attendant isn’t paying her much attention so she’s pretty sure she can just slip away with it unnoticed. Even if it’s way too big now that it’s actually in her hands. But Lela’s walking out of this with the shit in hand. Even if Steve had been the one to win it.

When she turns to call out to Steve she spots at least two different cops talking with him. Looking like a child being caught with his hand in the cookie jar, Steve ducks his head down and relays what’s happened. He’s pulling his wallet to of his back pocket as the game attendant continues to rant and rave about the damage.

Figuring there’s no way she can talk the alpha out of booking it now with two cops taking down his information, Lela plants her ass on the bullseye painted strike pad. She smokes and watches as Steve swears up and down that he’s not about to leave the thing as is. Lela watches, with open amusement as Steve solemnly swears to not break anymore of the fair’s games.

Carefully, only after the fuzz has stopped questioning him, Steve makes his way over to her with his head ducked down.

Grinning, wide and unrepentant, Lela huffs out, “You got a bad habit of breaking shit Steve.”

“It was an accident,” he defends as he stuffed his hands into his pant pockets.

Arching a brow, Lela mumbles over the butt of her smoke, “Ain’t it always?”
Face twisting into something like a begrudging smile, Steve wobbles his head in a so and so manner. Laughing, Lela gets to her feet and tosses him the jelly as she said, “C’mon, let’s jet before they slap cuffs on ya.”

Fumbling to catch the stupid plush, Steve opens his mouth as he followed after her, “I uh, I won it for you.”

Ignoring the twist in the pit of her belly, the flutter in her chest, Lela throws over her shoulder, “I know, but I ain’t holding that shit all night. Try not to bust it or I’mma have to kick your ass for it.”

Steve’s rumbling laughter washes over Lela as they made their way through the rest of the fair. They play very little games after that. News about Steve’s game breaking display of strength pretty much boxing them out on almost everything. So they settle on simply walking around and eating funnel cakes. All the while talking about the dumbest shit possible. Steve carrying her jelly the entire way.

And it’s nice. So very fucking nice that Lela wishes she could stretch the night on until forever. If only to keep the sight of his smiling face before her always. If only to keep his summer warmth wrapped around her to keep the chill away.

When Lela gets back to her place her belly is heavy with fair food. Her head is full of Steve’s rumbling laughter. Her nose is full of his rain and juniper scent and her arms heavy with the stupid plush. She settles that jelly on her desk chair and finds herself falling for the man just a little more. Reaching into her jacket pockets, to empty it before hanging it back up, Lela finds that stupid shamrock key chain.

Gripping it in hand, Lela finds her heart stuttering in her chest. That warmth that always flooded her when he smiled at her exploding tenfold and swallowing her up. Because she knows she’s getting in deep. Falling off a cliff she had willingly climbed.

And where Lela might’ve been worried before, she isn’t so much now.

**~**

“It’s ugly,” Lela announces with a careless shrug of her shoulders.

Stifling a laugh, Steve glances around them like he’s hoping no one is listening to Lela rag on the painting hanging on the wall.

No matter how hard he tries to pretend he isn’t the type, Steve’s all for Lela’s less than stellar manners. He always gets this wide stretched grin whenever Lela acts her absolute worse. When she says something that’s biting, angry and crude he always has this twinkle in his eyes. Like he’s all for seeing Lela unload so long as he gets to watch it happen.

It’s half the reason Lela finds herself actively saying the first thing that pops into her mind without thinking it through.

There’s a certain kind of comfort, she thinks, knowing that no matter what she’s got to say on anything that Steve will just take it for what it was. That he doesn’t judge her for any of it.

“It’s art Lela,” Steve says around a wide grin, “It can’t be ugly.”

Sometimes, Lela thinks, Steve argued with her just to get her to spit out more curses and bullshit.
Like he enjoyed her lad mouthed nature far more than he was willing to say out loud.

Glancing at the blonde alpha, Lela dubiously mumbles, “It’s fucking splashes of color. Fucking three year old does a better job at art than this asshole.”

This time around, Steve’s laugh slips out of his mouth as he shook his head and told her, “Maybe. I don’t know. It’s supposed to be a big deal.”

“Why?” Lela demands as she continued to stare up at the janked up mess laid out before her.

Lela’ll be the first to admit she’s not cultured in any way. Tony continuously stated as much. she was uncultured. Hence the reason she’d agreed to come with Steve to this art museum. Because she’s trying to learn shit and understand all the finer things in life that completely flew over her head.

Also, the fact that Steve had asked her out here, with that soft and hopeful expression painted across his face, had had a hell of a lot to do with her decision making. Lela’s not entirely sure why Steve always wears that hopeful expression on his face when he asks her out again. Like he’s waiting for the day Lela just straight up turned him down and told him to fuck off.

Lela’s a lot of things but she’s not fucking that stupid. Or crazy.

Humming low in his throat, Steve rocks back on the balls his feet and mumbles, “I’m not entirely sure. I mean, it doesn’t really make much sense to me. But people like it. So I guess there’s that.”

“People are fucked in the head Steve. Not really helping this piece of shits case here,” Lela informed him as she turned to walk away from the painting.

Setting a slow and leisure pace, Lela wanders down the pale white halls of the place. Steve follows after her with the map firmly held in his left hand. They don’t use it at all, but, Steve’s gripping it on the off chance Lela decides she’s up for following the laid out path.

When they wander into a different section, Lela hangs back and waits for Steve to pick a direction to start and heads on after him. They still infant of one made up of strange yellow sun flowers that looked how Lela used to see the world back when she was high and on shitty suppressors. It’s weird to see it in paint.

Running her tongue over her teeth, Lela tilts her head to the side and looks on. Slow and careful, Steve takes her over to another that’s of the night sky drawn by the same dude. It’s a mess of swirling psychedelic bullshit. But…it’s pretty. So Lela keeps her peace.

“I know this one!” Steve announces, his face pulled into pride filled happiness. When he turns to her he says, “This is Van Gough. My Ma was a fan of him.”

“It’s pretty,” Lela says because she’s not sure how else to describe what she’s looking at.

“Yeah, this was one of my ma’s favorites.” Steve mutters soft and slow. His eyes pinned to the painting before them.

And maybe it’s in his voice, or on his face, or both, but Lela feels the sadness that comes with the words. The was screaming up at her.

Carefully, Lela asks, “She…she not around anymore?”

Shaking his head, Steve continues to stare up at the painting as he explained, “No. she passed some ways back when I was a kid. Got sick. Couldn’t beat it.”
And shit. Not for the first time does Lela think Steve’s entire existence and being not make a single lick of fucking sense. Because there he stood, like the sole embodiment of all things good and true, built of loss and heartache. It didn’t make sense how the man managed to come out so sweet, so warm, so kind when he’s lived through enough pain to down anyone else.

Lips twisting, Lela confuses uno the quiet, “Mine too.”

At that, Steve turns to her, looks at her and offers a quiet, “I’m sorry to hear.”

His blue eyes bleeding with his sympathy.

And while she doesn’t know shit about how Steve’s relationship was with his own mother, Lela can’t help the sarcastic snort she issues. Because as much as she had cared for her own mother, Lela knows the woman didn’t deserve someone like Steve offering their condolences for her passing.

“I’m not,” Lela throws out, a lie she’s hoping to some day believe.

Looking like he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say to that, Steve delicately questions, “You, ah, you weren’t close?”

“Fuck no, she was a bitch. Made my life fucking hell when she was up and kicking,” Lela says as she moved away to another painting. She’s not really looking at it as her eyes sat upon it. Memories of her past threaten to climb on out so she asks him, “Were you close to yours?”

“Uh, yeah. She was—my ma was great. I mean, she was the sweetest person you’d ever meet. Always opened her doors to anyone that needed it. Always made room at our table even if we didn’t have much to offer,” Steve says, his voice taking on this tone built of a bitter sweet sadness. The kind that spoke of love that was laid to rest beneath the hard ground.

“One christmas, she cooked up a meal so big we invited just about everyone in the neighborhood to come on by. She…she was good like that. Believed in looking after everyone like they were pack or family.”

Brows pinching, Lela mumbles, “No shit?”

For all that her culture is built around strong family values and big pack, Lela’s never had anything like that growing up. It’d just been her and her mom. And even then, it’d been mainly Lela on her own for obvious reasons.

“Yeah. I think she did it cause she knew what it was like to not have a penny in her pocket. My ma’ and pop came over from the old country. Stepped off the boat with nothing to their names except what they carried on their backs. Had to work their fingers to the bone to get what little we had.”

“Where’d they come from?”

“Little town in Ireland. Ma said it was a poor town, hit hard by famine. So they’d gathered what they could and jumped on the first boat they could. Six months later, out I came. Ma always said I was American by birth but I had the old country running through my veins. Said that’s why I was so hard to manage as a babe.”

Steve wears a soft smile as he chuckled gently and low. His eyes glittering under the low light as he told her this. And Lela finds herself entranced by it all. Both what he’s telling her and the expression in his eyes. Because she’s coming to find out that Steve always laid himself out there—whatever part of him came up—with such ease it was damn amazing.
It always made Lela want to do just the same. So she opens her mouth and does.

“My moms parents came from some mountain village in Mexico. It was around the time homes were being burnt down by soldados who wanted their land. There was a lot of killing happening to the farmers that tried to protect what was theirs. So my moms parents swam through the Rio and touched down where they could. Soaking wet and hungry they had to live in some shed in the middle of nowhere. No light, no running water. Mom’s said her dad worked for 50 cents an hour for some gringo’s farm just to keep from getting caught by immigration. Mom’s said they had to run into the monte every time a car they didn’t recognize rolled up. She said one time an officer smacked her dad around just for the fuck of it and then left. Treated them like they were dogs just cause they couldn’t speak English so good.”

“That’s…” Steve starts, brows high on his face as he tried to formulate something to say. In the end he settles with, “I can’t imagine what that’s like.”

“Shit, me either,” Lela agrees as she ran a hand through her hair, “I never met my moms parents, but I always wondered what they were like. What they must have been like to have lived through all that shit. Moms never had anything nice to say about any one of them. But, I can sorta see how that can happen, right?”

Lela’s not about to make excuses for someone she’s never met. What little her mother told her about her maternal grandparents was never any good. Always about drunken rages from her own father and cruel distance from her own mother. But Lela thinks, all of what they must have gone through must’ve changed them. Turned them dark and bitter as much as all that had happened to Lela had done the same.

She’s not about to make excuses but she can understand. Because Lela’s own mother had let the world beat her down and twist her very soul. Lela’s mother had become like the stories of her dead grandfather. Lela’s mother had become just as cold, just as cruel, as the stories of a missing grandmother. Lela herself had mirrored them too. Becoming a monster to survive.

So she understands.

They’re quiet for a long moment as they continue to walk through the near empty museum. Both of them walking side by side but neither one of them opening their mouths. Lela doesn’t know if it’s because of what she’s said or maybe because Steve’s not entirely over his own mother’s passing.

Eventually, though, the silence breaks as Lela tries to lighten their air, “So, you’re Moms was into art too then?”

“A bit, yeah,” Steve answers, a slow smile working across his face as he went on to say, “She, uh, she actually bought me my first art set. A little worn down thing with near every colored pencil more than halfway used. She bought it for my tenth birthday. I don’t think I used a single one until she twisted my ear and sat me down to draw something with it. She was…she was my biggest fan. Didn’t matter what I drew, my ma always had to hang it up somewhere. Any time any of our neighbors came on by she showed them off like they were worth something.”

Smiling at his words, Lela argues softly, “Hey man, can you blame her? You’re pretty good.”

Blushing pretty and pink, Steve shakes his head while scrubbing at the back of his neck, “Nah, I’m decent now but I wasn’t anything near good then. Sorry looking things.”

“Long as they weren’t fucking splashes of paint Steve,” Lela mutters through a smile, “That shits not art. It’s fucking nonsense.”
Grinning wide and pretty, Steve laughs and points out another painting for them to look at. Lela follows because...because there’s no where else she’d rather be today, tomorrow or the next, than next to this man here.

“You got any brothers or sisters?” Lela asks somewhere between blindingly white canvases and a single red dot.

“Just one,” Steve announces easily. His face pulling into something so damn complicated Lela’s not sure exactly what makes it up, “Got a brother.”

“Yeah? He anything like you? Leaving messes around for someone else to clean?” Lela teases as she moved onto another painting that was made up of more bullshit.

Laughing, Steve follows after her, at her heels like he’s afraid she might slip away from him, “Nah, not Bucky. As much as he was a real rebel back in his hay day, not so much anymore. He’s...he’s been through a lot. Still my brother. Always will be. Don’t matter if we ain’t got the same blood or even if we ain’t got the same kinda pack bond as before.”

“What happened to him?” Lela asks, curiosity spiking in her chest as she listened to the words he declares with such certainty and iron built belief.

She wonders briefly what kind of history laid between Steve and this Bucky-dude to inspire such a tone. She wonders what he must mean to Steve to have him—godlike as he was—care so deeply.

“War happened. Twisted him up some. Made him different. Took more of him than it ought to have.” Steve says with sadness dripping from his words. It makes Lela turn back and look at him and note the way his eyes have swirled darker blue.

His words remind Lela of a man she’d handed over all the softest parts of herself to. A man who was softer than silk, gentler than spring winds and had been laid low. It reminds her of all that he had told her—whispered into the dead of night, when they were nothing but skin beneath the sheets of Lela’s bed—all his darkest secrets bared to her and laid onto her naked skin.

Lela’s not sure how many good men have been lost to the dark tides of war but she knows the number must be high.

Shaking her head, Lela huffs out a sigh and offers him a genuine, “Sorry to hear. He any better these days?”

“I thought he was. He was happy for a while but...” Steve starts only to fail, his right hand raking through his golden tidy hair as he struggled to put into words his turmoil.

“But his past caught up with him, huh?”

“Something like that. He’s getting the help he needs now. Don’t know when he’s gonna be able to come back—but, I know he’s coming back. Buck’s like that. Can’t keep him down too long. He’s built tougher than anyone I know. So...he’ll come back.” Steve tells her like he doesn’t doubt for a minute that his friend—brother—won’t be showing up around the corner any minute now.

“Okay,” Lela nods her head, knows not what else to say in the face of pure and unflinching hope and belief. She merely nods her head and takes Steve’s word for it.

It takes a moment before Steve can shake himself out of whatever sits heavy in his head. Shrugging his tense shoulders, he says, “I think you and him woulda hit it off pretty good. He’s always been good with girls.”
“Yeah?” Lela jokes lightly.

“Not a broad Bucky couldn’t swindle out of their last two cents with a single smile,” Steve says around a fast growing grin. Pride shining in his eyes as he went on to say, “That damn smile of his could get us outta any kind of tight spot.”

“Sounds like a hell of charmer,” Lela muses, her smile mirroring Steve’s.

“Had to be. I was always caught up in something stupid and Bucky always followed me into it. So, he had to learn fast how to get us outta it.”

“You know,” Lela begins, ignoring completely the art hanging on the walls for the beauty of the man beside her, “I’m starting to think this whole proper gentleman thing you got going is some kind of front and that you’re secretly a little shithead.”

Laughing, Steve shrugs his shoulders and admits with his blue eyes sparkling like jewels and his smile bright and wide, “So I’ve been told. When he gets back stateside, I—uh, I wanna introduce you to him. He…I think you’ll like him.”

And Lela’s not sure why that makes heat bloom across her chest. That Steve’s willing to introduce her to someone he considers that important to him. That he wants her to get to know the people close to his chest. It also reminds Lela of the clear fact that she’s been actively keeping him a close secret to her heart.

So in a split decision, she attempts to remedy all that.

“Okay,” Lela starts with, nodding her head firmly and then tacks on, “As long as you don’t mind meeting my pack.”

Wide eyed, looking side swiped and a hell of a lot joyful, Steve stumbles out, “Wha—really?”

“They’ve been askin’ bout you. Givin’ me a hell of a time cause I haven’t brought you ‘round,” Lela admits. Her eyes tracing over Steve’s golden face.

Blushing pretty and pink, Steve ducks his head and says, “Yeah? Been telling them only good things, right?”

Smile stretching her lips, Lela shakes her head, “Nah, not really. Told them you’re some kind of criminal who runs around breaking fair game set ups.”

Barking out a laugh, Steve shakes his head and nudges her shoulder hard enough that Lela tips to one side. Blue eyes sparkling like pools of ocean water, he says, “You’re not really setting the best impression for me there sweetheart.”

“Prolly not. But none of them are exactly model citizens anyway, so I doubt it’ll be an issue.”

“What are they like? You’re pack.”

Mulling over his question, Lela tries to come up with a way to put into words the complete insanity that they all were. In the end she settles with a simple:

“They’re complete assholes. Each and everyone of them. Not a line they won’t cross, ‘cause as much as they’re all fucking smart as shit, none of them know what the fuck boundaries means. Living in each others pockets means shit for all about privacy. Drive me up the wall most days but—“
“But you love them,” Steve finishes off for her. His eyes shining with this soft kind of happiness. Happiness he seems to be feeling on her part. Happiness he has for her and all that she has.

And it’s weird, but Lela’s not about to touch that. So she shrugs her shoulders and mumbles as put upon as physically possible, “Unfortunately.”

Laughing, Steve shakes his head and tells her, “I’ll—I’ll meet with them…if you want me to.”

Feeling a blush work it’s way across the bridge of her nose and over her cheeks, Lela nods her head. Because she does want Steve to meet her motley band of idiots. She wants Steve to be a bigger part of her life. She wants him around for the long run and to do so, she knows she’s gotta put him into the thick of it.

Grabbing hold of something that was braver than she actually was, Lela nods her head again and says, “Prollly gonna be a shit-fest, but if you’re up for it…yeah, I’d like that.”

“Can’t be that bad,” Steve argues, though he’s wearing caution open in his face as he says it.

“don’t bitch out on me now Rogers,” Lela laughs, her smile spreading wide and teasing, “You’re in too deep now.”

Smile mirroring hers, Steve nods his head as he reached a hand out to grip her own. His touch is tender—always was—and warm. He holds her hand like he’s waiting for her to brush him away. Like he’s always so sure Lela will pull away from him. And that’s ridiculous, she thinks, because who the fuck would do that to someone like him. With that in mind, she twines her fingers into his and holds him tight like she’s daring him to let go now. To walk away now that he’s in this far with her.

“I am,” Steve admits with a wide smile and happiness glittering in his big blue eyes. Looking for all the world like he’s the one that’s won the lottery and not Lela.

Rolling her eyes, Lela tugs on the hand she’s holding and forces him to follow her. Steve follows after her stumbling only a step before catching himself.

The conversation that follows is much like the one before it. Most of it little bits and pieces of their past that might make up who they came out to be. Little things that Lela thinks might be the beginning of a solid base. A foundation for something that was being laid—brick by damn brick—of something unshakeable.

**~**

Laughing, Lela shakes her head and tosses her beer cap at the blonde idiot before her.

“Shut the fuck up Steve.”

Grinning, Steve lets the cap ping off his head when Lela knows damn well he could’ve dodged it. But Steve’s like that. He takes all of the worst of Lela’s unpolished ways like they’re poetry in motion. Like he’s willing as all hell to take more so long as Lela flings it at him and looks only in his direction while doing it.

“I’m serious! I thought it was—“ Blushing pretty pink and so damn adorable, Steve ducks his head and twirls the pool cue in his big hands, “I thought it was some kind of sex act. I had to look it up.”

Laughter spilling out of her mouth, Lela opens her mouth to rag on him only to still when he states fast and hard:
“The no judging rule is still in effect!”

Full out smirking, Lela begrudgingly nods her head. Picking up her bottle, Lela drains half the contents and then huffs out, “Alright, Mr. Doesn’t Know What Barrel Racing is, my turn. Do your worst.”

Smiling wide, Steve leans back against the pool table they snagged for themselves. He gets this pensive look on his face as he tried to wrack his brain for a decent kind of ask.

For the last hour or so, they’ve been playing a weird soft version of 21 questions. All they were really doing was spilling more stories of utter nonsense they’d gone through. But it’s nice. Talking with Steve. It usually always was. Getting to know him, every bit of him she learns, fills her with a strange fuzzy warm kind of feeling.

Every time they meet up, get close, they’re always spilling something of themselves out for the other to gather up. Like they’re both just as desperate and just as eager to soak up every bit of it. Like they both are greedy for all the little things that make each other up.

They had made some kinds of plans to hit up a restaurant but had chucked it aside when they’d passed by the skeevy bar they were in now. It’s an old one, one Lela used to pass by back when she was still in her old shit. One that was probably criminally affiliated. But it always had decent music hanging over head. So Lela had wrangled the alpha man inside because it was late and she wasn’t up for letting their outing end so soon.

In the end, Steve had allowed himself to be man handled as Lela pushed him where she wanted him to go. But Lela’s starting to notice, the man never really put up a fight where she was concerned. For all that he was an Alpha, stacked as all fuck, the space around him sitting heavy with the scent of his musk, Steve was so damn easy to bully.

“Alright, I got a good one,” Steve declares with too much confidence. He lines up his cue and sends the white ball shooting to knock against a red striped other. The clack is hard and unforgiving.

“I’ll be the judge of that Steven Grant,” Lela says, enjoying way too much the way Steve’s face twists up like he’s not a fan of her full naming him at all. It’s half the reason Lela does it at all.

Sam was probably right about Lela being somehow related to Tony after all. She was a little shit even at the best of times.

“What’s the first book you ever read and fell in love with?” Steve asks easily. Like he’s not asking something so wildly out of place for where they’re standing in a grimy bar.

“Face twisting, Lela half groans as she searched for another beer top to fling at him, “You seriously gonna a waste a turn on that?”

“Hey!” Steve starts, already defending himself with the twist of his crooked smile, “I’m not wasting anything! It’s a good question.” Noticing her dubious expression, Steve adds on, “Plus, there’s a lot you can find out from a person by their first written love.”

And, seriously, Lela’s not sure how much proof she needs that Steve is an actual goddamn sap. Everything from the fact that he’s always got some kind of flower in his hand when he meets her for a date to the way he always asks before holding her hand. It screamed of his utter and devastating romantic nature. It was unbelievable as much as it was heart warming.

Made it so Lela fell a little deeper for the man.
Leaning her lower belly against the pool table’s edge, Lela shrugs her shoulders and admits, “Never been much of a reader.”

“Really?” Steve starts and then back tracks when Lela pins him with a look, “I’m not judging. I’m just... there must’ve been at least one book you read that you liked.”

Mulling over his ask, thinking it a wasted turn completely, Lela tries to find a decent answer within herself. She finds none. She didn’t exactly grow up in a house that coveted the written word. The only book her mother had ever owned had been a ratty bible. It’s spine had been broken, the pages yellowed and stained. For all Lela knows her mother never actually read it. But then, she’s not really sure. She never saw it open or moved from the bottom of her mothers closet.

But then slow, like the skitter of a leaf on their old wooden porch, a memory sparks.

“There was this book I remember reading.” Lela admits, her brows pinching as she tried to recall the name of it and what it was about, “I don’t remember what it was called or anything, but I remember stealing it outta the school library one time. I think I was nine, or ten? I don’t really remember. But anyway, it was about some orphaned kid that woke up in the land of the undead. He had to search for all his dead relatives or something so he wouldn’t fade away. It was the first time I remember the people in the pages looking like me. You know, brown skinned and shit. They even had spanish names. That shit blew me back. I’d never seen anything like it before.”

Face growing entirely too soft for Lela’s fragile heart to fucking handle, Steve quietly asks, “What happened to the kid?”

It’s his turn—still—but he doesn’t move to continue on with the game. His sole attention fixed on her from the other side of the table. It makes everything in her want to squirm as much as she wants to stand still and square herself up. Meeting his gaze always made something rush hot and wild through her entire body. Like she’s gearing up for a fight but everything else in her asking her to yield for him. The combination of it all making her head spin.

“Honestly? I don’t remember. He has to go through all these fucking trials or some shit to find them,” Lela mumbles, her hand raking through her hair as she tried to remember the end of the tale, “I don’t think he finds them, but he finds all the people that had been kind to him when he’d been alive. And I think he stays with them. So, I think he finds his family even if they weren’t the ones he’d been looking for.”

“That sounds like a good book,” Steve tells her. His dark blue eyes shinning with something like understanding as he leaned his enormous weight onto the pool cue.

Feeling all kinds of weird, Lela shrugs it off and dismisses it all with a simple, “I guess. shit was pretty dark all things considered. I mean, it was about a dead orphaned kid. One who was homeless and probably died of starvation out on the streets. He only got his happy ending when he fucking died. And even then not in the way he wanted. So, I’m not really sure what the fuck it was doing in a school library. I mean, fuck, what kind of lesson is a kid supposed to pull off all that shit?”

By the end of it, Lela’s laughing softly, her face pulled into a sharp smirk.

Shrugging his shoulders, his soft cotton white tee pulling over all that beautiful muscle, Steve reasons, “I think it’s supposed to teach kids about the idea of found family. Or pack, at least. That it’s less important about the people we’re taught to care about because they share our blood and more about the family we find along the way.”
And even though his words strike a serious chord within her, Lela refuses to budge on her distaste for what had once been her first real obsession as a child.

“I guess, shits still pretty fucked up.”

Wrinkling his nose, Steve nods his head and wryly smiles, “Maybe. But I’m not really sure what’s appropriate for kids these days. Back in my day, we didn’t have anything like what you guys have.”

This time around, it’s Lela who wrinkles her nose, “You sound like an old man when you say ‘back in my day’.”

“Hey, I’m a young 32 years old.” Steve defends himself and then goes shock still afterward. His face is littered in his regret as he slowly asked, “That…uh, that’s not—“

This is the first Lela’s hearing about his age. The first time it’s ever come up. The only time Lela’s ever heard it be said. So it’s a bit surprising but not enough so to make her change all the bullshit she’s feeling for the man. It didn’t do shit to knock the ageless beauty off his face. Didn’t make him any less beautiful in her opinion.

Even under the dim lights of the fucking dive they’re in, Steve shone like gold. Practically dripping with good looks no matter how much cigarette smoke surrounded him.

But Lela’s not blind. She can read his fear and apprehension in his royal blue eyes. She can see the way he holds himself like he’s ready for Lela to brush him aside because there’s an age gap, one that’s a little too wide for his own liking.

Whistling long and low, Lela feigns regret and jokes, “Shit, never mind, you’re totally an old man. Want me to help you find your way back home old timer? Need a cane or something?”

Her words startle a laugh out of Steve as he grinned, “You’re horrible.”

“Hey man, I’m being serious,” Lela starts, pulling on a serious expression as she placed her hand onto the pool tables’ wooden edge. It’s only when she’s sure she has his attention that Lela says, “I can totally hook you up with crossing the street when you need me to. I’m all for doing my part of the community these days.”

“You’re the worst person I’ve ever met,” Steve accuses but he’s smiling too brightly to actually mean that.

And maybe because she’s feeling all kinds of brave in her new bones, Lela says what she does without an ounce of fear on her part, “Yeah, but you like me so what’s that say about you Steven.”

Looking entirely too fond, Steve nods his head and agrees, “I do like you so that probably means I’m just as bad.”

Blush settling on her face, Lela snatches up her beer and shakes her head, “Nah, you’re too fucking sweet to be just as bad as me.”

“You think I’m sweet?”

“Fuck yeah. Sweet as sin.”

Spluttering, burning bright red, Steve does that weird thing where he curls into himself while simultaneously puffing his chest out like a proud alpha, “I don’t think we ever covered sweet sin at sunday mass.”
“No?” Lela asks, as she swiped her tongue over her smirking lips, “Let me run through it for you. As much as you’re all kinds of fucking adorable you’re also hot as all fucking hell Steve. Like shit, look at you? Seven long feet of fucking hard muscle. Makes a girl get all kinds of hot and bothered. Shit, I’m having trouble not jumping your fucking bones half the time.”

Hunger goes to war with Steve’s shyness within his gaze. A strange heady combination that makes a fire explode through Lela’s rushing veins.

The worst parts of her yearn after that look in his eyes. The one he only ever got when Lela pushed shit into a more dangerous level of flirting. Her second nature aches to go belly up just as much the monster in her wants to claw at him to break that sweet smile into something made of primal lust.

Because while talking to him—getting to know all the little details of what he liked and what he didn’t—was all well and good, Lela’s red blooded. She’s ravenous for the feel of his hands on her. To know if he tasted of rain water or of juniper. To know what the feel of his golden muscles were like beneath the palms of her hands. To know if he kissed soft and sweet or hard and fast.

She aches to know. Her head spins every time she looks at him for too long. Her belly grows heavy and twisted with the lust that pools hot and dangerous.

Popping his lips open, like he’s about to say something to follow up Lela’s words, Steve is interrupted. Or at least, Lela is. Because it’s then that someone bumps into her back. Someone bigger than her but decidedly probably smaller than Steve.

The feel of a hand sliding down the curve of her back and then down to grope at her ass make Lela’s heart freeze in her chest. All that she’d been feeling that was even remotely feel good dies in an instant. Jerking to the side, Lela turns to glare at the fucker currently feeling her up.

It’s a piss ugly fucker. The kind with a shitty beard, yellow teeth and a hideous complexion. The kind that probably only ever frequented dives like this. He smells of piss, of cheap beer and the familiar scent of narcotics.

“They haven’t seen this ass in here for a spell,” the man slurs down at her. His dark glassy eyes leaving no fucking doubt in Lela’s mind what he’s fucking after, “I got a twenty in my pocket for that sweet mouth of yer’s girly.”

Something like shame, like hideous anger and disgust ring in her bright and ugly. They slap into her face as realization crashed head first into her. She knows, fucking knows, how this asshole knows her. It’s in his face, in his slimy touch, in his fucking words.

Lela knows the kinds of fucking filth she used to crawl through for the twenty in his pocket. And maybe, the fucker did too.

Growling, deep and vicious—hard enough to be heard over the tin of the entire bar, Lela bites out, “Get your fucking hands off me.”

“What you change your prices sweets?” the man laughs down at her. His stale and ugly beta scent rolling off of him as he tightened his grip on her ass, “How much you charging for that mouth of yer’s these days?”

“Hey pal,” Steve says from where he’s making his way over to where she stands, “Paws off the lady.”

Barking out a laugh that was all kinds of sarcastic, the man spits out, “Ain’t no lady, pal. She’s a whore. Best one I ever had suck my prick down.”
Spinning in place, Lela pushes the man off her and puts every inch of her hate into the growl she sends his way. The growl shakes the roof of her mouth as her fangs lengthened dangerous and sharp. She’s panting as she snarled like a wild animal:

“Fuck you asshole.”

Shame and fear sinks deep into her because in the back of her mind she knows Steve’s heard the man clear enough. The whole fucking place had.

“What, you too good for my money now?” the beta fucker growls out as he flashed his yellow fangs at her. His face pulling in anger at being denied so openly and loudly.

Pulling up all of her oldest fucking tricks, Lela sneers at the man as she widened her feet beneath her and squared both her chin and shoulders. Glaring up at him Lela calls out, “Nah, your dick just ain’t worth my time. I got a running rate of at least a hundred for anything smaller than my fucking pinky.”

The beta roars in her face, angry and insulted, his hand flashes out to grip Lela but Lela’s always been faster than she looked. And while the fucker out weighed her by at least four solid times, Lela’s got her pool cue in her hand. The stick whistles in the air as it snapped in half with the force she puts behind it. She nails him square in the cheek and throws him off balance. Ignoring the inherent need to run—all her bullshit omega instincts screaming to run behind Steve where danger wouldn’t touch her—Lela flies forward.

Calling up the monster she was pretty sure she’d killed off, Lela empties her mind completely. The worst of her useless dynamics instincts burning away underneath the flames of her old destructive ways. She burns, bright and vicious, like a bonfire that’s been kicked up into the air. She pushes forward as she keeps throwing her fists and doesn’t stop until her knuckles are busted, smeared red and her wrists ache.

Dark satisfaction blooms heavy on her chest at her victory. A familiar feeling she’d thought never to feel again. But it floods her like an old friend. Wraps her up and whispers into her ear that she’s won, that she’s **worthy**. That she’s not the thing to be beaten and mounted. She is the monster who walks away with her head held high. And Lela doesn’t care if it’s right or not, she fucking basks in it. Lets it roll over her like all the unholy waves of pleasure it comes in.

A shout goes out, one that sounds like outrage, and before Lela can make heads or tails of situation there’s a group of other assholes heading her way. Pulling herself away from the bloody mess of the man she’s just beaten, Lela readies herself to take on someone else.

Her throat is rumbling with growls as she snapped her sharp teeth. Holding her head up, proud and so very fucking defiant, Lela welcomes them to try to bring her down as the asshole at her feet had. Sure, they outnumbered her, fucking could kill her if they wanted to, but she wasn’t going down without a fucking fight. She wasn’t gonna be put down like that again.

And with that in mind she roars long and loud into the smokey air. Her heart thumps hard in her ribs as adrenaline coursed wildly through her. She feels wild now. Feral again, darkly alive in a way she had almost forgotten. Burning from the inside out with a fire that hadn’t been stoked since she got herself bonded and brought inside.

But like a coyote was still a coyote no matter it’s surroundings, Lela was still only just a wild thing barely house trained. She’s a monster built by the dark hands of her world underneath her freshly healed flesh and new bones.
A tall lanky looking alpha is the first to reach her. His fist is already flying towards her when suddenly…he goes flying to the side. The solid crack of a fist hitting against a face echoes in Lela’s mind. The lanky alpha looks half dead before he ever hits the ground in a sprawl of limbs.

Head whipping to the side Lela takes in the sight of Steve standing tall and proud. He sends her a small glance that’s made up of all kinds of unspoken violence. There’s a set to his chiseled jaw and a darkness hanging on the bow of his lips. He says nothing as he nods his head and goes to stand at her side.

Not in front of her, not before her. Steve stands at her side like he’s ready to fight with her, not pull her from the danger. Like he knows Lela isn’t about to put up with some bullshit like that. Like he knows Lela’s not looking for someone to defend her fragile ass in this moment. As if he knows, Lela can handle herself and won’t stand for someone to take from her a fight that was hers to win.

He stands at her right like he’s all kinds of willing to jump into the fray with her if only because she’s already in it. His shoulders are squared like the devil couldn’t beat them down. He pulls himself tall and unyielding like heaven or hell couldn’t move him for all the world.

Her heart thumps heavy and fast for a completely different reason this time around. A wild kind of lust rushes her so fast Lela feels whiplash from it. For a hot second, she thinks, she could fuck this man right here and now and not give two fucks who watched it all go down.

But then there’s people headed her and Steve’s way. Growling and angry now that two people have had their asses kicked by people who were new faces.

Lela can feel the manic energy that splits her face apart as she gets her ass tackled into the pool table she’d been playing at.

The air rushes out of her in a sharp bark of pain. Fists flashing out to wail on the strangers face—it’s a fucking Dom-Beta bitch—Lela kicks and punches until she manages to get to her feet.

There’s shouts ringing in the air. Filling the whole of the place with insanity and panic as people began to riot alongside with them. For no other reason except for the fuck of it all. Fights break out just about everywhere as Lela dodged and growled out in her crazed abandon.

The brawl lasts for a long moment and is only pulled into a halt when someone yells a familiar four letter word.

*Cops.*

Blood singing, Lela punches the bitches face in one last time before she drives her knee hard and unforgiving into the beta’s stomach. Tossing her away, Lela rushes over to where Steve is ducking and weaving from the sloppy haymakers being tossed at him from four different sets of dude.

Pinching her thumb to her index and placing it to her lips, Lela whistles long and loud. When that’s done, Lela yells, “Steve! *Cops!!*”

Blue eyes catching on hers, Steve tightly nods his head and lets his fist fly one last time. He knocks a man out and sends his body over to the other three. It knocks them unbalanced and leaves an opening wide enough for him to slip on by. Without thought, they both rush over to the back exit away from the shouting police.

The cold air of the night slaps against Lela’s heat and sweat slicked face. She ignores it as she picks the other end of the alleyway and books it. She doesn’t need to check to see if Steve’s following because she can make out the sound of his boots hitting the pavement behind her.
Shouts are thrown out against their backs for them to stop, but, they don’t. They keep on running. Ducking and weaving through alleyways to get as far away from the scene of the crime as possible.

In a flash, they’re out clear on the other side.

Taking refuge in an empty alleyway, Lela leans up against the wall and watches the street to make sure there’s no one on their tail. Her breath leaving her in short pants from her mouth. She’s out of shape, hasn’t had to run from the fuzz in some time, but she thinks she’s holding up just fine after a fucking dive bar brawl.

Dark eyes cutting over to where Steve’s doing the same—looking over to make sure they’re in the clear—Lela smirks wide and toothy. For all that he was honey sweet, kind and fucking golden, Steve was one hell of a dude to get thrown down and deep into the thick of it. Fucker could fight like he was built for it.

But then, she kind of figures he was considering his rank and shit.

“Shit Steve,” she says with a laugh, her entire body still thrumming with adrenaline, “Where’d you learn how to hit like that?”

The pretty fuckers not even panting when he turns to look her over. His eyes glittering in the low light of the orange street lamp.

Without dropping a beat, Steve announces easily, “Punching bags aren’t the only thing I can bust open sweetheart.”

Lela’s about to say something to further the teasing in the air when suddenly there’s a racket of people running. Boots hitting hard on the pavement. The tall tale crackle of police radios echoing in the air. Wide eyed, Steve spits out a curse and reaches down to tangle their hands together. With a firm hand he pulls her deeper into the alleyway and back behind some stacked crates and pallets. Wordlessly, he pushes her behind them and crowds around her as he ducked out of sight.

And fuck, Lela knows she’s got bigger more important shit to be thinking about in this moment—like fucking cops looking for them both—but damn if that isn’t the last thing on her mind.

Instead, all Lela can think of is the heat rolling off of Steve in waves. Heat that feels like open summer days. Heat that rushed out of him and called her closer. Back pressed up against the stone building and her chest flushed with his—all Lela can think of is the mans scent. The way it hangs heavy off him now. A thick scent that threatened to drown her as much as it promised to hold her tight. All Lela can think of—as the cops ran right past them—is the way Steve’s much closer than he’s ever been. That his body—firm like the building behind her—is pressed up against her own.

All Lela can think of is the strength in his coiled arms. All Lela can think of is the sight of him standing proud and defiant at her side in the bar. The way he had looked as if god himself couldn’t move him from her side. All Lela can think of now is of the hunger that’s been growing since she first laid eyes on this stupidly pretty man.

And maybe it’s a culmination of all that, the fight, the steady climb of her feelings for him, and everything else that makes Lela do what she does.

Left hand gripping tight onto the front of his stupidly tight shirt and right hand snaking up to tangle in his golden hair, Lela yanks him down as she laid her lips onto his. Soft pink meeting browning apple. And just like everything else about him, Steve’s lips are warm, sweet, and so very fucking welcoming. A soft grunt whooshes out of him like Lela’s punched him square in the gut. His whole
body goes loose and boneless like he’s so surprised he’s left his body entirely. His dancing blue eyes grow half hooded as something strange crossed his face.

Lela’s just about to pull away, concerned that maybe with all that’s been said and done in the bar, this might all be too soon. Or maybe, that Steve might not wanting to be making out with her with what he now knows.

But as she goes to pull away, a rumbling growl—so deep, so throaty and so damn powerful—slips out of his parted lips. Those perfectly big hands of his grip her tight as he dragged her tighter to him. His lips part against her own and his warm tongue slips right in. Lela can feel the long sharpness of his alpha fangs as she tangled her tongue with his. A growl falls from her mouth as Steve took the sweetness of their first kiss and broke it in half.

Because it’s nothing like she had dreamt their first kiss would be. Not by a long shot.

For one, it’s far rougher than she expected. It’s desperate, raw, full of harsh pants and teeth biting down on lips. His hands, that had only ever briefly touched her, grip her tight enough that Lela knows bruises will bloom come morning. He pushes her back against the unforgiving line of the building as he pressed his thigh between her legs. Pushing and pushing until there was not an inch of space between them two.

It leaves her head spinning and so fucking full of that red haze of lust as all of her twirls in place. Heat explodes within her burning her to ash. A fire much hotter, far more fucking destructive than the one in the bar, lighting her up until she can’t tell what part of her is left.

Steve kisses like he’s built of a holy kind of fire and Lela is nothing more than gasoline soaked matches. He kisses her like he’s aching to ignite something in her that only he can withstand. And it drives her half mad. Makes her writhe against him uncaring of where they’re standing and who might come their way.

She needs more. So much fucking more that she’s loosing her mind over it. Her hindbrain thumping wildly in her head like a second heartbeat about to go into a stroke. A familiar throb forms between her legs where Steve’s thick thigh is pushing up against. A tightness is clenching in the pit of her belly as every inch of her wished to undo the clothes on her own body and those that sat on his.

Eventually, the kiss ends but only because Steve seems to realize that Lela might need to breathe some time soon. He pulls away only enough to lay his forehead against hers. His parted lips issuing deep pants that mingled with Lela’s own.

“Sorry, I uh—I got a little carried away,” Steve mumbles with growls still lacing his words. His deep blue eyes burning dark with all the desire sitting in them.

“Fuck your sorry,” Lela spits out as she untangled her fingers from his hair and pushed him away from herself. Hunger ignites the worst in her. All things second natured and well learned, Lela’s fucking ravenous for more kisses like that. So she pushes at him and demands, “Your place or mine?”

Stumbling to catch his footing, Steve stares at her in confusion for a solid two seconds before that dark hunger in his eyes flashes in recognition. Popping open his mouth, he immediately tells her, “My apartments a few blocks down.”

Grin sharp enough to fucking cut, Lela flashes her exposed fangs and half purrs and growls, “Well come on then. I wanna fuck you somewhere warm.”
Wide eyed, Steve rushes towards her, lays his lips on her and kisses her like he might die a bit if he doesn’t. Hand tangling with her own, he pulls her along and leads the way back to his. Lela follows because…because she’s fucking gone on the fire sitting in his kisses.

~*~

It’s messy, kissing and walking. Lela’s pretty sure if not for Steve they’d have hit the ground a long ways back. But somehow, Steve keeps them upright. He makes it look easy as he attacks her mouth like she might just up and disappear in a cloud of smoke if he stops for even one second.

In a tangle of limbs they fall into his apartment. The door swinging wide and snapping shut with a firm kick of Lela’s booted foot. The fucking thing rattling in the silence of his empty place.

“Bed?” Lela asks, her voice husky and low, only after she’s released his bottom lip from between her sharp teeth.

Lust dark eyes, Steve scoops her off her feet and makes his way over to his bedroom. Like it’s second nature, Lela wraps her legs around his waist and goes back to swallowing down the fresh rain water in Steve’s mouth. Her fingers tangling in his hair and pulling it tight if only to hear the ungodly growl the man issues for that.

The longer she kisses him, drowning in the fire he’s setting, Lela begins to loose all kinds of rational thoughts. She feels wild, unhinged, fucking feral. Far more dangerous than what she’d felt fighting a two fucking dom-betas in a bar.

The longer she kisses him the more each of them become greedy and desperate. Their hands grip tighter. Their teeth sink deeper into the flesh they find. Their growls grow louder. It feels like a fight and yet not. Like their fighting for dominance in a place where no will be had. The heat of their separate passions setting them both ablaze. They attack one another like they might die if they don’t.

It makes Lela’s heart thump harder. It makes her head swim because she’s never had something like this. Never met someone who was willing as all hell to meet her blow for blow and not falter. Never kissed a man who looked at the worst of her actions and encouraged her to take what she wished no matter how she got it. Never loved a man who didn’t want to make her submit to him but pushed her to try her best to make him bend.

Dropping backwards onto his bed, laid flat with Lela above him, Steve kisses her and snakes his big warm hands up her shirt. Lela’s just about to pull away from his lips to pull of her shirt when suddenly the familiar sounds of buttons popping echo in her ears. Too fast to make any sense, Lela’s gray and black flannel has been torn off her.

The sound serves only to make the throb between her legs the only thing she can think of. An approving dark snarl leaves her lips as she tugged on Steve’s own shirt. The thing stretches until fabric tears right down the middle. The action seems to spur Steve further as his face twisted into something so dark Lela might’ve been scared if anyone else wore that expression. Instead it makes her all the more ravenous and slick. So very fucking slick.

Growl sitting heavy on his tongue, Steve pulls himself up until he’s sitting and flips them over until Lela is on her back and he is crowding her down onto the bed. He slips the torn remains of his shirt off of himself. His torso, smooth and golden, gleaming in the low light spilling in from his window. Faster than she can process, Steve kicks his boots off and sheds his pants and boxers in one smooth go. Leaving himself bare before her.

And god, Lela thinks, it was a fucking sin of the worst kinds to hide all of that beneath fucking
Mouth hanging open, Lela stares unabashed at what’s being shown to her. Her greedy eyes rake over every inch of him. Down his golden torso, over his tight washboard abs, and down to what stood proud, thick and hungry between his legs. And fuck, he’s huge. Like every other bit of him. He’s thick long and so fucking hung.

For once in her fucking life, Lela agrees whole heartedly with her hindbrain as it twirled in pleasure over her find. An absolutely wrecked sound falls from her lips as her sex throbbed angry and needy. Every inch of who she is aches to praise every single inch of his golden body. To run her hands over all of him, to mark up all his unblemished skin. To sink her teeth into him so that all that laid eyes on him would know she’d gotten there first.

Running her tongue over her lips, Lela kicks off her own boots and races to undo her own jeans lest they be torn too. Wordlessly, Steve helps her by roughly pulling them off and away. Her bra and panties get torn up just as bad as her shirt but Lela doesn’t fucking care one single bit. When he crawls back over her, his hands tracing up her legs, and his tongue sliding over her thighs, Lela is already so fucking close to breaking apart.

And as much as she’s all for letting him go on his way, Lela’s hunger will not be denied a single thing. Not when all the worst parts of her monster are out and running. An angry growl leaves her lips as she pushes him back and away. Digging her nails into him, Lela fights to get him onto his back.

Only when he’s laid out before her, straddling his waist, does Lela growl out, “Don’t move.”

Confused, so very fucking confused, Steve stares at her but does as he’s told. His pink kiss swollen lips pulling themselves into a frown. His dark eyes staring up at her like he’s trying to work out if he’s done something wrong.

Gone as she is on the fire burning her up, Lela doesn’t bother to explain shit. Instead she drops down to kiss him. Takes from him more of those gasoline lined kisses and runs her hands over what she finds.

It’s like heaven and hell combined, she thinks. His body smooth as silk over hard ironed muscle. Dragging her nails down his chest, Lela releases his lips and crawls down to run her tongue down his neck. A dangerous as shit move considering he’s an alpha as keyed up as he is. But fuck if Lela isn’t about pushing the fucking boundaries now. Scraping her sharp teeth over the delicate skin stretched over his clavicle Lela makes her way further down.

Laying open mouthed kisses across his abs, Lela worships all that she finds in a fevered attempt to thank whatever god has built this man. Pleasure filled groans slip out of Steve’s mouth when she sinks her teeth down onto the meaty side of his torso. Her bite being just this side of too painful.

When she stills, she’s eye level with his straining wet cock. A sight pretty enough to make Lela think if she died now, she’d die the luckiest bitch that ever did live. Without an ounce of hesitation, running on fucking roaring flames, Lela grips his dick in her hands and watches as her fingers don’t touch for the insane girth of it. Her aching sex spilling more slickness down her thighs at the fucking promise of it.

Eyes flashing up to meet dark blue, Lela keeps his gaze as she wraps her mouth around his wide head and swallowed him down in one whole go. It’s fucking impossible to take all of him though. So
Lela does her level best. Either way, Steve growls out long and loud a deep and wild thing. One that shook the very walls of his apartment. A growl built of pleasure, of want and something too dark to name here and now.

The sound only encouraging Lela to bob head up and down until she feels the very base of his cock grow thick. Feeling the tall tale feel of his orgasm approaching, Lela pulls off and slips to her feet. Pinning him with a dark look, Lela dares the man to move a single inch.

Surprisingly, he doesn’t. Steve just lays there, propped up on his elbows with his eyes tracking every single one of her movements. Like a big wildcat tracking their prey. Like he was ready to pounce on her if it looked like she might get too far away from him. And it makes Lela burn all the hotter. To know he’s listening to her even now. That Steve’s only ever following her lead where ever she pushed him.

Head swimming, Lela rumbles through her pants until she’s got her wallet in her hands. Pulling the rubber she’d stashed in there so long ago, because she’s all about being prepared these days, Lela crawls her way back up onto him and tears the package open with her sharp teeth. Slipping it on him, Lela straddles his lap again and lines herself up.

In the back of her mind Lela knows with a cock this big a decent amount of prep is required. But she’s hungry and so fucking wild she’s not willing to wait. It’ll hurt, burn and pull but Lela’s willing to fucking take it all if just to have Steve in her now. With how wet she is, the slide will be smooth enough.

With that in mind, Lela sinks down and relishes in the pain that sparks and catches up her spine. Her mouth hangs open and heavy with the snarls that leave her lips as her aching sex swallowed him down inch by fucking inch. Maybe it’s the fire in her veins or the hunger in the pit of her belly, either way, it’s much to slow even for her own liking.

Pulling in a breath, Lela slams down until she’s taken him to the hilt. White sparks flaring behind her closed eyes. A savage growl ripping itself out of her chest with the force of a fucking wildly thrown punch. Her spine curving with the pleasure and pain intertwining along the way.

Snapping up, Steve sits up and grips her tight. His hands digging into her hips as his lips crashed into her parted ones. A wounded sound spills from him as his body trembled. The scent of his lust filling up the room until Lela was fucking choking on it. She’s about to lift up her hips to take him again when suddenly his hands grip her hips tight—so fucking tight—that more pain chases after her pleasure and keep her in place.

Each points of his fingers digging in deep into her. Pinpricks of pain that chase the throb in her steadily leaking sex.

“Wait!” Steve growls out, low and pleading. His face slipping away from hers so that he can lay it upon the crook of her neck. Rubbing his face there, forceful and insistent, Steve growls out, “You… you’ll hurt yourself.”

And fuck that, Lela thinks. Fuck that.

If there was one thing she was sure of it was this, Lela could take him. She could take every bit of him as much as he always seemed ready to take all of her. She would take him, swallow every bit of him down and claim him as hers. The fire in her burning fiercely for it.

Snapping her teeth, Lela’s right hand flashes up to grip him tight around his neck. Lost as she is to what she’s feeling, Lela doesn’t bother with words. She lets her growl speak for her as she gripped
him tight and pushed him. Slow and careful, like he’s powerless to her touch, Steve pulls himself away from her. He lets himself be gripped like he isn’t an alpha at all. A completely wrecked sound leaving his lips as Lela pushed him down.

Only when he’s back onto the bed does Lela release the pressure of her hand. She doesn’t remove her hand though. She keeps it there as a warning if nothing else that she’ll sink her nails into him if he tried to stop her again. It’s a dangerous move, half unheard of, considering he is what he is and she is what she is. But Steve lets himself be pinned down by her hold. Lets himself be the one that submits to her. And damn if it doesn’t feed the fire of her absolute desire for him.

Pulling herself up, Lela lets herself fall back down with enough force that a heavy moan slips past her mouth like it’s just been hit right out of her. A throaty moan echoing hers from the man beneath her.

A fast and vicious pace is what she sets. One that has her racing to the edge of her climbing orgasm. Each and every one of Steve’s moans and growls of pleasure urging her faster and harder. Like he’s just as fucking desperate as she for the pleasure she’s chasing down. It climbs, climbs and climbs until she’s throwing her head back and crying out her release. But she doesn’t stop. For all that her body shudders, fucking breaking apart bit by bit, Lela doesn’t stop.

Can’t. Because that fire in her is reaching a fevered pitch. It’s consuming her in all it’s violence and destruction. Tearing her down until she is a wild thing built only of pleasure and sparking pain.

And faster than she can really make sense, Steve flips them around again. So that he is above her and she below. The hand she has around his throat clutches tight but does little to undo what he’s done. It does little to stop him as he fucked into her with as much abandon as she had him.

Each of his thrusts are strong and unrelenting. A snap that echoes into the empty air around them. A filthy vulgar sound that makes Lela moan wanton and desperate. His hips snap and push his swollen cock deeper into her as he chased his own pleasure. A rough and raw pace spills out of him as he worked to push them further down into the deepest pits of pleasure.

And by all the gods that have ever been whispered into existence, how pleasure sparks and explodes within her. White hot and world ending, Lela sinks her nails into what part of him she grips. Pulls him closer and demands in savage growls for more of what he gives.

Teeth bared, Steve pants into her open mouth. Their moans and growls mixing until Lela feels a knot form yet again in the pit of her belly faster than she thought possible. Clenching tight around him, her sex begs for more as her grip around his neck tightened further. And like he’s been built for it, Steve angles his hips and hits Lela dead center into that magic spot inside her. Like the very cosmos are exploding behind her eyes, Lela cries out for any and all to hear her pleasure. Her spine curves up and off the bed as she cried like a bitch in heat. Her cries only spurring him on as he continued to thrust up and into her.

And like an explosion of a wild fire meeting an oil rig, Lela fucking explodes. Her whole world crumbling and turning to ash. All of who she is fading away leaving behind only the sounds of Steve’s growls and the taste of his tongue in her mouth.

It feels like death and rebirth in the same breath. Like she’s just rose to the highest tower and fallen to the lowest point in one jolt. It makes her heart stop and race.

With a roar, Steve cums. His whole body going taut and rigid as he spilled into her. His cock throbbing and spurtng as the walls of her pussy spasmed and clenched to milk him for all that he was worth. Lela’s hand falls away from him as she writhed beneath him. A shuddering twitching
mess her body becomes like she knows not what to do with herself after something so intense.

Like it had all been too much and not enough. Like sensory overload and deprivation have happened together and scrambled every nerve ending in her brain and body. Something like a whimpering cry spills form her lips before she knows what she’s doing.

Hearing the cry, Steve jolts up from where he’d been laying completely on top of her. He’s panting as he looks her over. His dark blue eyes running over her face quickly as he tried to make out if her cry is of pain or something else.

“Lela?” he calls out, soft and careful. Her name sounding so sweet as it fell from his gasoline lined mouth. His work rough hand coming up to cup her face.

And the touch is so gentle, so careful, that Lela’s fucking up brain almost cries over it. Because while she had set that vicious pace, pushed Steve into it as she had, something too delicate in her aches for his sweetness now. She needs his tender touch to…to ground her. To keep her from floating into the unknown of too much and not enough. To keep her writhing body still as she worked to not fucking fall apart.

Brows pinching, horror slipping onto his face, Steve half jumps off her as he demands, “Did I hurt you?”

Her tongue sits useless and dead behind her lips. So Lela settles on shaking her head. Her trembling arms wrap as tight as she can manage around his shoulders. She pulls him closer to herself, drags him down until he’s flush against her. Bodies slick and wet with their sweat and everything else. Her hindbrain, scrambled as it is, calls for Lela to keep him as closer to her as she can manage without actually digging in past his skin.

So she does. She pulls and pulls until he’s dropped across from her entirely. His heavy and wide muscle bound form pinning her down onto the bed. A crushing weight that makes it hard for her to breathe but settles the strangeness of her second nature.

It feels good, to be be trapped beneath Steve. To have all of him upon her, slowly softening dick still in her, here and now. It makes her feel whole in a way she hasn’t felt since…since she got her heart broken. And so she basks in it. Lets fresh rain, juniper and Steve’s alpha musk wash over her until her heart is running on his fumes. With his head nestled on her chest, Lela lets her eyes fall close.

She must doze off, she’s not sure, but when her eyes flutter open, it’s with Steve slipping back into the bed with her. Groggy and all kinds of fucked out, Lela tries to pull herself up only to fail immediately. Her arms tremble too much for it. Her mouth opens to say something but only a small little noise leaves. A whimper and a growl combined. It grates against her sore throat rough and dry.

“Shhh, I got you sweetheart,” Steve coos as he slipped back into the bed. Pulling with him the covers as he wrapped his big arms around her.

Carefully, warm and tender, he moves her so that she is laid across his chest. Her head nestling itself on the crook of his neck and shoulder. And despite being made of pure muscle Steve is surprisingly softer than the bed underneath her. So she bares low and approving as her eyes dipped back down and closed. She rubs her cheeks against him as she slipped her leg over his waist and dragged herself flush upon him. Every inch of her naked skin against his golden one.

Steve’s chest rumbles low alpha purrs that sound something like a damn fire trucks engine. Far too loud to be any kind of comforting but there it fucking was lulling her deeper into well earned sleep. She slips into sleep with fresh rain, juniper and his alpha musk in her nose. Her heart beating slow
and sluggish to the sound of his strange purrs.

**~**

Waking always comes slow to her no matter how much rest she’s actually gotten. It’s always an uphill battle she has to fight.

This time around is no different.

Lela’s not entirely sure what’s woken her to begin with until she clocks the smell in the air. Nose wrinkling at the smell of smoke, Lela half shoots up. Her drowsy mind coming up with scenarios of her kitchen in flames built by Clint. But slowly as her eyes take in the unfamiliar layout of a bedroom that isn’t hers does Lela’s mind empty on out.

Because she’s not home. She’s at Steve’s and that brings her up short for a solid second. But then all the memories of the night before hit her. Like a runaway train that was set ablaze with it’s brakes ripped on out, it hits her without mercy.

Wide eyed, Lela glances down to her naked torso and scrambles to grab the soft baby blue sheets pulled at her lap. Tugging it up Lela attempts to cover herself in some way. the spot beside her is empty of the man she’d fucked like a wild animal. From the sound of it, and the smell, Steve was somewhere in his kitchen burning something.

At a loss of what to do, Lela slips out of the bed and makes her way to where she can see the open door of the bathroom. Her feet are silent on the too cold tile of the place. As she closes the door and goes about her business. She’s in the middle of flushing the toilet when she notices a brand new toothbrush still in it’s packaging sitting on the sink counter.

A small smile slips onto her face because she knows for a damn fact that Steve left it out for her to find and use. Because he was sweet like that. Popping open the packaging, Lela brushes her teeth and figures if she’s already doing that she might as well go full stop.

Flipping on the shower to the hottest setting, Lela slides right in and washes off the feel of old sweat and sex off her skin. Doing so with the winter fresh scented soaps and shampoos lining Steve’s shower shelves.

The hot water beating down on her undoes all the kinks in her muscles and forces them to relax. In doing so Lela finds she’s far more sore than she’d have bet on. There’s an old ache in her bones that has little to do with the fist fight she’d gotten into and more to do with the shit that went down with Steve.

There’s finger shaped bruises on both sides of her thighs and hips. Bite marks on shoulder and left breast she doesn’t remember ever receiving. But there they sit, red raised and angry for her finger tips to wander over. A claim over her that was possessive and half violent.

And while the sight of anothers mark upon her would’ve pissed off every inch of her abuse born instincts, Lela finds she doesn’t mind so much if they came from Steve.

A vicious hungry thrill spikes in Lela’s veins with want for more of those marks to be laid upon her. For there to be more of them because they feel like badges of honor. Marks that sang to the entire world that Lela is not walking through this life alone. that she has someone that’s willing to touch her the way Steve has. That he likes what he see’s enough to bite into her and ward off those around her.

But cold hard reason douses that want just as fast as it had spiked. For all that Steve has laid his teeth onto her, so had a million others. Lela’s scars were faded now but Lela can still see them when she
looked hard enough. So it’s probably nothing more than a mole hill she was trying to make into a mountain.

Frowning at herself, Lela washes out her hair, scrubs her body like she’s about to put up pieces of herself up for auction. Flipping off the water, she reaches for a towel and dries herself on auto pilot. It’s only when she’s standing naked on his navy blue bath mat does Lela realize she’s got shit for clothes to wear.

Last that she remembers, her shirt had been ripped open. Her underwear had suffered the same fate. Spotting a forest green button down overthrown on a hamper, Lela reaches for it. Pulling it up to her nose, she sniffs at it delicately. It smells heavily of Steve’s rain and juniper scent. It smells of his musk too but nothing heavy like sweat. So she figures it’s safe enough to pull on for lack of nothing else.

The fact that she’s going to be wrapped up in his scent again having very little to do with it. Well… maybe just a bit.

Carefully, she pulls it on and does up enough buttons that it doesn’t slip off. Then she rolls up the sleeves until Lela feels less like a child drowning in pretend costume clothes. Snatching up her towel from where she’d laid it, she continues to dry her hair as she stepped on out and searched for whatever the hell was still burning.

Her mind slowly filling itself with all that she probably needs to address. For one, she knows she needs to talk to Steve about the shit that happened in the bar. And then Lela knows she’s got to address all the shit she’s got sitting on her heart. Like how she’s pretty much in love with this asshole after a smooth couple of months. Shit like that couldn’t be skated over and some part of her doesn’t want to.

A big part of her wants to tell him how much she likes him. How much she cares. How much she’s grown to fucking be in love with him despite the short time they’ve gotten to know each other. A big part of her wants to be honest with him as much as fucking possible. Which probably meant she needed to say all that shit about her being what she was.

An old sense of cowardice sparks up in her. Makes her want to tuck tail and just avoid it. But then, she remembers how far that got her last time. She doesn’t want to go through that again. Doesn’t want to play with time like that and fucking gamble with what she has in her hands.

So pulling on all the strength sitting in her new bones, Lela forces herself to be brave.

But all that gets dashed the moment she sets eyes on the golden made man she’s neck deep in love with.

Pan in literal flames, windows thrown open, Steve is in his sparse kitchen looking like he’s purposely trying to demolish his place as messy as possible.

Brows pinching Lela stills in his living room and calls out, “What the fuck are you doing?”

Whirling around, flaming pan in hand, Steve turns to her. His blue eyes wide on his surprised face. The muscle shirt he’s got on, the soft gray jogger pants slipping low on his waist, completely stealing the show despite the fire raging on.

“Lela!”

Dropping her towel, Lela rushes forward and snatches the pan out of his hand and drops it into his loaded sink. Flicking on the water, the fire is doused into smoke. Four black chard somethings float
up in the sooty water.

“I—uh, I thought you were sleeping.” Steve says like that explains why he was standing in his kitchen holding a fire laced pan.

Turning off the faucet, Lela turns to him and drawls, “So you were planning on burning me alive?”

“What? No,” Steve fires off quick as he moved to turn off the flames of his stove top, “I was trying to fix us up some breakfast.”

His words make something delicate and too hot explode in Lela’s chest. It makes her smile become wide and loopy as she leaned up against his counter and teased, “Yeah? You a fan of charcoal in the a.m.?”

Face pinching with his slight embarrassment, Steve admits, “I’ve, uh, I’ve never been much good in the kitchen. Ma’ said I could burn water.”

“Clearly,” Lela laughed as she slipped around the man and over to his fridge. Pulling it open she eyes what’s inside. It’s half depressing seeing as to how there’s very little inside outside of takeout containers and something dubiously green in the back. Spotting an egg carton Lela figures that’ll do and snatches it up.

Moving like she’s got all the right in the world, Lela manhandles Steve around until he’s standing by his sink and nowhere near his own stove. Lela reasons it’s safer that way. It takes her two separate tries but she eventually finds a pan to cook up the eggs and sets to work.

“How’d you like your eggs?”

“Uh, scrambled.”

“Good, never could trust someone who can eat that sunny side up shit.” Lela throws out as she cracked the shells and set to cooking them up something to fill their empty belly’s. Chancing a glance up and over to him, Lela spots a weird kind of expression sitting on Steve’s face. Frowning, Lela squares up her shoulders and demands, “What?”

“You’re wearing my shirt,” Steve announces like Lela might’ve somehow not noticed.

Narrowing her eyes on him, Lela stills from where she’s mixing and levels him with a dry stare, “Yeah, some asshole, too strong for his own damn good, kinda ripped my clothes clear in half. So I’m out a few pieces of clothes.”

Blushing Steve ducks his head down. But he’s looking nowhere near repentant as a smile curved his lips up. When he levels his glittering blue eyes on her he says, “You…you didn’t seem to mind at the time.”

“Never said I was complaining,” Lela defends with a grin of her own as she cocked her hip out and waved her spatula at him, “I’m just telling you why I’m standing here wearing nothing else but your fucking dirty shirt.”

The smile on Steve’s lips falls almost immediately. The glittering in his dark eyes falls away as they grew dark and dangerous like the ocean. Running his pink tongue over his bottom lip, Steve asks in a heavy rough voice, “Nothing else?”

And damn if Lela’s heart jolt hard at that look in his eye. Lust and want twirl tight in the pit of her belly as her thighs ached to clench tight. The memory of him, buried deep within her, stretching her
wide, sparking across her mind.

Biting her bottom lip, Lela bravely tilts her head and informs him like a dare and a promise, “Nothing else.”

For a solid second, neither of them move or say a word. But like a snap, Steve rushes forward. His arms wrapping tight around her as he brought his lips down onto her parted lips. And just like the night before, he kisses her fast and rough. His mouth lined with gasoline that lights up the flames in the pit of her belly.

Wildly, Lela reaches out to turn off the flames of the stove top before she tangles her hands back into soft golden hair. She yanks hard until familiar deep growls spill out of his mouth and into her open ear mouth. Without her boots, the height difference has him half hunched over as he walked her backward into the bedroom she’s just come out of.

Greedy and insistent, his hands grip her as he lifts her clear up off her feet so she may wrap her legs around his waist. Tongue tangling with his, Lela finds she cares very fucking little for the food she’d been busy trying to cook for them. Falling back onto his bed, Lela claws at the thin muscle shirt he wears until it’s pulled over his head and off. His jogger pants are quick to follow. when she goes to pull off her borrowed shirt her hands are stilled by the wild growl that slips out of Steve’s mouth.

“Leave it,” he demands, blue eyes burning with something like wild hunger and possession.

Brows pinching together, Lela opens her mouth to argue only to have his lips crash back into hers. Steve kisses her like he’s starved for it. Like it’s been years since he’s tasted her despite it being a solid couple of hours since they last did this. Argument dying on her tongue, Lela just goes with the flow.

They’re deep into the thick of it. Hands cupping and teasing. Fingers slipping between slick wet folds. Lips laying open mouth kisses upon skin. Pleasure filled growls filling the air around them. Lela’s spine curving like a bow when his head finds itself nestled between her thighs. The knot in her belly growing tighter and tighter as a familiar pressure grew higher and far more dangerous.

When suddenly there’s a shrill noise ringing out. A noise that sounds eerily like a phone ringing.

Up on her elbows, so that she might get the full view of Steve lapping her up like a lion at a watering hole, Lela mumbles through a wide panting mouth, “Someone’s…fuck—someones callin’.”

Stilling only to growl, Steve flicks his tongue over her clit and sends hot white pleasure sparking up her spine, “They’ll stop.”

A strangled kind of laugh leaves Lela’s mouth that gets twisted into a broken moan when Steve twirls his tongue and slips fingers into the mix. The ringing of a phone slipping far from her mind as her approaching orgasm built, built, built and then fucking broke. A growl and a cry falls from Lela’s mouth as she dropped back down onto his bed. Her body tensing and shuddering as she fought to keep her heart from seizing up in her chest.

Tongue, lips and teeth scraping up her inner thigh and up her heaving belly, Steve makes his way upward and over her. He stills to dip in tongue into Lela’s mouth letting her taste all of her sharp tang on him. It makes a growl slip loose that was all kinds of dirty. Kissing him slow and sloppy, Lela’s hands wander and wander until she’s stilled by the sound of another call coming in.

Groaning, Lela’s head drops back onto the bed as she wrinkled her nose and said, “You should probably answer that.”
Laying kisses over her jaw and then down her neck, Steve mumbles into her skin, “Not my phone sweets.”

It takes a moment before his words register in Lela’s mind. What with his sharp teeth scraping over her ear lobe it’s hard as all fuck to keep rational thoughts on hand. But when they do, all of Lela’s feel good vibes die.

Scrambling, Lela pushes Steve off her and goes flying off the bed. Snatching up her discarded pants she searches for her phone and nearly fucking dies at what reads up at her. 41 text messages from Tony. All of them increasingly stupid the further she scrolled. 10 missed calls from Pepper. 2 from Bruce. 15 from Sam. 6 texts from Clint. But more worryingly—fucking frightening—was the 5 missed calls from Natasha.

When her phone starts ringing again it’s from Bruce so Lela immediately answers, “Hey doc!”

“Lela? Oh thank god,” Bruce says fast and rushed, “You didn’t come home last night.”

“Yeah, I know. I stayed over at…” Glancing backwards, Lela eyes Steve’s naked form and gambles, “my boyfriends place. What’s up?”

“Ah, uh, nothing. Tony's just been, well, you know.” Bruce supplies, his words falling away at the end.

“He’s been spazzing out, huh?” Lela huffs feeling guilt tangle her up as she ran her hand through her damp hair.

“Just a little.”

Wetting her lips, Lela nods her head and says, “Be home in a while. Tell’im I’m not dead or anything so to calm the fuck down, yeah?”

“I’ll do my best but, you know how he is.” Bruce says with a soft laugh as Tony’s far away voice shouted something Lela couldn’t quite make out.

Smiling, Lela nods again and says, “See you when I get home.”

“We’ll be here. Oh, but I should warn you. Nat and Clint are due to be home sometime today, so, you know. Just giving you a heads up.” Bruce says before scrambling to get off the phone when it sounds like Tony’s about to take it from him.

“Fuck,” Lela hisses down into her hands.

Her whole body filling up with dread.

“Something wrong?” Steve asks as he slowly pulled back on his sweats. As if understanding that their previous sexy activities were being called off.

Pulling a face like it actually pained her, Lela shrugs her shoulders and wobbles her head in a so and so manner. Phone in hand, Lela shifts her weight from foot to foot and explains, “My pack kinda freaked the fuck out when I didn’t make it home last night. And I think they might’ve called back some heavy hitters who were currently far the fuck away to not cause any real damage. So…shit’s about to hit the fan.”

Looking like he’s all kinds of confused, Steve nods his head and asks, “Do you want me to give you a ride over?”
And while the offer is all kinds of appealing, seeing as to how it might cut the trip in half or whatever, Lela’s all kinds of apprehensive about taking it up. What with how shit currently was back at her place—Tony keyed up as he was, Red and Chuckles bound to arrive in any second—it might not be so…safe. Steve would be walking into a goddamn slaughter. He’d probably get chewed the fuck out by Sam. He’d most definitely get the full iron man threats Tony was hoping on. He’d probably walk out with more than a couple of knives and arrows courtesy of Red and Clint. He’d be subjected to Bruce and Pepper’s judging disappointed looks which were probably worse than Nat’s knives if Lela was being honest.

Lela doesn’t want to do that to the man because…because…because she fucking loves him. She wants him to have a decent shot at trying to wow every single one of them the way he had her. She wants Steve to have a betting chance against all of them and this wasn’t the fucking way to do that.

So girdling whatever kind of bravery came from her new bones, Lela pulls in deep breath and exhales absolute bullshit:

“You know I’m like, half in love with you, right?”

Looking completely shell shocked, Steve stares at her wide eyed and open mouthed. His body is shock still as he sits on the edge of his bed. Like Lela’s dropped a bombshell he never heard whistling through the air.

It makes her back track a little, “You don’t gotta say it back or whatever. Especially with all the shit that went down yesterday at the bar. But, I just, I kinda—”

Springing up from his seat, Steve rushes her again. He kisses her hard and determined with enough force to drive Lela back into his wall. Her head thumping against it as he kissed her like he might die if he didn’t.

When he breaks the kiss, Steve’s eyes are burning blue and so fucking beautiful as he smiled wide and victorious.

“I’ve been in love with you since the moment you growled my way sweetheart. Just been waiting on you.”

It feels like a firecracker—a goddamn ear burster lighting up the sky—is going off in her. Popping in a whizz, a bang and too many bright colors for her jumbled up mind to catch. She feels happiness, an ugly rush of it, twirl her tight until it’s running down each and everyone of her bonds. Because he loves her. He loves her. Steve fucking Rogers loves her. Has loved her since he first met her.

She feels like that stupid fucking high striker. The one Steve had broken back on one of their first dates. She feels all the lights in her flare to life only to pop in a wild explosion of too fucking much energy.

Heart in her throat, happiness burning holes in her, Lela laughs and drags him in for another kiss. She can’t kiss him worth shit with how wide her lips are stretched into a smile. All thoughts of her pack and what bullshit awaited her falling away from her. When buttons go flying Lela doesn’t mind a single bit.

She knows she’s got more truths to spill but she figures one was better than none. At least, for now. She’s got bigger and better things to focus on than spilling her guts some more. Like the way Steve’s tongue runs down her neck and makes shuddering chills race up and down her spine.
First and fucking foremost! If you guys could do me the biggest fucking solid ever, please go back and Re-Read Chapter 42 - Time moves on. I accidentally posted the wrong version of it. CGKrows, edited it all to be true to Steve's old school voice and I completely dropped the ball. It's amazing, please re-read it!!!

SO, yeah. These assholes love each other. And they love each other so wholly and completely that it boggles my mind on how it all happened. Seeing as to how slow Lela was on the uptake with Bucky. But here she is, fucking sprinting to the end of the race like she's gunning for the prize.

I'm so happy for them you cannot understand. But I'm worried you guys might think it's all too much way too soon. But lets be real, they fell for each other day fucking one. And we all know it's Steve/Lela/Bucky as end game. So I hope you guys liked it.

Tony is only gonna get worse now that Momma Bear Nat is on her way home. Both of them are fighting for the spoon that's gonna stir the up the pot. Sam's gonna be tossing in blackcats just to make sure the splatters well and good. Get yourself ready for all that.

Oh, and fair warning--SPOILERS--guys, Bucky's on his way home too.

So, yeah, DRAMA ABOUND!

Hope you guys liked it!
Let me know what y'all thought!
And yeah, Lela’s coming to understand that yeah it is. But also, so was love. Because as much as maybe she shouldn’t, Lela was still in love with someone that couldn’t be hers. As much as she loved Steve now…Lela still loved James. Would always, she thinks and that’s all kinds of fucked up.

“For the last fucking time: I am not hurt or in need of a fucking doctor!” Lela growls out completely irritated and annoyed.

“You look like someone ran you down with a steam roller!” Tony shouts as he reached out to cup her face.

Having completely given up on trying to fight off his limbs a long time ago, Lela lets the man do as he pleased as Lela tried to undo the nonsense of her movie line up. She’s gone one fucking night and the following day and everything gets blown all to shit.

“Did a rabid dog maul you?!” Tony demands as he prodded the red blossoming bite on her left shoulder.

Steve, as it turned out, was not the kind of guy who believed in restraint. Not after they’d gone on to declare their feelings out into the open. Which was all kinds of fucking amazing by Lela’s none to humble opinion if not for the fact that Steve also wasn’t about leaving marks where she could hide it. She’s got bite marks, hickeys and everything else in plain eye’s view.

Some of them darker than others. None of which her pack was real thrilled about.

She’d been regulated to a shower the moment she walked into her place. Every single one of them wrinkling their noses at her at the heavy smell of sex still sitting on her skin. Lela had scrubbed herself clean with an old bottle of scent suppressing body wash Sam had pilfered out of Nat’s shit. A dangerous move but Lela wasn’t about to put up with Tony’s complaining and territorial alpha growls the whole day.

There’s no doubt in her mind that if she let him,Tony would pick his leg up like a damn dog and try
to piss on her to get the scent of Steve off her.

“Pretty sure it was a dude that mauled her. And from the looks of it, she let’em.” Sam sniped from where he was aggressively tapping at his phone. Lela’s got no fucking doubt in her mind that he’s tattle telling every single thing Lela’s said and done since she walked into the building to Red and Chuckles. Any second now her phone was going to blow the fuck up on FaceTime calls with Clint demanding she show him.

Lela could feel it like a shark in the water.

Lips popping open in a horrified/scandalized ‘o’, Tony stares at her like Lela’s about to fall onto a million rusty swords.

“Sammy, baby,” Lela calls out, sweet and cooing, her eyes promising him pain, “Shut the fuck up.”

“Okay, that is it!” Tony screams, jumping up from his seat on the couch beside her, “I wanna meet this guy! What’s his number?”

Before Lela can even form a proper ‘fuck off’ Pepper says from where she’s laying on the carpet floor:

“Tony you’re acting like Lela’s 15 years old and you’re her old man father.”

“EXCUSE ME?!” Tony cries looking all kinds of offended.

“Plus, it’s not like you’re any better,” Bruce lazily supplied as he flipped the page of his morning newspaper. His eyes never once lifting as he continued on, “Might I remind you of the time you dragged me to the met gala and pulled down my shirt so all your love bites could be seen? It was embarrassing.”

“That’s different!” Tony defends himself.

Raising a brow, Lela throws the alpha man a dark look and demands, “How is it different, you old kinky son of a bitch?”

“Because I’m—you know, I’m Me and you’re You,” Tony says by way of explanation. His hands splaying out like that’s all the proof in the world that he needs to feel the way he does.

“And what’s the difference between you and me?” Lela easy follows up.

The old her would’ve taken offense to every word of his poorly constructed sentence. But Lela knows Tony, like she knows the rest of her pack, her low rank never once being used against her for the slightest thing. Hardly ever brought up unless it was for picking up her meds when they were in that part of Queens. So she knows it’s got nothing to do with her status and Tony’s higher one.

Whatever the issue was it wasn’t that.

“I…I—“ Tony starts, glancing around to both his beta and his gamma for help. When none comes he crosses his arms over his chest and full on pouts like the five year old he actually was.

Rolling her eyes, Lela focuses back on fixing her movie line up. She’s just about to pull up Parks & Rec when the lift sounds.

Excitement fills her up as she half threw herself off the couch. The jelly plush she’d been hugging spilling onto the couch. Practically jumping up and down in place, she watches as Clint and Natasha
come into view. Her chest aches with the sheer amount of happiness waiting to be unleashed. The moment Natasha throws open the gated door, Lela rushes forward and wraps her arms around the first one she can. Strawberry sweet bubblegum fill up Lela’s nose as her body is lifted clear off the floor.

Clint’s laughter echoes in her floor as he spun her around in place, “Hey babe!”

The ribbon wrapped around her chest slithering and twirling in happiness the whole while.

Not even bothering to hide her wide smile, Lela lets herself be twirled as she tossed out in a laugh, “You assholes said two weeks!”

Placing her back on her feet, letting Natasha swallow her up in a hug too, Lela’s nose fills up with ginger, nutmeg and blackberry this time around. The band around her wrist blazing hot and true. Quietly, Natasha hums and lays a kiss onto the crown of Lela’s head. Her cheek lightly nuzzling for a moment before the red devil murmured:

“Target was tricky to pull out.”

And Lela really doesn’t want to know what kind of person could outrun the devil but she’s glad they’re back. Safe and whole back home where they can harass her like the dickheads they were. She’s just glad her two idiots are here with her. Back home where they ought to be. Not half way across the world in a place they couldn’t tell her the name of for their own safety.

Lela’s just about to open her mouth, ask if they’re hungry, so she can throw something together when suddenly Tony is raving somewhere behind her.

“Oh thank god you’re home! Nat, please talk to the kid. She’s been running wild on me.”

Brows pinching, Clint glances down at her and grins, “Been giving the old man a hard time?”

“Had to, don’t want him getting slow on me,” Lela jokes with a wide grin. God, she fucking missed the blonde shithead so much.

It must bleed on down the line because Clint grins so wide his face looks to be splitting in half. A purr slips out of his mouth as he dragged her close and nuzzled his face into her hair.

“Okay, fuck you both! But seriously! She’s been taking up with criminals! Her mobster boyfriend kept her out all night! She didn’t even shoot us a courtesy text! And look at her! She looks like she’s been attacked by a rabies filled bear!”

“What happened to watching her like a hawk?” Clint barbs as he wrapped his arms back around Lela and lead her to her kitchen.

“There’s only so much I can do when she’s boxing me out! I’m not a fucking god!” Tony defends himself.

Humming low and teasing, Natasha drolls in that sinister way of hers, “Oh, if time magazine can hear you now.”

“You’re a push over Tony,” Sam throws out as he came up to wrap his arms around Natasha. He lays a sweet kiss upon her pale cheek. Natasha rumbles out pleased growls as she ran her hand over Sam’s face and slipped her hand into his.

Clint isn’t so goddamn tame as he pulled Sam into his arms and laid a filthy sounding kiss onto
Sam’s lips. It makes Tony choke on his own tongue. Lela wrinkles her nose but says nothing else. Instead she enjoys the way Sam’s flower bond flutters and heats up just as much as his cheeks burn.

Pulling Lela into her kitchen, Clint says with a bright smile that did nothing to hide the way his eyes were more green than honey, “Spill it babe, heard you got a boy toy stashed somewhere in town.”

“Seriously? You guys have been gone for fucking forever and that’s what you want to talk about?” Lela grumbles as she shoved at the gamma and pulled her fridge open. She’s tossing him a big red when she argues, “I wanna know where the fuck you’ve been at! What’s with all those fucking animal pic’s you’ve been sending me?”

“Ah, sorry babe, I got bored while I was over there. Sam takes forever and a day to hit me back. There’s a ten minute curtesy limit when someone sends you a dick pic,” Clint announces like what he’s saying is so fucking normal.

“You’re a pig,” Lela laughs out as she pulled out some blueberry pop tarts she keeps around for him specifically.

“Hey, it’s always tasteful if that’s your problem,” Clint argues as he ripped the foil open.

Pursing her lips, Lela shakes her head and tells him, “That’s not my problem. My problem is that you’re fucking telling me this shit.”

“It’s 2019 Lela, sexting is a perfectly healthy part of a relationship, done right. Don’t get lost with the times like Tony,” Natasha smoothly remarks as she was handed a bottle water by Pepper.

“I don’t know about that,” Pepper mumbles as she hugged Natasha and welcomed her home.

“No, she’s right. Tony’s pretty much regressed into a 1950’s man. He’s been talking about chaperoning dates,” Bruce says as he clasped Clint’s shoulder. It’s as close to a hug as Bruce allows himself to get.

Everyone is well aware of the fact that the doctor doesn’t trust himself enough to run around giving hugs. He gave what he could and the whole of the pack respected it. Loved him for it. Gave him what he wanted and backed off when his face twisted uncomfortably or his scent bleed with his anxiety.

“I am seriously getting offended here. I will not have you taking cheap shots at my age! Nat, you’re my age for fucks sake!” Tony shouts out angrily as he shoved his way into the kitchen.

Turning her nose up, Natasha regally announces, “I do not age Anthony Stark. I am above that.”

Snorting, Lela rolls her eyes but doesn’t bother trying to get caught between any of this. As long as they weren’t trying to needle information out of her, they could all shit on Tony for as long as they wanted.

Crowded around all her arguing, dysfunctional and utterly intrusive pack, Lela breathes nice and easy and embraces all the happiness she’s housing inside her these days. Because her pack, all of them, are home and everything else was taking a back seat.

With that in mind, Lela immediately calls out, “Movie night?”

“Fuck yes!” Clint shouts as he sprung up from where he was sitting on her counter top.

“Clint, you haven’t even showered yet!” Pepper calls out, voice of reason. Her face pulled into a
fond frown. The kind she always seemed to wear when she was pulling on the responsibilities of the only functional adult among them.

“Use mine,” Lela tosses out and watches as the man practically runs for it.

“It’s my night,” Natasha says with surety lining her mouth as she pulled an apple up from Lela’s fruit bowl.

“Oh, no, Tony moved the schedule around when you guys left,” Bruce supplies as he shot Tony a damning look.

Narrowing her gaze, Natasha bites into the crisp apple in her hand and states again, “It’s my night.”

“Alright, it’s your night.” Sam easily folds like he hasn’t been actively taking up most of Natasha and Clint’s vacant movie night dates. As if he and Tony weren’t the ones running the most wild while Red hadn’t been in town.

And with that they all go scrambling to find their spots in her living room. All of their limbs sprawling out to intermingle with one another’s. When Clint jumps out of the shower, damp and wearing only a pair of boxers, he throws himself on top of the entire pile. He pushes, pulls and steps on a hell of a lot of people the whole way. Everyone groans but no one pushes him off. Least of all Lela. She lets herself be surrounded by all of them as Natasha picked something for them all to watch.

Settling in deep, head cushioned on someone’s arm, Lela basks in the feel of all her pack bonds twirling happy and warm over and through one another.

*~*

“Alright, spill babe. Give me all the dirty deets.” Clint says as he tried and failed to open the package of bacon in his hands. He’s using his teeth despite the box saying there’s a clear way for it to be done.

Groaning, Lela snags the package in his hands and undoes it like the damn thing says to. She’s laying three strips of thickly cut awesomeness into the pan when she tells him, “He’s a good guy.”

“Yeah?” Clint hums out. There’s no judgement or suspicion in his tone but Lela feels it in his ribbon bond. He’s concerned even if he’s trying not to be.

“He is,” Lela argues, turns to glare at him for a moment before flipping over the bacon, “He’s kind and sweet. He’s got a wicked sense of humor and he...he...he makes me happy.”

There’s a beat of silence that drops onto them both. The rest of the pack was still laid up on Lela’s living room floor. A too big bundle of blankets and pillows cushioning them all as they slept the day through. Lela had been the first to wake—which was a fucking first—so she’d slipped out to get started on breakfast. Clint had woken only after she’d stepped out of her bathroom.

Supposedly he was here to help her but he’d done nothing of the sort. More than anything he was just interrogating her and getting in the way.

Carefully, Clint asks, “How deep are you in it with this guy?”

“Pretty deep,” Lela admits, her face burning as she remembered all that happened the other day. Chewing on her bottom lip, Lela mumbles low enough to not be heard over the crackle of the bacon cooking, “Kinda dropped the L word on him already.”
“Holy shit,” Clint heaves out, shocked. His ribbon bond twangling like a rubber band snapping in place.

“In my defense, he’s a really good guy,” Lela throws over her shoulder.

“That’s…” Clint starts only to fail, “that’s…a bit soon?”

Moving to get the bacon plated, Lela turns and eyes the man as she asked, “Too soon for what?”

“You just got out of a relationship with…with James. Are you sure this isn’t just a rebound? It’s a bit fast, don’t you think? Are you sure you’re not…you know? Rushing into this because of what he did?”

Clint’s words make Lela still in place. Her whole body going rigid as she stared at her gamma. Wide eyed, Lela tries to find something to say. More than anything she tries to find anything within her that might prove his words true.

For all that she had been angry at James leaving, dumping her, carving out some unknown piece of her and just disappearing with it—Lela wasn’t angry now. She couldn’t be. Not anymore. Not after the hole in her heart has been patched up by warm smiles and glittering blue eyes.

There’s a great big part of her that’s still horribly sad about it all but she’s not…bitter. With time she’s come to understand that while James had pulled a dick move, he’d done what he’d done for himself. He needed to get away, needed to work some shit out that Lela probably wouldn’t have ever known how to help with. And Lela understands that now. Hadn’t then but does now.

James was a good man. Built of tragedy, sadness and broken dreams. But he was gentle, had always been gentle with her. He’d been kind to her when Lela hadn’t known kindness like that. He moved slow with her, taught her how to use her heart, when Lela had walked through life without ever using the fucking thing. He’d taught her love, showed her how it wasn’t a knife to be used against her, and had made her human again.

Like Lela had been a carved statue and James had kissed her into living breathing flesh again.

So while the memories of James had once been barbwire lined, covered in thorns and needles, they weren’t so anymore. Lela finds she thinks back on them and only ever smiles at the memory of his lips. She’s got no fucking doubt in her mind that she’s still in love with him. Probably always would be. But all the hopes and dreams she’d pinned to those moonlit smiles were laid to rest.

He’d gone and though she didn’t begrudge him of any of it anymore, he wasn’t coming back through that door anytime soon. And he’d never promised her that he would. He’d said goodbye and Lela had picked herself up as best as she could and walked on.

“I…James…he was a good…dude,” Lela starts off with as she turned off the flame of her stove top. Laying her hands on the counter top, she stares into Clint’s eyes and confesses, “Him leaving, it fucked me up pretty good—I ain’t even gonna lie about that. But, I’m not doing anything outta spite, or whatever. I’m just…when I met Steve, I…the way he looked at me? It just…it fucking burned me up from the inside out. It was like—fuck—I can’t even explain it. It’s like I knew him already despite the fact that I’d never seen the beautiful asshole a day in my life before. It was like a part of me was telling me I’d seen him before, knew him before and was rushing to get up close and personal with him again. It was like everything in me was screaming for me to snatch him up before he got too far, ya know? When he tried talking to me the first time he was so fucking shy he couldn’t really string a sentence together. He was leaving out little notes for me with little doodles on them and just…he’s amazing from the beginning. I told him about the shit that happened between me and James. He
understands where I’m coming from, why I’m the way I am sometimes and doesn’t fucking hold anything against me. I—I love him for who he is because he’s only ever looked at me the same way since the first day he met me. Like I’m the one running around with gold on my skin. Like…I don’t know, like he loves me for all of me—good or bad. He loves me like I love him. So… I don’t know. Maybe it is too fucking fast but…it doesn’t feel like it is, ya know? It feels…he feels right.”

Clint is quiet as he looks at her. Seated on one of her barstools, he tilts his head to one side and looks deep into Lela’s eyes. Like he’s trying to spot the lie that might sit in them. Like he’s holding out for the one single ounce of doubt she might have. Almost as if he’s about to pounce if Lela’s so much as even bit fearful on her part. When he comes up empty handed, he merely nods his head and declares:

“Alright then, I wanna meet him.”

Heaving out a heavy sigh, Lela goes back to fixing up something for them all to eat, “Yeah, you and everyone else. I already said I was gonna bring him ‘round when you guys came home. So I’ll ask him when he’s free. But you assholes better not try to run him off.”

“Not much of a man if he lets himself be run off.” Natasha drawls low and sweet as she slipped past Lela on silent feet.

Jolting in place, Lela growls out in annoyance and bites out, “I’m fuckin’ serious Red, wear a fucking bell!”

“Never.” Natasha smirked as she laid a kiss onto Clint’s already waiting lips. When she’s done with that, Natasha asks, “did you get a name?”

“Yup, Steve,” Clint grins wide and happy.

Confused, Lela tilts her head and then feels realization crash into her as she spit out, “This is the last time I let you fucking weasel your way into helping me cook Chuckles!”

“Steve what?” Tony demands as he bumped into her couch and rounded the corner.

“She didn’t say,” Clint easily supplies.

Grumbling low in his throat, Tony pulls up his phone as he mulishly sniped, “Not much of a damn spy if you can’t get a last name out of her.”

“He’s technically gotten more out of her than you have this entire time,” Bruce lightly argues as he slid up to Lela and easily started helping her with making the food. He brushes his hand through Lela’s hair and pulls away what has fallen into her eyes. His fingers are so gentle as he tucked the strands behind her right ear.

It easily untwirls the hint of anger currently pulling her stomach into knots. Bruce’s feather light touches always did.

“Wait, were you all in on this?” Lela growls, hands on her hips as she turned to glare at them all. A heated thing that does nothing to intimidate the assholes she holds close to her heart.

“In my defense, I told them to leave it be,” Pepper says as she pressed her lips to Lela’s forehead. A gentle good morning murmured into Lela’s skin. Banking the rest of her anger almost immediately.

“Does he work in the tower? What section?” Sam questions as he carried Natasha’s laptop over to Lela’s kitchen table.
Gritting her teeth together Lela growls loud enough to still all the bullshit running circles around her. When she’s sure everyone’s looking at her she says, “I told you guys, I’ll bring him here. Quit trying to fuckin’ smoke him out like he’s some kind of fuckin’ rat!”

“He’s coming here?” Sam easily says, not even slightly phased by Lela’s angry display.

Not for the first time does Lela miss the days when her fucking growls were taken seriously by every last one of them. Even Bruce was starting to not bat a single lash Lela’s way. Like they all knew she wasn’t really gonna do much else but kick up a storm and let them all get their way. But man had those had been the days. Days were Lela’s personal space was respected and she wasn’t treated like a goddamn fucking twelve year old throwing a temper tantrum.

She mourns all the days gone by.

“When?” Tony demands.

Humming low in her throat, Pepper pulls out fresh strawberries from the fridge as she asked, “Should we cook something up or dine out?”

“I’m thinking about making stir fry this weekend, we could do it then.” Bruce calls out as he started to crack open eggshells.

“That works for me,” Natasha breezily stated as if she’s not actively trying to fuck up Lela’s whole fucking life.

Waving her hands out, trying to get noticed in the middle of being ignored, Lela calls out, “Whoa! First of all, I gotta ask him if he’s free before you guys start making plans.”

“So call him. I want to meet this asshole who thinks it’s perfectly acceptable to keep a girl out all night and the following morning!” Tony rants.

“Tony, love, please. It’s too early for all of that.” Bruce shushes easily as he started plating up several rounds of scrambled eggs.

Grinning wide Lela pins Tony with a look and repeats, “Yeah Tony, love, shut your mouth hole before I put my fist through it.”

“Lela, please, we talked about threats in the morning,” Pepper admonished lightly as she handed over a plate full of bacon, eggs and hash browns.

“You said I couldn’t threaten people with putting my foot up their ass and leaving my boot up their throat. Never said anything about punching Tony’s mouth in!” Lela argued as she took her plate to her kitchen table. Feeling entirely too annoyed that Tony was flashing her a wide smirk the whole way.

“Hey Nat-cat, how sure are we that they aren’t related?” Clint asks as he followed Lela over to the table. His eyes flashing from Lela back over to Tony suspiciously.

Slipping in beside Sam, handing over a plate for him, Natasha drily states, “Less so these days.”

Rolling her eyes, Lela piles food into her mouth and tries not to internally freak out about what’s to come.

*~*
Oh fuck off!” Lela laughs as she continued to pile more and more stacks of recycled paper upon her empty pull cart.

“I’m dead ass serious! She’s suspended! *Gringita* was stealing supplies outta the back closet. Owens totally thought it was you but since you’ve been off, she was the only one running night shifts.” Amber tells her with a too wide smile.

Laughing, Lela grips another stack up off the floor and pulls up with her knees, “Why the fuck was she stealing fucking cleaning supplies?”

“I don’t fuckin’ know! Someone said she was selling them on the side or some shit,” Amber laughs out as she paused to run the back of her hand over her face.

“What, like, fucking three dollars a fucking pop? Shit ain’t even worth it.”

“Nah, heard she was taking the good shit, the fire suppressors and shit. Making some money off that shit, hard.”

Surprised, Lela stills and face shrugs before admitting, “Nice.”

“I know right!” Amber laughs as she pulled her water bottle off the ground and took a long swig from it.

Grinning, Lela stills too and leans up against her borrowed cart. It’s a flat bed seeing as to how she and Amber have drawn the short straws. They’ve been assigned to pick up all the recycled paper in building J’s east wing. Something that was admittedly harder than it fucking sounded.

Far too many trips in between the bins and the drop off site were what killed a person.

Figuring the coast was clear, Lela settles down and seats her ass onto the pile she’s just assembled. Mirroring her actions, Amber does the same. Popping open the tab of her soda, Lela drinks and lets her aching feet rest for a short moment.

It’s here that Amber announces, “Saw your boy over at the southside. Running drills with some of the securities new hires.”

“Yeah?” Lela mumbles, her mouth twisting up into a smile despite herself.

Smiling wide and knowing, Amber nods and purrs out, “*Ouuu,* bitch, you got it bad huh?”

“Fuck off wey,” Lela laughed as she fumbled to wring the aluminum tab on her soda off. She’d pull out a smoke but she’s inside and she’s not about to get written up by Owens. Fucker was on a war path since the whole suspension of Claire shit.

“Nah, don’t even front, you got that stupid smile on your face. Bitches only get smiles like that when they’re in love and shit. Or when they’re riding good dick.” Amber tells her like she’s got hard knowledge of this fact.

“Yeah?” Lela laughs again.

Smile turning lecherous, Amber leans her elbows on her knees and asks, “So which is it? Love or good dick?”

Wrinkling up her nose, Lela leans away until her back is pressed firm onto the wall behind her. Kicking out her limbs to sprawl lazily, Lela says without a hint of embarrassment or hang ups,
“Both.”

“No shit?” Amber grins, her eyes looking greedy for the details.

Finally managing to snap off the top, Lela shrugs her shoulders and tells her, “Five out of five fucking stars, would definitely ride that dick again. Shit was like fucking god. I think I saw god a couple of times.”

Groaning, Amber swipes a hand out to hit Lela’s knee as she cursed, “Pinche perra chingada!”

Laughing, Lela shrugs her shoulders and says on a more serious note, “Supposed to ask him to come over this weekend to meet my pack.”

“Damn, shit’s serious then?” Amber questions, looking all kinds of happy for Lela. If anyone was rooting for her and Steve to work out, it was Amber. Seeing as to how she had had a front row seat to most of the shit between Lela and Steve going down since the beginning.

“Pretty serious. Packs ready to rip into him the moment he walks in the door though.” Lela says as her eyes fell away to the tab in her hands.

“Why? Cause of the shit that happened with your Ex?”

“Yeah. They think I’m moving on too fast or something.”

“Why feel like you are?”

Slowly, Lela runs her hand through her hair and shrugs her shoulders as she admitted, “Sometimes I feel like I’m running through everything with him. Like, it feels like I just met him so I shouldn’t be this deep into it. But then, I don’t know, I feel like he’s…like he’s right. You get me? He just…he fits with me. He always makes it feel like I’ve known him for forever or something. It just…it feels right even if we’re all kinds of fucking new to each other. But then, it felt like that with my ex too. So…I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

Looking thoughtful, Amber leans back and fiddles with the bottle in her hand. She’s quiet for a long while before she opens her mouth and says, “I don’t think times got anything to do with shit like this. Like, you can know a dude for fucking years and love him until the very last fucking second. Then you meet someone else and it’s like——” at this Amber snaps her fingers, “—instant connection, you know? So I don’t think it fucking matters as long as you’re happy.”

Chewing on the inside of her cheek, Lela nods her head and mutters, “I still miss him, my ex. There’s days when I see something and wanna pick up my phone to call him. But…I know he won’t answer and that it won’t do shit all for me.”

“You loved him, shit like that doesn’t just go away overnight girl. No matter what anyone else says.” At this Amber takes on a somewhat sad expression. Her hazel eyes burning with things the girl won’t touch here and now.

“Yeah…” Lela mumbles low and quiet. Some part of her knowing for a damn fact that she’ll go into the ground having James name carved into her heart. Probably right next to Steve’s freshly raked in one.

“Anyway, you got a hot ass alpha on your arm now, so just fucking enjoy it perra!” Amber announces happily as she sprung back up onto her feet and went back to work.

And though it kind of pains her to just be able to brush past old memories of James and all she had
with him, Lela forces herself to do it. She gets to her feet and moves because there’s very little she can do about any of it now. He was gone. He’d said his goodbye. And Lela was with Steve now. Steve who stood still like a mountain until Lela pushed him and forced him to bend for her.

It doesn’t feel like betrayal but it might if Lela stopped to look at it too long.

*~*

Dragging her feet, Lela settles herself into clearing out the mess of fucking towels in the locker room. The bin they usually went into over flowing because the new hires they’d gotten weren’t fucking pulling their weight.

A hell of a lot more people had been involved with Claire’s get rich quick scheme. So Owens had cleared out half his cleaning crew and hired those that passed the screening. They weren’t worth dick, but at least they weren’t lacking numbers now. For whatever that was worth.

A heavy sigh slips out of Lela’s twisted lips as she stooped down to scoop up the damp towels by hand. She’s loading them all up into her empty cart when she feels the familiar heavy weight of eyes on her back. Pulling herself up, Lela turns to level a glare on whoever was looking her way.

Her glare dying almost immediately as she took in the long line of god like perfection currently presented to her. Because damn if Steve wasn’t a sight for sore eyes. Like a walking fucking wet dream, that was him. He’s got on some kind of tactical uniform that was a deep gray color that did wonders to make his blue eyes fucking look electric. His golden face shining like the rays of the sun as he grinned her way.

There’s not a doubt in Lela’s mind that Steve could wear a fucking garbage bag and fucking pull it off. But damn if he doesn’t look like fucking sin in something so goddamn form fitting. Every line of muscle on him is accentuated. The thickness of his legs glaring up at her with a dark promise of what lay between them.

It makes lust spark up inside her. Makes her hungry enough to ignore the running list of fucking added duties to her long ass day.

That conversation she knows she ought to get out of the way with him rearing it’s head only to die beneath the heel of her hindbrains appetites.

“Hey sweets, what’s a girl like you doing in a place like this?” Steve drawls, his eyes eating her up as he crossed his arms over his wide chest and leaned his shoulder onto a row of lockers.

It’s a fucking line, cheesy as all shit, but right up Steve’s fucking alley. The kind only he can say with such seriousness that it doesn’t sound half as fucking ridiculous as it is. Especially, Lela thinks, when their both standing in the locker room showers of building H.

A wide smirk spreads fast on Lela’s lips as she tossed the towels in her hands away. Running her tongue over her lips, Lela tosses his way, “A girl like me is why a guy like you comes to a place like this.”

Arching a brow, his smile growing wider, Steve arches a honey blonde brow at her and questions, “That so?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Lela hums out as she pushed her hands into her pant pockets and slowly wandered over to the man.

Standing toe to toe with him, having to tilt her head back to keep her eyes on him, Lela growls low
in her throat. A sound that does little to hide the fact that Lela’s all kinds of willing to fuck the man here and now. A sound that makes it glaringly obvious that she’s ready as all shit to get down and dirty in a locker room even if someone comes their way.

For a split second, Steve looks surprised before his eyes burn dark and dangerous. His smile falls from his lips as he surges forward and lays a kiss onto her lips. Gasoline tipping into her mouth, falling down into the pit of her belly, Lela’s lust explodes.

Their kiss is rough, raw and entirely too much teeth. Each of their individual tongues tangling in a mad scramble to dominate the kiss. Lela’s hands are sinking into his hair, pulling and yanking, as she dragged him down to her level. A rumbling deep growl is what she’s awarded for her efforts. A growl that makes the roof of her mouth tremble and her hindbrain twirl up nice and tight. A growl that makes her yearn for all that she knows he can give her.

Fresh rain, juniper and alpha musk clouds up her head and spills out any and all rational thought.

“Here? You sure?” Steve huffs out, his alpha fangs peeking out behind his kiss swollen lips as he stared wide eyed at her.

Snarling, baring her fangs at him, Lela pushes until the man hits the rows of lockers behind him. Uncaring of where the fuck she’s at, Lela sets to undo his belt buckle. She yanks open his fly with scrambling frenzied hands. When she’s got a handful of iron hard sin, Lela flashes a wide razor sharp smile and purrs out:

“As sure as you are.”

And without thought, Lela drops down to her knees and sets to fucking work.

Not so long ago Lela wouldn’t have ever thought she could fall to her knees as easily as she is doing now. At least, not without a heavy dose of heroine and the need to feed herself spurring her on. But it’s easy to do so for Steve. To drop down to her knees like her hindbrain aches and fill her mouth with all his gorgeous length. But, a lot of things come easy for her when it comes to Steve. As easy as it had come when it had been another one of her loves.

Tongue darting out to lave at his weeping cock, Lela growls low and ravenous. Her hindbrain curling and twisting at the thick scent in her nose and the musk sitting heavy on her tongue. Twirling her tongue, pressing it hard into the weeping slit, Lela basks in all the growling moans spilling out of Steve above her. His taste filling her up and begging for more.

Opening her mouth wide, Lela swallows him down. Her lips stretching wide and obscene as she pushed him down far enough in her throat that she thinks he might hit her fucking heart. There’s a thump and a crash that makes her look up to watch as Steve threw his head back on a guttural moan. The tendons on his golden neck pulling taut.

The sight of him, lost to his own pleasure, makes lust pool hot and vicious between her legs. Her sex spilling slick and throbbing harder than the heart in her chest.

Wrapping her hand around what does not fit down her throat, Lela bobs her head to push him deeper into the pits of pleasure. Her pace is much too fast. Entirely too fast for her own liking. But her hunger will not quiet. She pushes fast and races to the finish even if it’s just for him and does little else but just turn her the fuck on.

Right around the time her jaw starts to ache, a dull painful sting, Steve slips his hands into her hair. His hand fists and pulls at her scalp. A sharp pain that makes Lela’s sex ache deep and angry for all
that it’s being denied.

“I’m...fuck—Lela, I’m...” Steve pants out. His mouth falling open as his dark blue blazing eyes fell to meet hers.

Honestly, Lela doesn’t need him to tell her that he’s close. She can feel it in the way his dick grows thick and weighted. The way his head swells down where she has it in her throat. What could be a knot but wasn’t because he wasn’t in a rut. And damn if that thought doesn’t make everything in her burn with pure want.

Wildly Lela wonders what the fuck Steve would look like in the throes of his rut. She wonders, with a salivating mouth, how much bigger is cock can get. Let wonders what he might feel like, buried in her, tied to her, filling her to the brim with his hot and heavy seed.

Quick, like she’s starved for it, Lela wraps her hand around what she can’t fit down her throat and lets a spit slick hand run down to fondle his balls. With expertise lining her fingertips, Lela massages them and keeps her eyes trained up at the man she’s kneeling for. A demand lining the growl she rumbles out and lets vibrate down the length of him.

She can feel the exact moment it starts. The way he swells thick and gorgeous. The way his whole body tenses in preparation. The way his head knocks back and shudders ripple down and over him. Like a band stretching and ripping, Steve comes like he’s unprepared for it. Like it takes him by surprise despite the clear fact that Lela’s been blowing him for this very reason.

In thick heavy spurts, he shoots his load down her throat. A dark rumbling growl filling up the whole of the room they’re in. Both the sound of him and the fucking taste of him makes Lela feel drunk on her own lust.

In all, Steve doesn’t taste nothing like how he smells. Lela expects rain or maybe juniper. But, no, he tastes as heavy as his alpha musk is. A dense scent that makes her hindbrain cry out for more all the same.

Swallowing around him, Lela listens with greedy ears the growling hum that spills out of Steve. Pulling off him with an obscene pop, Lela eagerly runs her tongue over his hardened and twitching length. Cleaning him of her own drool with lazy twirling licks that make Steve’s whole both shudder like it’s both too much and not enough. When she’s done she’s a panting growling mess. Her tongue running over the lengthened fangs in her mouth to further chase that heady taste inside.

For as eager as her pussy is in pushing things deeper into that direction, Lela knows she can’t. She’s got maybe a couple more minutes before she’s gotta start in on the room and run down to the next one. So though it pains every inch of her Lela slips him back into his pants. Steve’s a shuddering mess on wobbling legs as Lela buckles his button and belt back into place. His face is that pretty pink hue she’s become obsessed with. His burning blue eyes blink and blink like he’s chasing bright spots out of them. When he opens his mouth, alpha fangs on clear display, not a word slips out. Only a rumbling desperate growl that Lela knows he’s just as eager to pull her pants down as she had him.

Shaking her head, Lela takes a step back to keep from letting him have his wicked way with her. An idea Lela’s body is fully on board with. His unique brand of musk sitting like a damning temptation upon her tongue. Her lips, swollen and glossy, are spread wide into a smirk as she pulled a smoke out of her breast pocket.

In an effort to kill the taste in her mouth, Lela sparks up and figures Jarvis will kill the smoke alarms up top if it becomes an issue. Only when she’s got a mouthful of smoke does Lela casually ask:
“You got plans this weekend?”

Looking all kinds of fucking confused, blissed out, still leaning heavily on the lockers behind him, Steve shakes his head but doesn’t bother trying to make use of his mouth.

Grinning, watching her handiwork with none too subtle appreciation, Lela nods her head and mumbles over the butt of her smoke, “Whole packs in town. Wonderin’ if you can drop by.”

“What time?” Steve mumbles as he ran a hand through his golden hair and met her gaze.

Wobbling her head, acting like she wasn’t aching to drop down to her fucking knees again, Lela says, “I don’t know. Five good?”

“Yeah—” Steve mumbles, as he stood tall and walked over to her. He’s ducked down low as he lays his lips on her. He kisses her all kinds of slow with a tongue that’s built to unravel fucking worlds. A growl slips out of his mouth and into hers as he chased smoke and his own musk within. His hands gripping her tight as if he’s aching to tear through the clothes she’s got on in search of the flesh hidden beneath. When he pulls away, a panting mess with eyes burning dark with beautiful promise, he whispers, “I’ll be there.”

Grinning wide, Lela pushes him away from herself and says with a laugh, “Alright, then. Now get to stepping Rogers, don’t need you distracting me.”

Chuckling low, rubbing his cheek against the nape of her neck, Steve growls into her skin, “Oh, I’m the distraction?”

Warmth bubbling in her chest, making her heart thump harder, Lela pushes him off and watches as he walks backwards towards the door. Both of them wearing matching grins the whole while. When he’s about to duck out, Steve stills and asks:

“You got plans tonight?”

And maybe, she’s not sure seeing as to how Red and Chuckles are back in town. But Lela answers quicker than those thoughts can make themselves known, “Not really, why?”

“What time do you get off?”

“Six.”

Nodding his head, Steve tells her with a wide smile, “I’ll see you then sweets.”

And just as he’d appeared, he fucking vanishes. Leaving Lela a twirling mess of emotions. That bubbling warmth she has in her chest flowing outward to tangle with all of her bonds. Her new bones feel all kinds of feather light Lela wouldn’t be surprised if she started floating.

With an extra pep in her step, Lela finishes cleaning up the showers and runs through the rest of her day. The prospect of having that heavy alpha musk on her tongue making her move fast.

*~*

Out by the westside exit of the compound, Lela waits for Steve. She’s got a smoke pinched between her lips as she eyes the screen of her phone. Reading, for the third time that minute, the text Steve has sent her. It says nothing else but for her to meet him here. Though for what, Lela’s not entirely sure.

For as long as she’s known Steve he’s never actually rolled up on anything outside of his two legs.
So she’s all kinds of confused as to what she’s supposed to be looking for at the moment.

When the rumbling sound of a bike’s engine comes, Lela glances up and finds herself utterly surprised at what she finds. Perched, like a goddamn king upon a noble steed, comes Steve. The setting sun glowing behind him as he slipped to a halt before her. His face a grinning mess as he kicked his legs out to steady the brown and chrome motorcycle he’s straddling.

Whistling low and appreciative, Lela calls out with a wide smile, “Damn, Steve.”

“You like it?” Steve questions with a happy face as he killed the engine and leant back.

“Shit yeah! Where the fuck you been hiding this shit?” Lela demands as she pocketed her phone and did a slow circle around the alpha and bike.

Laughing, Steve shrugs his shoulders and curls in like he’s embarrassed by how much pride he finds himself housing, “Haven’t been hiding it. Just don’t have a lot of reason to use it.”

Slowly kicking the stand out, Steve slips off the bike and Lela watches as the thing rises a bit from where it had sagged before. When he’s on his two feet Lela admires the man instead. His clothes have been switched out to simple denim jeans and a white tee underneath a dark brown leather jacket. His dark brown boots pairing nicely with the jacket and the fucking bike.

It’s a pretty as shit sight. One that Lela shamelessly basks in the longer she stands there looking. Her eyes eating up every inch of him. Not for the first time does Lela wonder how the fuck she got so lucky in bagging Steve. Aside from looking like a living breathing wet dream come to life, the man was just so otherworldly good. He was sweet, caring, honest, warmth and loving all rolled into one.

Not for the first time does Lela feel like the luckiest bitch that ever lived. To know she can just step up to him, lay her lips upon him and not have a doubt in her mind that he will return her kiss. To know, without a shred of doubt, that Steve will love her as passionately as she does him. To know that he looks at her and only her. To know that he won’t turn away from her no matter what side of her face she showed him.

And yeah, maybe Clint was right. She had moved on a little fast from James but how could she not when confronted with such a man as Steve? Maybe it was too fast but it wasn’t a fucking rebound or an intentional stab at the man who’d left her.

What she feels for Steve is real. As real as his smile. As real as those too big, warm and work rough hands. As real as the ugly thump she got whenever he was around. It was real and Lela wasn’t gonna give that up any time soon.

The devil could kick up a storm, Lela wasn’t turning her back from Steve. She wasn’t gonna let another person walk out of her life without them knowing how she felt for them. This time around she was gonna lay this shit out. Come the pain that may, Lela was tired of being the only one heartbroken.

A small part in her crying that if maybe she’d been honest from the get with James, he’d still be with her now.

Flicking her dying smoke away from herself, Lela closes the distance between them and pulls the man down to her level. Roughly kissing him Lela breathes out in a low growl,

“Love you.”

Wide eyed, Steve looks down at her before his expression melts into something so tender Lela’s
hindbrain half cries over it. Slipping his too big hands up her spine and into her hair, Steve nods his head and murmurs against her waiting lips:

“Love you too, sweets.”

Half choking on the feeling that spreads like an over inflated ballon in her chest, Lela lets her arms encircle his waist. With Steve’s face ducked into the crook of her neck, Lela buries her face into his chest. Her nose eagerly pulling the scent of rain and juniper until her head is loopy with it. Something tight builds up just below her throat as she hugged him tighter to herself.

Something that is desperate and rabid. Something that claws with broken and chipped nails until Lela’s raw and bleeding.

“You alright?” Steve questions, his hot breath fanning across her skin. It chases away the cold that threatens to seep into her new bones.

More than half of her doesn’t want to touch what she knows she ought to. What she’s been internalizing since Clint asked what he asked. What she’s gone over with, with Amber. But talking to Steve is easy. Easy as breathing. So before she knows what she’s doing the words come tumbling out of her mouth and into his chest:

“My pack thinks I’m moving too fast with you.”

For a long moment Steve says nothing. He remains quiet. The only way Lela knows he’s heard what she’s said is the way his arms around her tighten. Like he’s half afraid she’ll disappear if he doesn’t grip her close enough.

“Do you?” he asks on a quiet low rumble.

Biting the inside of her cheek, Lela turns her head and lays her left cheek flat against him, “No. Maybe? It doesn’t feel like I am. I know I care about you. I know I love you. But…it wasn’t that long ago that I got my ass handed back to me. So I get where they’re coming from.”

Slow and careful, Steve pulls away to look down at her. His navy blue eyes twinkling in the reds and purples of the sky. Those damn pink and kissable lips of his twist into a sad frown as he nods his head and says, “It’s alright to have some doubt Lela. Heartbreak…it’s hard to get over.”

And yeah, Lela’s coming to understand that yeah it is. But also, so was love. Because as much as maybe she shouldn’t, Lela was still in love with someone that couldn’t be hers. As much as she loved Steve now…Lela still loved James. Would always, she thinks and that’s all kinds of fucked up. Wasn’t it?

“Would you…” Lela starts, her words dying on her as she stared up into his gorgeous face. Fear making it so she has to work up the courage to say what she knows she has to, “I love you but…I don’t think I’ll ever stop loving him too. And I get how fucked up that is. It’s so fucking unfair to you but…”

Shaking his head, small smile tipping his lips upward, Steve tells her, “Loves complicated Lela. We can love someone who isn’t with us anymore just as much as we love someone who is. I—there’s a part of me that’ll always love Peggy even though she’s gone. Doesn’t mean I love you less for it. Doesn’t mean I don’t love you with all that I got now. And I do, ya know? Love you with everything I got.”

Feeling the truth in his words ringing clear and true, Lela dumbly nods her head as if she does. As if
it is a fact handed down to her from somewhere on high. But seeing how Steve’s never handed her anything except the truth—whole and undisputed—Lela figures it is a fact. A truth the kind only Steve can pull up and hand on over.

“But James…he ain’t…he left—he’s not…” Lela tries to say that her past love wasn’t dead. That he was alive—somewhere. That he left her because he didn’t want to run through what haunted him with her. That the situation for both of them wasn’t the same.

“As long as you don’t feel like we’re moving too fast…” Steve starts, eyes roaming across her face looking for any ounce of doubt, he continues on, “We can deal with what comes together, yeah?”

And like everything else that was Steve, he issues this promise with an iron willed belief. So firm in place that he stood like a mountain against the raging winds that were built up in Lela. For all that Lela knew the alpha before her to be a fighter when it came down to it, it surprises her here and now. That Steve’s not willing to back down and away despite knowing that to different names line Lela’s heart. That Steve’s not leaving her; his love having not faltered an inch with her confession.

“Yeah,” Lela whispers, her voice feeling too small in her own mouth. She feels hope slip over her tongue and out. The thought of Steve still wanting to be in this making her weak in the knees. A weak wind could come knock her down if not for the sure arms wrapped around her.

Tipping his head to the side, Steve smiles down at her and asks, “Wanna hit the town with me?”

It doesn’t take much for Lela to mirror Steve’s smile. Her lips work up on their own as she nodded her head and followed the man to his bike. Slipping onto the back of him, Lela wraps her arms around him again. All her troubles melting away with the winds that whipped past her and the rumble of Steve’s engine. The love for him growing stronger and deeper all the while.

*~*~*

“I’m being serious!” Lela half yells in her own defense.

Honestly, Steve’s willing to believe anything his girl says over everything if not for the wide sharp toothed smile she wears as she says this.

Hard earned knowledge tells him Lela’s not above stretching the truth when she feels like it. When she feels like pulling a joke on him especially. Because she’s like that, enjoys putting him through the wringer just to laugh and grin at him from across the way. And though it should put him out, being the butt of her jokes on end, Steve only ever finds himself laughing along with her most times. His head gettin all spinny every time she throws her head back and lets her husky laugh spill out into the open.

A sound that, more than anything, pleases all his secondary instincts. All the things that make him an alpha growling and purring in happiness because of her laugh. So Steve’ll happily be the butt of her joke so long as she looks his way still by the end of it.

Narrowing his eyes upon her, Steve purses his lips and mumbles, “That’s what you said last time, sweetheart.”

Tossing her head back, looking like a dream underneath the light of the full moon, Lela laughs long and loud. Her husky laugh rolling out of her and into the nighttime winds surrounding them. Something tight in his chest pulsing in satisfaction and yearning at the sound of it.

And despite how much of a romantic he gets accused of being, Steve’s never been one for poetry.
Never could understand half of what he’d found between pages of yellowing books. Poetry had been more Buck’s speed. But, damn if she wasn’t poetry come to life.

A walking, talking, fighting, snarling, dark form of poetic beauty.

The way her dark eyes reflect the stars above her head takes his breath away. Her dark wavy hair always shimmering like diamond dust has been combed through it. Her soft brown skin glittering and promising him rivers of gold. Whole sonnets ought to be devoted to her. Running long winded things that can put ink to paper the beauty she holds in a single sharp toothed smirk.

She’s gorgeous, every last inch of her. Beautiful and serene like a goddess that was both giving and vengeful.

It doesn’t make sense. No matter which way he looks at it, Lela is a puzzle he hopes never to complete. She’s a girl, Steve has come to understand, that is made up of a million and one contradictions happily fighting alongside one another.

Lela’s a girl made up of sharp edges, sharp enough to cut, and still smile so warm and sweet. A girl who could throw her fist at any who slighted her and still run her fingers so softly through his hair. A girl who carried with her such heavy scars and still loved as completely as she did.

It doesn’t make sense, no matter how he looks at her, but damn if he doesn’t count himself lucky enough to be here with her. To have her look at him the way she does. To have her love him like she does.

When she’d opened her pretty dark mouth and said that damned four letter word at him…he’d been sure he’d lost his damn mind. Because he knew, from the moment she glared at him, met him up in that coffee shop, set her dark gaze on him, he’d been gone. So deep in love with her he was lost. He had dreams where she felt even a little of what he felt for her.

But then Lela had said what she’d said. Her big dark eyes hopeful and scared. Her body squared up as if she was facing down a fight as she admitted something she seemed too scared of touching. But she was reaching for it like a moth was rushing towards a flame. Drawn in, despite herself as much as he was. Both of them seemingly pulled by something that was stronger than either one wished to fight.

It’d lit him up from the inside out. Made him feel like he was running through a mine field and out to the other side towards an oasis. It’d made him feel whole in a way he’s never known he could feel. Made him wanna run right up to the roof top and growl out in vicious victory. An alpha roar of conquest lining his mouth. The urge to bellow out—like he’d mated himself an omega—burning through his veins. Because Lela loved him. She looked at him, in her gorgeous earth shaking prime, and chose him. Chose to love him even if she wore all the scars on her skin from a love that had slipped through her fingers.

Knowing what he knows now, that she still loved another that wasn’t with her now, didn’t move him an inch. It might’ve if it’d been anyone else. Anyone else but her. But, Steve knows he loves her. He knows she loves him just as much. He knows, like he knows her skin is supple smooth and her hands can hold him gently and lovingly, that she had enough heart to house him too.

It did nothing but solidify in his own mind that the man who left her was no more than a damn idiot.

Who could look at her, built of nothing but heart, and walk away. Who could see the frail hope in her eyes and step on it?
Knowing what he knows now, Steve only finds himself actively working to keep the love between them solid and true. A foundation built strong and unmovable for the years to come. Because there would be more days of this.

More days of Lela laughing at him, with him, for him. More days where Steve sat back and marveled. He was sure of it. Could stake his whole damn life on it. He’d make more of these days and carry them with him always.

“He’s a song, pretty famous one actually,” Lela mumbles, as she twirled her smoke between her thumb and index. The smoke that fumes up creating a soft veil from which her dark eyes glittered behind.

And again, Steve wishes he had the ability to put words together the way poets did. Because her eyes deserved so many odes.

“What kind of person sits around singin’ ‘bout a girls…you know,” Steve argues, hates that he sounds like the old man everyone keeps pinning him for. But there’s a line, Steve knows, over what acceptable to be sung about. Girls...underthings, was not something one sung about.

Laughing at him, Lela grins and shrugs her black leather clad shoulders and offers simply, “It was a weird time man. Everyone was singing dumb shit then. Not much one can listen from that era and say it held through with time. Outside of grunge, everything’s shit.”

Pursing his lips, Steve tries not to sound like an old biddie but knows it’s a lost cause when he mulishly announces, “Still, there’s no reason to go ‘bout singin’ something like that.”

“It’s the thong song. My alpha says it’s the unofficial anthem for his generation. You seriously never heard it before?” Lela questions as a grin worked itself wider on her beautiful face.

“No, I haven’t.” Steve tells her firmly as he twirled his fingers between her inky black strands. No matter how he looked at it, her hair was softer than any silk he’s ever come across. That strange scent of hers—brushfire smoke and something faintly sweet—kicking up into the night time air as he toyed with it.

Rummaging through her back pocket, leaning closer into his side from where they sit outside on his bike, Lela pulls her phone out. With a few taps across the screen, Lela allows something to come spilling out into the air. In less than thirty seconds the worst thing imaginable starts being sung about.

Groaning, Steve drops his head back and issues a low laugh because of course she’s put that on for him to hear. Reaching over to swipe her phone from her, Steve attempts to wrestle it out of her small hands and mumbles:

“We’re out in public sweets.”

Laughing like the little rebel she can be, Lela keeps her phone out of his hands as she said above the damnable song, “Ouuu, are you embarrassed Stevie babe?”

Burning from both the increasingly vulgar lyrics and the fact that Lela’s calling him pet names, Steve catches the phone and ends the song. He sends her a triumphant grin of his own as he handed it back.

“Never thought that that’d be you’re type of music.”

Smoke pinched between her lips, Lela glances at him and burrows deep into his side. She does this
effortlessly. Just digs her small body up against his side and moves his arm until it drapes over her shoulders. She pushes him, twists him where she wants him and then lays still. Steve lets her do as she pleases because...well, because he’ll always let her do as she pleases.

Every time she lays her petite hands on him makes everything in him calm. All his alpha instincts uncurling outward until he can’t think of anything else but keeping her sated, pleased, content and pulled tight to him. Makes him feel wanted, whole and worthy that Lela seeks him for her comfort.

“Don’t really got a set type, ya know? Long as it ain’t fuckin’ country music. Fuckin’ can’t stand that shit. Makes me wanna bash my skull in. Johnny Cash being the only exception. Fucker’s got some smooth ass songs.”

Not often does Steve actually know what someone is talking about these days. Half, if not most, references fly right over his head. But that name he knows. On account of that running list he’s got in his jacket pocket.

“I’ve heard of him. Never actually looked into it though.”

Pulling her face from where she’s laid it upon him, Lela quirks a brow at him. She opens her pretty brown lips on an empty note. But she says nothing and just pulls her phone back out and starts fiddling with it again. In no time at all, another song starts playing out.

“This is one of my favorites, his voice is just…it’s fucking dope. Heard him when I was a kid, couldn’t get the sound outta my head for a full fucking month.” Lela tells him easily.

It’s a slow song, sad and ominous. The guitar thrumming in the background and out into the open dark night air. The singers voice curling with a southern twang. The lyrics, more than anything, are what sticks out to Steve. A song for those that won’t go down without a fight. A song for those sin stained but reluctant to be held down.

“Ain’t no grave can hold my body down,” Lela hums out, her husky voice pitched low as smoke twisted and curled from between her lips. Her voice far sweeter than Steve’s ever heard it before.

It’s a song, Steve thinks, fit for the girl beside him. For Lela was just like the man in the song. A girl whose soul wouldn’t be put down no matter how many times the world tried. A girl whose heart has been trampled enough times it knows the true meaning of heart break but loved regardless of it all. A girl who loved as fiercely as she fought.

And though he’s got a lot of reasons to fight the evil of these worlds, he knows none hold up a damn flame for the want in his heart to keep his girl smiling till the end of their days. So the world could try to tip her chin down but Steve wasn’t about to let that happen without a fight.

Pulling her tighter to him, Steve lays his head upon hers and mumbles, “It’s a good song.”

Eyes glittering with the knowing smile she sends him, Lela says, “Fuck yeah it is.”

Rubbing his cheek against the crown of her head, Steve asks, “He got anything else?”

It’s late now, the food truck they’d caught straight out of Lela’s shift at the tower packed up and gone, but Steve isn’t willing to move until Lela asks him to. But she doesn’t seem to mind the late hour. She just snuggles deeper into him as she fiddles with her phone and pulls up another song for them to hear in the dead of night.

Steve can find no reason in the world to rush her along back home. He just pulls her tighter to him and rumbles low purrs in his chest as she made herself comfortable against him. Every line in her
body falling loose and pliable as she eventually flicked her smoke away and wrapped her arms around him.

In her embrace, wrapped tight in his arms too, Steve finds a home that has eluded him since the moment he opened his eyes. Nose full of her brushfire smoke, Steve feels complete. Heart full of the love he has for her, Steve feels a warm future spilling out before him into the cold dark night.

*~*

“You look fine,” Lela grumbles as she smoked her cig.

It’s a damnable lie. Steve looked worlds better than just fine. He’s got on one of his stupidly tight long sleeve button downs. A soft maroon colored one that paired nicely with his dark denim jeans and the dark black boots on his feet. The dark leather jacket he’d pulled off and thrown over his arm had done things to Lela’s fucking heart. His golden hair has been combed back nice and neat leaving his gorgeous face front and fucking center.

He’d looked like a walking fucking fever dream when he’d rolled up in his bike. If not for the fact that she’s pretty sure that everyones waiting for her up top, she’d fuck him here and now. Steve was a living breathing temptation. Any one who was lucky enough to lay eyes on him was sliding open their legs on the off chance he looked back.

Only person that wasn’t in on this whole hearted truth was the man in question.

The moment he’d killed his bikes engine, Steve had rushed her and started fidgeting in place. His eyes falling down to his shirt like he was wishing he had a spare with him. Like he was regretting his choice of clothes with everything in him.

It’s kind of cute if Lela’s being honest. Watching him being all kinds of nervous for something as important as this. That Steve cares enough to want to look his best for her pack. It makes her heart swell with all the hot to touch love she has for him and with something so primal she doesn’t really understand. There’s a need in her, the longer she smokes and watches, to keep the man safe from all the shit he’ll inevitably be dealt the moment he walks into her place.

“I feel under dressed,” Steve mumbles down at his jeans.

Rolling her eyes, Lela flicks her smoke away and pulls the man closer to herself. Stretching to the tips of her toes, she tells him, “What the fuck you on about cariño. You look hotter than hell.”

Blushing, Steve lets himself be pulled and welcomes her lips as he smiled at her gently, “You look real pretty too sweetheart.”

Shrugging, Lela drops back onto her feet and says with more confidence than she currently feels, “I try.”

Which was the honest truth. Lela had gone through six different outfits before she’d settled onto what she has on. None had felt comfortable enough, or good enough, for what lay before her. In the end, she’d settled for her trusty gray long sleeved tee. One that hugged her tight and cut down into a plunging v which bared the criss crossings of her black lace bralette. Pulling on a pair of black ripped skinnies, slapping on some black liner and rouge colored lipstick, Lela had called it a day. Her combat boots left unlaced and sloppy at her feet.

“C’mon,” Lela tells him as she dragged him up the steps by lacing her hand into his and squaring her shoulders for a fight she knows might come, “Hot as ya look, I’m getting cold.”
Ignoring the lift, dragging her feet like that’ll help, Lela throws over her shoulder, “You sure you’re down for this? We can always ditch’em and head out for a quick bite.”

Lela’s not even lying about that. She’s very fucking willing to ditch the entire situation laid out before her. Each and everyone of her pack was driving her up the wall since the sun had pulled up. Bruce and Pepper were manning the kitchen with Sam helping out where he could. Red and Chuckles were not so subtly interrogating her the entire morning. Tony had resorted to pacing before the lift on the off chance it started moving with Steve’s body inside it.

It was a loaded powder keg waiting to go off.

“No. I’m…uh, I’m ready.” Steve says a little unsure as he followed her up, “They’re not—they’re not that bad, right?”

Laughing, Lela stills someways down from her door. Pinning him with a look, Lela says as honestly as possible, “No, they’re worse. You know Sammy’s pack right?” when Steve nods his head, Lela goes on, “Okay, he’s probably the least of you’re worries then. Seeing as to how y’all are already friends. Everyone else is a fucking loaded gun. And that’s not even a joke babe. Don’t get fooled by their pretty faces. Red’s who you gotta watch out for. She’s always got something sharp on her.”

“This…” Steve starts, running a hand through his blonde locks, “This isn’t exactly settling my nerves here sweets.”

Shrugging, Lela reaches out to him and laces their hands together, “Just telling you how it is babe. They’re the prettiest looking monsters you’ll ever see. But you’ll be fine. As soon as they see you in your sunday best they’ll come around.”

And honestly, Lela’s not so sure about any of her reassurances. But she knows while her pack is built with dysfunctional assholes they aren’t that much of dickheads. Lela’s pretty sure that when they’re confronted with the whole of Steve’s sweet and shy nature they’ll cave.

Pulling in a deep breath, hoping for the best, Lela tugs him up and heads for her door. She’s at her front door when she turns and tugs him down for a kiss again. Against his lips she mumbles, “No matter what happens promise you won’t go running for the hills, yeah?”

Smiling, Steve kisses her sweet and gently as he murmured, “Never. Love ya too much to run anywhere but to you.”

Scrunching her nose, Lela pushes at his firm chest as she accused the alpha with her heart soaring, “You’re such a sap.”

“Only for you sweetheart,” Steve laughed out.

Rolling her eyes, Lela whispers into the quiet of the staircase, “And I love you for it.”

Wide smile on his face, Steve practically glows like the burning sun. His shoulders, that had been curled down with his anxiety, harden and straighten out. Like he’s grown confident by Lela’s words and love. He stands tall with his chest puffed out as he waits for her to open her own door.

Though it pains her, Lela pulls her eyes off of him and pushes open her front door. The first thing she see’s is Clint’s waiting face and in turn Natasha’s. They’re front and center like they couldn’t wait three solid seconds until Steve’s actually inside before jumping him.

Lela’s in the middle of pursing her lips at them when suddenly…all hell breaks loose.
Each and everyone of her bonds pulls taut while simultaneously exploding wildly across her. It makes her nervous empty belly knot and twist so hard she thinks she might fucking gag.

“Rogers?” Tony calls out, head snapping over to the door as he demanded quickly, “What’s wrong?”

“Cap?” Sam says as he rushed out of the kitchen to stand at attention beside Natasha and Clint. His brown eyes growing alarmed as he too asked, “What’s happened? I didn’t get a page. Are we headed out?”

“Steve?” Clint rushes out the name, his honey eyes flashing between Lela and the alpha at her back. And faster than Lela can really track, Clint’s lightly freckled face pulls down into a frown as he hissed out, “You’re *her* Steve?”

Clint’s ribbon bond turns to piano wire and cuts in deep.

“Of course he fucking is,” Natasha growled out as her hands reached out to pull Lela away from where she stands by Steve.

Natasha’s iron band turning so bitterly cold that it ached.

Surprised by the words, by the general tone in both Clint and Natasha’s words, Lela lets herself be moved.

“Holy shit,” Pepper says from where she’s now standing in the middle of Lela’s level. Lela’s too fucking confused to be surprised by Pepper’s cursing. Pepper’s bond flexing with shock and then cold fear.

“Wait! Hold the goddamn phone. You’re *Steve*?! You’re the new asshole boyfriend? The one who kept my kid out all goddamn night?!” Tony half screams out. His face pulling in anger.

The snake on her spine twisting hard and coiling. Lela wouldn’t be surprised if her spine cracked in two with the force of it.

“You’ve got to be shitting me!” Clint growls as he moves to stand between Lela and Steve.

“Wait, guys, everyone calm down!” Bruce tries as he abandoned everything in Lela’s kitchen and came running to the quickly growing crowd by the front door.

Bruce’s bond, more than anyones, was filled with cold anxiety and thrumming uncomfortably.

“Fuck no,” Sam spits out, his face turning grim as he pulled himself up to his full height and took a dangerous step forward, “Tell me I’m looking at this all wrong, Cap.”

The flower on her heart turns thorned and dripping in venom. The roots of his flower bond constricting through the passage ways of her thumping heart.

And considering everything’s been happening in less than forty seconds flat, Lela feels like she’s spinning in place. It takes her a long time before she can get her feet under her with her bonds pulling in every direction. When she finally does, the first thing she does is shake off the hands that cage her. Pushing her way around Clint, Lela comes back to where she started and glares at everyone present. With dark growls lining her throat, Lela demands:

“What the fuck is going on here?”
“Kid,” Tony is the fastest one to open his mouth. His eyes—dark and angry—flashing between Lela and Steve standing rock solid at her back, “Tell me this is some sick elaborate joke. Tell me you haven’t been sleeping with Rogers.”

“Oh god! She’s been sleeping with him!” Sam growls out, his beta fangs flashing as he took a step forward only to be stilled by Clint’s arm. Every line on his dark face speaking to his sudden and eager want to pull Lela away from Steve.

And it’s a fucking shock if ever there was one. Sam, soft and smiling Sam, going full on dom-beta at the drop of a dime. Lela had been pretty sure he’d be the least problematic one coming into this. Obviously, she was dead fucking wrong.

Growling vicious and dangerous, Lela gets two seconds of silence as she bit out sarcastically, “Let me guess, y’all fuckers know each other?”

Huffing out an awkward and nervous laugh, Bruce scrubs at the back of his head as he mumbled, “Now there’s the understatement of the year.”

Lips pursed into a tight frown, Lela feels the tension coiling up on her shoulders. When Clint goes to open his mouth Lela growls loud enough to get her silence back into place. Slowly, Lela turns in place and eyes the alpha currently hiding behind her.

Ignoring everyone in her place, Lela looks up at him and says as carefully smooth as she can manage, “Steve, babe, this is my pack.”

Navy blue eyes on her, only her, Steve nods his head and tells her straight faced, “I know’em.”

Pulling a face, feeling the unmistakeable need to fucking laugh, Lela nods her head and drawls, “Clearly.”

And while she knows the night has just begun—with it all the fucking drama that was currently in the air—Lela feels like she can face it. If only because she’s got hope in her chest and Steve’s love and she knows the assholes at her back were only trying to look out for her. So she welcomes it with open arms as she turned around and declared:

“The weapons ban is still in effect! You assholes better not try some shit.”

Popping his lips open, Clint cries, “He can totally take it though!”

Mulishly, lips twisted into a deep frown, Sam bites out far more hostile than Lela’s ever heard him get, “Deserves it too.”

The door closes with a deafening click. If Lela was any kinds of smart, she would’ve walked out while she had the damn chance. But Lela’s gotten slow and dumb since she’s been let inside. Tamed by all the love she’s been drowning in. She doesn’t hear the warning bells ringing in her ears until it’s far too fucking late.

*~*

At this point, Lela’s seriously thinking about getting a written fucking list of all the people each and every single one of her pack mates has an issue with. One that she’ll end up tattooing into her left arm to avoid situations like this one. A list that’ll help her out and keep her from bringing home sworn fucking enemies.

Because it’s tiring, more than anything, walking through life so underprepared. This is the second
time she went and put her foot in it and fell in love with someone her pack is dead set on hating.

Leaning against her open window, Lela shamelessly smokes half inside of her level. Any other day, any other fucking situation, and Bruce would be kicking up a storm about it. Pepper would’ve asked her to step out. Tony might’ve started in on his ever long winded lectures about the side effects of smoking just to get her to put it out. But seeing as to how it’s this situation, this day, no one says a damn word.

Mainly because they’re all too busy staring—or glaring—in Steve’s direction. Steve himself is awkwardly shuffling on his feet. For someone ripped as he is, he’s too nervous to leave Lela’s side for fear of getting his ass mauled. It’d be funny if it didn’t make Lela want to sink her fangs into the assholes making him feel the way he does.

Those assholes being her assholes.

Heaving out a deep breath of smoke, Lela drawls as smooth as she can manage at this point, “We gonna talk ‘bout it? Or we just gonna carry on our merry fucking way. Personally, I’m all for an awkward as shit meal.”

That’s a lie. Lela hates eating in anger or whatever the fuck this was. Food, Lela’s come to understand about herself, was meant for happy thoughts, happy times and general feel good moments. Maybe it’s the poor kid in her that feels like a meal was a well deserved reward that makes her so happy to be stuffing food into her mouth. Or maybe it’s the fact that she’s gone actual weeks in between eating solid food that has made her this way, either way, she doesn’t eat if she’s in a shitty mood.

So it’s a lie, a bold faced one where everyone in the room is concerned, but Lela’s willing to go through on her bluff if need be. If pushed, she’ll grip Steve’s hand tight and drag him out of here without a backward glance.

“Do you know who he is?” Natasha starts, her jade eyes glittering like a deadly jaguars as she lounged on a barstool and sipped from her wine glass. She’s got this whole air of calmness sitting on her skin that is only just hitting the mark.

If anyone bothered to really look they’d see the barely controlled rage sitting in her face and the barely there frown on her ruby red lips.

Rolling her eyes, Lela huffs, “Course I do. He’s Steve. My boyfriend.”

Laughing, half angry and half something else, Sam throws his head back and says up into the ceiling, “You’re a real piece of work, you know that Rogers?”

Confused, feeling like the odd man out, Lela glances over to Steve and tries to get her unasked question across by gaze alone. By the way Steve sheepishly curls into himself lets Lela know he got it.

Scuffing his boot onto her concrete floor, Steve mumbles low, “I uh, I probably should’ve mentioned how I knew Sam.” Raising a dark brow at him, Steve ducks his head and admits, “I, um, I’m kind of Captain America.”

It takes a little longer than Lela’s willing to admit out loud when the words click in her head. But being that she’s just that dumb—a special breed of stupid—it takes a solid minute or so. When the words hit, clear and vivid, Lela feels surprise soak deep into her bones. Shock blurs out the fucking twinge of anger that twirls in her belly that he hadn’t bothered to mention it before.
Sucking on her teeth, Lela flicks the ash on her smoke and hums out, “No shit?”

Growing, deep gurttal things, Tony snarls from where he stands caged in by Bruce and Pepper by the stove. He’s been pulled the furthest away because he seems the most likely to resort to bodily harm out of everyone present. Which isn’t a surprise if Lela’s being honest. But damn if it isn’t blown bigger by the way Pepper keeps yanking him back and into place every two seconds.

With bitten off words that are barely intelligible, Tony snaps out, “Unbelievable.”

“What else ain’t you telling her, Cap,” Clint says on a smooth casual tone. His eyes spelling murder as he fiddled with a pen in his left hand and tapped a viciously fast beat on his thigh.

The question, innocent as it is on the surface, feels dangerous as all fuck in the open hostile air. For a second, it throws Lela through a goddamn loop. Up until this point, Lela’s never had any solid fucking reason to question a single thing Steve has said to her. But knowing now that he’s been keeping a pretty big piece of information of himself a secret from her, well, it makes her feel nervous and guarded.

Probably more guarded than she ought to be considering she’s got a pretty big secret from him too. One that she should’ve spilled out a long ass time ago. One that she had been planning on doing tonight despite the way shit turned. One that feels a little fucking stupid considering she’ll be saying it to the country’s most awesomest of heroes.

Brows pinching up tight, his shoulders squaring out, Steve tells the room at large with some amount of firmness, “Nothing. I haven’t kept anything from her besides that.”

“Oh?” Natasha hums. Her eyes cut from Steve back down to her drink as she drawled, “So it’s all open and honest communication between you two love birds?”

“The fuck you getting at Red?” Lela demands as she flicked her dying butt out the window and into the passing cold winds.

There’s a slow building pressure just at the back of her head. The same one that kept her alive so long back when she was little better than a hungry street dog. Instincts long forgotten rear up and blare at Lela to get while the going was good. To bail before someone stuck a knife between her chest or sunk their teeth into her neck. She feels her stomach grow tight, so unbearably tight, she feels like maybe vomiting.

Half of her doesn’t want to push. That half that has grown complacent, fucking tame, aches to just skip over all this and go on their merry way taking in only the good. But Lela’s always been shit at walking away from a fight. Of tucking tail and living to fight another day. Lela’s her mothers daughter even now and so she’ll meet this head first and live to regret it for however long that is.

“You ever tell her about your brother from another mother?” Tony snaps out, forcing his way past Pepper and slipping through Bruce’s scrambling hands.

“You guys, please, let’s not do this,” Bruce tries as he dropped his ladle and rushed out to try to douse the flames. His face twisting with anger and something like fevered fear.

The sight of it makes all of the worst of Lela’s abuse born instincts snap to attention.

“No, lets,” Sam growls out as he took two or three stomps towards Steve, “How fucking dare you stand there, next to her, after what he did to her?”

Lela’s all kinds of confused but chooses to remain quiet because of that slowly sinking feeling of
dread has tied up her tongue. Something itches in the back of her mind that sounds eerily like her mother screaming from the void Lela’s stuffed it into. Run, it sounds like her mother is screaming, run!

“He broke her fucking heart, your goddamn fucking brother. Fucking broke her right in half! Left her a fucking mess on this fucking floor here and just fucked off to wherever the fuck without a look back! It nearly killed her! And here you come ready to fucking do it too!” Tony half roars, his fangs flashing and his boa bond constricting so tight Lela feels her spine give way, “I’m not gonna let you two assholes fuck her over twice! Over my dead body! I warned him, I fucking warned him, and he just—"

That’s as far as Tony gets before Lela feels herself moving. Slipping down to her feet, she walks slow and careful over to Steve. There’s a horrible fucking knowing in her chest that begs to not be correct. An ugliness that aches with everything in her to be proven wrong from her mounting suspicion.

All it takes, all it really takes is a good look. One simple look and Lela knows she’s got her answer. It’s in Steve’s eyes. His navy blue eyes are blown wide with horror and shock as he stared down at her. He looks as if he’s about to toss himself out the closest window to run the fuck away. A sight that would’ve made her laugh any other day but not now.

Mouth dry, voice pitched low and pleading, Lela asks, “What’s your brothers name?”

Looking like he’s swallowed down buckets of glass shards, Steve opens his mouth and throws Lela’s whole world into a blender with a simple, “James Buchanan Barnes.”

That dread she’s been feeling, crawling up the length of her spine, spilling into the very core of who she is, floods and does not relent. It pounds into her unforgiving and cruel. Vicious in its attempt to drop her to her knees like the actual scum she’s always known herself to be. Like ice water has been dumped on her Lela understands two solid things about herself.

One being she is a fucking idiot. The worst kind that has ever lived. The shittiest type of person that she can fall in love with one man and turn around and love their brother without knowing when all the signs were fucking there.

Second being that she is, in the end, a fucking whore. A no good dirty ass ratchet bitch that could hop from one dick to the other without ever once questioning a goddamn thing. Because here she was steadily fucking—and loving—two brothers in less than a year apart.

Betrayal, her heart cries out, that’s what she’s done in the purest of forms. Betrayed James in one breath and sunk Steve down to her dirty ass level too.

Feeling cold, empty and numb, Lela tosses her head up and offers a dark laugh that she knows is drenched in her fucking desperation. It rattles out of her mouth warped and tainted. An ugly thing she’s never thought herself capable of unleashing.

Pushing so that every single one of her bonds falls away beneath the pain she’s got running through her, Lela turns and heads for the back of her couch. Snatching up her leather jacket she reaches for her front door. Her hands just gotten to the door knob when suddenly Sam is beside her.

His warm brown eyes are twisted in something like pain and regret as he looks at her. Bleeding with something Lela can’t begin to name or doesn’t want to. Sam opens his mouth only to snap it shut when Lela lets loose a growl that would make her mother so very fucking proud.
Without a word she slips out of her front door and walks out into the cold evening air. Stilling long enough to lit herself a smoke, Lela slips on her jacket and sets to fucking wander until her feet bleed or she dropped down into the river. Whichever came first, Lela’s not being too picky at the moment.

She makes it all of two fucking steps before her name is called. It runs against the winds, her name. The voice of whoever calls her is low, a rumble, like thunder on the wind. And like lightning as struck, Lela feels herself go shock still at all the memories that voice force into the forefront of her mind.

Turning, the sight of who she meets feels like a sledge hammer hitting her violently across the fucking face.

For there he is, standing tall and beautiful like one of her worst and best dreams come to life. Bathed in the evening light, James stands beside his fucking mustang as if he’d never left her to begin with. He’s got on that familiar white long sleeved henley and denim jeans he’d used on one of their many dates.

For one wild and hysterical moment, Lela thinks she can almost trick herself into believing he’s here to pick her up on a date or some shit. The sheer want that springs up from the pit of her stomach to rush over to him, lay her lips upon him, and love him with everything she has in her. Everything in her burns with the need to run her fingers through those dark chocolate strands and reacquaint themselves with the lines of his body. To love him in all the ways she’d missed.

There’s a burning need to taste pomegranate and wine on her tongue that makes her hindbrain curl outward with a whine that her teeth clench tight onto.

But then all that has happened and all she’s done since—and with who—crashes into her.

And really, if Lela was looking for any more solid evidence that she is a fucking slut of the worst kinds, there it was. Because here she was, looking at James—wanting him, all of him—while still having Steve’s juniper and rain water kisses still on her lips. Here she was, so fucking eager to jump into his arms while she had his brother up on her floor dealing with all the shit she’d run away from.

A snarl, so deadly and vicious, Lela’d be proud of on any given day, slips out of her lips. She snarls at herself more than at the man she’d laid to rest within her own heart. She snarls at all the ugly shit she is more than she does the beautiful man before her.

She snarls at the worthless animal she is because James didn’t deserve to breathe the same air she was tainting up. She snarls because James deserves better than a goddamn whore looking at him like he’s the second coming of christ. She snarls because Steve did too. They both deserved better than what she turned out to be.

“Lela?” James voice calls out to her. The familiar rumble and baritone making the worst parts of her want to slip into something docile and gentle.

Lela fights it as much as she’s able. She curls herself into that cold anger she’s housing and pulls her smoke to her lips as she jerked her head to the side while spitting out, “Steve’s inside. Let yourself in Barnes. Ain’t nothing but a good time up there.”

And with that, Lela forces herself to turn around and keep on walking. It’s harder to do knowing she’s left two of her loves behind in the same place but Lela’s always been good about being a cowardly dog when the need fit her.
The night grows longer and colder the further she walks. The winds whip around her the further she goes into unfamiliar places. But she can’t find enough of herself to find any real discomfort. Lela’s too busy burying it down low, deep down, to feel much of anything.

Even her bonds have all faded into the background. All of them growing more distant the further she pushed them down and away. The cold night air helping to stave off the pain shit like that usually caused.

When she finally manages to find the place she’s looking for Lela stills and takes a good look around her. She’s only been here once or twice and only during the day. The building she’s looking at looks different in the middle of the night. All the rundown shit it has looks worse now with the blare of sirens rushing past and roving packs of beta and alpha gangsters hanging about.

It’d be intimidating, fucking dangerous, if she thought about it too long. It’s a bad decision in the making. One she’s doing half deliberate.

But she isn’t thinking. Not really. She’s just moving. Forcing herself to ignore all that she knows she ought to deal with because she’s too much of a fucking dog to actually do it. So she fists her hands tight in the pockets of her jacket and moves forward.

In less than five or so minutes, she’s in the decrepit building. Up the flight of stairs lined with trash and littered in graffiti. Lela counts at least three solid stains that she can smell the bitter tang of old blood. None of them really put her off enough to not step over them. She keeps moving until she’s on the last floor and down the furthest hall to a familiar door.

Forcing her hand to move, Lela knocks only twice before stilling.

“—the fuck is it?!” calls a ragged voice from further on.

Grinding her teeth together, Lela calls out her name and waits.

She doesn’t have to wait long before the door is yanked open and another face from the long forgotten past greets her. Looking like an actual living breathing zombie, Jay looks out at her with sunken eyes and unwashed hair. His glassy eyes look her over as he ducked around to make sure she’s all alone in the hall. His left hand sporting a familiar glock.

Now that she’s sober, Lela can pick up all the shit in Jay’s scent without effort. She can scent his Gamma tang as if it weren’t loaded so heavy in all the drugs he’s pumping himself full of on a daily. Even the graveyard dirt hits her last.

Brows pinching tight, Jay tells her, “Yo, thought you were dead.”

Lips pursing up tight, Lela shakes her head and bites out, “Not yet.”

Laughing, Jay shakes his head and scrubs his head with the gun in his hand as he mumbled, “Figured you were. Ain’t seen you around for a while.”

Squaring up her shoulders, Lela bites out, “You gonna invite me in Jay?”

Narrowing his eyes down at her, Jay takes a moment to answer before he slowly pulls away from the door and lets her in. He says nothing as he closes the door. He says nothing even as Lela walks over and through all the trash he seems to be living in. He says nothing when Lela drops, as if she were invited, onto his dirty couch and made herself at home.

“Where you been girl?” Jay eventually asks after he’s done up the billion and one locks on his door.
Chewing the inside of her cheek, Lela shrugs and offers up the truth, “Got clean.”

“No shit?” Jay asks with a bark of cold humor. His eyes going wide as he tried to put that information together with the image of who he’s known Lela to be for as long as they’ve known each other. After a while, his smile grows cold and jaded—far sharper—as he murmured, “Not anymore though, right? You ain’t here to catch up with old friends, are ya?”

Anger, dark and vicious, threatens to spill out of her then and there. All the things she’s trying to stifle bubbling to life only to get snubbed out by the heel of coldness currently running through her.

All those things Lela had thought herself to be—good, worthy, special and loved—burning to ash underneath the knowing glint in Jay’s eyes. Lela wonders how many people have come and gone from his life with the same story Lela’s got. People who’d gotten good and clean only to come crawling back when life kicked them down and showed them who they really were underneath it all. Lela wonders how many brothers and sisters she’s got out there now.

“Not anymore,” Lela agrees as she pulled from her jacket pocket a large wad of cash and tossed it at him.

Lela forces herself not to think further than what she’s feeling now or what she’s doing now. She doesn’t touch all the feelings bubbling just beneath the surface. She doesn’t think about all that will happen only after she’s done what she’s come here to do. She doesn’t think and just lets herself watch as Jay moved around in jerky junky lined movements.

Her eyes pin themselves on the fresh needle being broken out of it’s new package. She watches, with a sort of detachment, as the chunk of poison gets burned down into liquid on a crooked spoon. She watches—with apathy—as the syringe is loaded and Jay hands over the rubber band for her to tie off her arm. She slips out of her jacket and sets to work as if she’s never lived a life outside of this.

When the needle pierces flesh, cold steel slicing into gushing crimson, Lela feels all the shit she’s been pushing back break. The levy giving way in a way she hadn’t expected. For all that she’s known this shit to work—she doesn’t expect it to dredge up her troubles and spit them front and center.

Like a freight train hitting her, Lela knows she shouldn’t be here. she knows she shouldn’t’ve come. She knows she’s got a million different reasons not to be doing what she’s just done. she knows…she fucking knows she’s breaking at least eight different hearts right here and now.

It’s only when her eyes grow heavy, her body becoming dead weight, and the needle slipping from her skin, does Lela know she’s fucked up in more ways than one.

But then that familiar slide of weightlessness hits her. That addicting splash of euphoria hits her and all she can do is ride the shit out and hopes it fucking kills her before she can wake.

Because Lela doesn’t want to wake. Doesn’t want to deal with all she’s left behind back at her home. Doesn’t want to go through the fucking rubble of a house still on fire. Doesn’t want to deal with the heartbreak that will line James face. The heartbreak that will wreck Steve’s face. Doesn’t want to deal with all the shit her pack will kick up when they smell this shit on her.

So she slips down and under and prays to any god that’s willing to lend an ear that she goes out with a whimper—the same way she’d come in.
I offer my most humblest of apologies. first for the wait and for the absolute shit fest that was the ending for this.
Life is being very, very, unkind to me right now. I might be taking it out on my creations here.

I know you guys were expecting better of Lela, and maybe me too, but this is all I could come up with at the moment. I swear she's not going to stay stuck in the mud. But she's gonna be in it for a spell. If only because I'm in it too. I promise it's not gonna be there the whole way through. Lela's got a smart pack, so they'll help her through the back slide. But I figured, her plates full why not shit on it some more.

So yeah, James is back. Worst possible reunion. But Steve meeting the pack got away from me. I didn't want everything to just come tumbling out like that but everyones got a mind of their own and forced my hand. Lela hitting the bottom that fast is only par for the course. She was flying pretty high.

Hope no one is pissed.
Please don't be mean guys.
Shit's pretty heavy in my real life.
I'm trying to post this as it comes but honestly I'm hurting here. Nothing's going right.
Life is burning around me and I can't find my feet.
For a split second, Lela remembers the way she’d gotten clean before. The way Natasha and Clint had found her and bared with both her withdrawal and heat combined. Lela remembers how much she hadn’t wanted to be clean in the beginning. She remembers how much she’d hated being locked up in that hotel room being told this was the way it was gonna be for her because Natasha and Clint had deemed it so.

There’s not a lot of memories of her mother that she particularly likes. Not a whole lot Lela can sit back and think, it came painless and happy. But, sometimes, if she thinks on it hard enough—forces her minds eye far back enough—she thinks there is one. One faded, grainy, memory of her mom. Sun bathed, wild black curls tangling in the salted air, smile wide and jagged as she kicked at the tides that rolled in and out.

If she focuses hard enough, Lela can almost remember the sound of her mothers laughter in the air. The way it roared in her ears louder than the fucking ocean. It had been a fierce sound. Almost as fierce as her fucking growls. A thing built to envelope the world and shake up the roots of the oldest trees.

For the life of her, Lela can’t remember when that was. How old was she? Why were they there at all? Lela’s not sure the whens, hows or why’s. Only that they’d been there—maybe—and Lela’s mother had looked beautiful for one split second.

Gorgeous and beautiful in all the ways her young mind had marveled at.

This memory only ever comes to her when she’s deep in the shit—like she is now. It only ever floats her way—on film that is half burnt and sketchy—when the worst of her appetites have been fed. That memory only comes to fall onto the forefront of her mind when Lela’s high off her ass.

At this point Lela’s not sure if it’s a real memory or if it’s something her doped up mind has conjured up and stuck with. A lie her drug addled brain clutched at while the very core of who she was seeped out from her ears. Her brain scrambling to find a sense of self—an anchor amid raging ocean waters—while she burned out her soul.
Either way, the memory always makes something too vulnerable to actually name spring up within her. Reminds her of the days she’d been too young, all long limbs, and hope eyed. Reminds her of the sheer amount of stupidity that child she used to be believed in. Reminds her, here and now, that she’s still no better.

Lela wakes with a ring to her head. A slight throb that intensifies the longer she blinks her eyes open. A grumbling growl slips from between her dry lips as she rolls over and takes stock of the rotted ceiling above her. Her mouth feels too dry, fucking sand paper quality, as she forces herself upright on wobbly arms.

“Shit, didn’t think you’d get up anytime soon,” Jay huffs out from where he sits on his dirty floor. Bundles and bundles of drug lined baggies surrounding him. With a rueful smirk around his lit joint, Jay tells her, “You really were clean huh? Shit knocked you down fast. Wasn’t even half of what you used to use.”

“Fuck off.” Lela hisses. The words scraping raw her throat.

Laughing, Jay shakes his head and mumbles, “Phones been ringing all night.”

Head swimming, body aching in that too cold way it got after a spoon dance, it takes a moment before the words make any kind of sense. When they do it feels like the world comes screeching to a halt. For one second Lela feels her belly swoop on out. As if maybe she’s stepped off a stair case without clocking the fact that she’d missed four or five steps in one go.

With fumbling fingers, Lela works to get her phone out of her back pocket and clicks until her screen blares on. The bright light in the half dark of Jay’s place hurts. What hurts more, probably, is all the missed calls from every single on of her pack. All the messages that have been pouring in from them all. Each and everyone of them far more frenzied and panicked than the one before.

What hurts infinitely more—she thinks—is the fact that she ain’t got a single fucking call from Steve or James.

But then, Lela can understand why they wouldn’t have even put in that effort. After all, Lela’s been fucking one brother while the other ones back had been turned. So maybe they weren’t entirely too eager to call her up and ask her where she’s been holed up at.

Pain, jagged and jarring, slips in like a cold knife into the middle of her chest. It digs in deep and twists just to make sure the wound stays open for as long as possible. Probably, most definitely, neither of them were too happy with the person they were keeping company with.

That thought makes everything in her curl in on herself. Thorns built of iron slice into her and spring forth the worst type of pain. Guilt, shame, something like hatred makes her want to rake her own nails down her face until she bled truly.

Running on dope fumes Lela pulls herself up off the couch and desperately tries not to brain herself by that alone. The world was spinning on it’s axis. Or at least, so it was for her. Spinning and spinning and lost in place because Lela was feeling like a raft out at sea with no anchor. Her bonds—which are always so fucking loud on any given day—are low burning now. Like they’ve been snuffed down some by the drugs and all that Lela doesn’t want to address within herself.

Yanking on her jacket, Lela heads for the door without a backward glance. She only stills to undo all the locks. She’s pulling the heavy door open when Jay calls out to her from behind.

Tossing a black bag into the air, Jay stares at her through glassy eyes. Lela catches it and stares down
at the bag and then at the gamma before her. She’s confused when she gruffly demands, “—the fuck is this?”

“Shit you paid for.” Jay tells her simply. His eyes raking over her face as he pulled slow languid puffs off his rolled joint. The skunk scent of his weed spilling out and over to choke Lela.

Dark knowledge spreads tight in Lela’s chest as she gripped the bag loosely in her left hand. She’s got half a mind to drop the shit onto the floor and walk on out. But a familiar beast is clawing at the back of her mind. A traitorous hunger burning up low from the pit of her belly and on out. The absolute shit worst of who she is knows she ain’t gonna drop that bag and all the shit within it. She knows—though this was a mistake—she’s not strong enough to just leave it be now.

Not when her body is currently hitting the very beginning of shakes and trembles. Not when her body is thrumming with a hunger it remembers with vivid clarity now. Not when she’s got heartbreak clogging up her head and her bonds are blessedly quiet and submerged into the ice cold waters. Not when guilt is threatening to open it’s jagged fanged mouth and swallow her up whole. Not when she’s got mountains of bullshit eagerly waiting to tear into her and turn her into bloody ribbons.

Not when…not when she’s still kind of hoping to slip the needle back in and just turn her guilt riddled mind to mush.

So she bundles the shit up and stuffs it into the inner pockets of her jacket. Damnation slamming it’s rusted nails into her palms and feet for it. She’s about to head out when she stills and asks through a hoarse voice, “You got anything for the crash?”

Something evil and nameless twists it’s horrid hand around her neck and forces her to look at the ugly little thing she is. Yanks back her eyelids and lets her see just how far she’s willing to crawl for a split second of escape.

Reminds her she’s nothing but a damn mangey dog at the end of all things.

“I got loads mama, what you lookin’ for?” Jay drawls as he blew smoke into his glowing cherry.

Running a dry tongue over her bottom lip, Lela roughly demands, “Snow.”

Without bothering to look, Jay grabs one of the tied up baggies by his left ankle and tosses them her way. He looks disinterested when Lela drops more cash by the table at his front door. Doesn’t bother to get up and count it, simply lets it be. She’s about to step out again when he finally manages to speak:

“See you around.”

And it’s not what he says, more like how he says it that makes Lela pause. Maybe it’s the dope or the guilt running fervently through her, but Lela could swear that for a moment—it kind of sounds like Jay is wishing he wouldn’t. Like maybe he’s hoping that Lela never finds him again. Like maybe he’s hoping Lela can be the bigger person here and quit while she was ahead. The bitter bite of disappointment in his eyes shows he isn’t holding up much hope that she won’t come crawling back again.

It makes indignation and something else burst like white hot sparks out from beneath the ice she’s submerged herself into. That even her fucking dealer is tired of her shit makes Lela spread her lips into a sneering snarl. That even her dealer knows she’s an old dog and old dogs died with the dirty tricks they picked up.
Everything hits her like it’s on too loud and way too fucking bright. Like she’s running on a hundred when she should be back down to maybe a solid seven. Like she’s broken the knob off on something and can’t find the glue to put it back.

It’s the crash. The familiar and damnable crash.

Lela’d almost forgotten what that was like. She’s only ever felt it a hand full of times. Always had enough things to chase a run with the wolves to stave it off. But she’s been sober now. Almost a full year. Or at least, she had before last night.

Gritting her teeth, Lela pushes through the door of a dirty gas station and searches for a cup of coffee. She finds a filthy pot and pours herself a full cup that she downs in one smooth go. It slides down like battery acid. Burning and tearing the whole way. Her hands shake as she pours her second cup.

“Shit aint free!” the attendant yells from behind his bullet proof box.

Growling, low and agitated, Lela grips her cup and heads for the register. She slaps down some money and demands two new packs of smokes. Only once she’s paid for her shit does Lela slip on out the same way she’d come.

The bitter fresh morning air makes her curl into herself as she hugged her cup of coffee to her chest. It does little to warm her but it feels nice. Nicer than the cold shakes she’s got running through her. That bundle digging into her left side singing sweet songs filled with temptation. Lela knows all she’s got to do is dip her fingers into the smallest baggie and the shakes would petter out. She knows all she’s got to do is pull rough snorts and half of her body would stop feeling like it’s banged up and twisted at wrong angles. She knows, if it starts to really hurt, all she’s gotta do is slip somewhere relatively sparse and heat up a spoon.

But she hasn’t done any of that. Mainly because she’s a coward. Lela doesn’t want to be that person again. Lela doesn’t want to become the shitty person she was then. It’s also because the longer she’s awake—the harder awareness hits her—the more aware she becomes of all the wrong she’s just done.

More than anything it’s guilt that keeps her from shooting up again. Guilt and fucking fear for what lay ahead. Once is a mistake, twice is deliberate actions. Lela’d read that somewhere on a fucking self help pamphlet. It rings true in her now. Makes sense the louder temptation coos in her ears. Slams it’s logic into her mouth like a brutal punch.

It’d be easy as all fuck to just slide into it. To just shoot up until it’s gushing out her fucking eyes. To stuff all the ugly she’s got running rabid in her beneath the bliss that comes from doing it. It’d be so fucking easy but the thought of anyone of her pack looking at her with sad disappointment in their eyes—like Jay had—makes her feel colder than the fucking shakes has got her.

The fear that they’ll be…mad makes her feel like a child again. A child staring at her front door waiting for the monster that wore her mothers face. That they’ll say something and rip into her. Knock her down further than where she stands now. That they’ll know all of their hard work and love is being shit on makes her feel…fucked.

It makes her feel all of two inches tall. A goddamn fucking worm. A worthless piece of shit too deep into her own head she can’t see straight.
All of Natasha and Clint’s efforts to get her clean going up in smoke because Lela’s too much of a fucking coward than face the consequences of her shitty actions.

All of Sam’s firm belief in the good in her crushed beneath the heel of her stupidity.

All of Tony’s gentle praises that Lela was worth more than she understood burned to ash by Lela’s inability to keep from breaking everything she held in her hands.

All of Bruces quiet hope splintered with the pierce of a needle.

All of Pepper’s unyielding love thrown into the wind and scattered.

All of James carefully placed tender words breathed onto her skin melting off with the sludge of sin on her.

All of Steve’s bright eyed smiles cast aside for a quick dive into nothingness inside her own heart.

All because Lela was nothing but a dog.

A low throb aches in the middle of Lela’s chest. It pulses like a second heart. Only it’s thump is harsher, uglier, meaner and far more insidious. It pounds into her like a hammer driving down an iron spike until it broke through skin and bone.

Her hindbrain, the useless shit it is, cries against it. Twirls and slithers like it can’t understand why there’s so much pain. And that, well, that makes a smile split wide and vicious across her face.

Pain is nothing new to her. She’s an old hat at this. Forced herself into situations where she came out bloody, ripped at the seams, plenty of times before so it’s nothing new. But it’s damn funny that her piece of shit hindbrain can’t remember the life they lived before her pack came to be.

It’s funny. Funny like how Lela’s whole life was one gigantic fucking joke. It makes an indelicate snort ripple out of Lela as she laughed at her own expense.

The old slice and dice of self deprecation seeps into her. Burns her from the inside out with a cold and inhuman fire. Empties her out until she doesn’t feel like the girl her packs made her out to be. Fills her instead with the old fucking rat she used to be.

And like that’s all the excuse she needs—flimsy as it is—Lela ducks out of the main entrance and around back. She’s tucked away between two dumpsters filled to the brim as she digs out a baggie.

Dipping her pinky in, Lela pulls up a nice enough hit and pulls that shit right on down. Her nose burns at it, her eyes water a bit, but she keeps pulling in lungfuls by her nose to inhale it all completely.

Contrary to popular belief, this shit ain’t instantaneous. Or, at least, it never was the case for Lela. Always took a solid couple of minutes to feel the shit take hold. For the tempo of her heart turn chaotic. For her head to run like it’s firing all at once and too fast. For the shittiest of her ideas to start looking like well set plans. For pain to grow distant as she ran wild like the beast she’s always known herself to be.

It takes a while.

The ring of her phone breaks her from her actions. It blares loud and grating. Makes her jump a bit as she scrambles to pocket her baggie and not drop her coffee at the same time. Cold fumbling fingers dig the blaring shit out of her back pocket as her bleary eyes took in the name reading out.
More of that shame and guilt wash over her. Soak her down to her new bones encasing them and showing her that they’ve never been new at all. That they’ve always been the same broken and charred shits she’d been born with. The same ones that carried her through all the gross shit she’s put herself through.

The name makes her feel like she’s covered in shit and disease.

Watching the call ring and ring Lela resolves herself to not answer the fucking thing at all. If only because she’s not up to speaking to any of them and maybe because she’s half afraid they’ll make her for the scab she is. A druggie not worthy of any of the smiles they send her way.

Them somehow figuring it out over the phone keeping her from answering when the guilt gets to be too much. Fear of all that she doesn’t know kicking up at a moments notice keeps her in place.

When her screen goes black Lela pulls up Jarvis and tells him:

“Hey J, you do me a favor?”

‘Of course Miss Lela.’

Running her tongue over her teeth, feeling the tall tale signs of cocaine hitting her system, Lela mumbles out, “Can you send Bruce a message for me?”

‘Of course, what would that be?’

Clicking her tongue, Lela glances up at the gray sky and wonders just what it is she can say to them now. What, if anything, is Lela allowed to fucking say after she’s done all this shit.

Probably nothing. Lela’s got no right to be dodging their calls. Ghosting them, Tony had once called it. Ignoring them like they’re the ones who did anything wrong. Pushing away their bonds like they’re the ones who went and fucked with the nice life they’d built with her, for her.

But then the shakes slowly start to bleed out of her. Slipping out of her body with each passing minute and with it comes a familiar animal Lela remembers and half dreams of on some days. That beast she used to be—the one she’d prided herself to be—slips onto her.

It goes on effortlessly like a jacket that has been tailor made for her. Built for the lines of her shoulders and the curve of her waist. It’s as if Lela has never taken it off at all.

The shit she’s burned the inside of her nostrils with finally kicking up and into place. It makes her feel a little like her old self. Reminds her that when she’s like this—high and so very dumb—she ain’t got shit to worry about. The world, and all it’s waiting consequences, takes a back fucking seat.

And that gives her a dark kind of confidence. Reminds her she can survive all the disappointment so as long she keeps two feet in front of it and doesn’t let the shit catch her by surprise.

“You tell’em….tell’em I ain’t dead so they ain’t got shit to worry about. Tell’em I ain’t heading back no time soon. Tell’em…tell’em to fuck off. I’ll head back when I fucking feel like it.”

‘…Miss, do you want me to say exactly that or should I—‘

Grinning jagged and sharp—an ugly spread of lips—Lela barks out a laugh that is as twisted as she feels now. She shakes her head at the cybernetic life force currently trying to save her from herself.
Humming low in her throat, Lela drums her fingers against her styrofoam cup with renewed energy and says:

“Exactly that J. Don’t bitch out on me. You tell’em the same way I told you.”

‘Yes Miss.’

When that’s done, Lela pockets her phone and shakes out her limbs. It jostles the drink in her hand but she’s running on a high she almost forgot the feel of. Her heart thumps happy and bright; slamming itself against the bone of her rib cage as she turned about and searched for something to kill her fucking time.

Picking a direction at random, Lela moves and leaves all her problems behind for when she runs out of fucking drugs. Which, considering the lump in her jacket pocket, ain’t anytime soon.

*~*

No one moves for a solid day. All of their eyes fixed on the front door like they’re all waiting for the moment it opened back up and their girl walked on in. A smile painted on her face like the last 24 hours hadn’t happened at all. Laughter shining in her eyes signaling all of their collective forgiveness.

Because though she didn’t know it, Lela was built with a never ending well of forgiveness. Each and every one of their mounting slights forgiven the moment she laid her head to rest and awoke the next morning. Her anger always giving way to the love she housed within her tiny frame.

There’s not a person among them that doesn’t feel some dark way about how it had all happened. Finding out her current beau was none other than Steve Rogers had set them all into a tizzy. Finding out that she knew nothing of Steve and James joint past only adding fuel to the fire.

The situation could’ve been handled better, should’ve been handled better, but emotions had been high. All of the anger they’d been housing for James bursting to the surface at Steve because he’d been the one standing there. A scape goat if nothing else.

Admittedly, it should never have gotten as bad as it did, Lela leaving hadn’t been anticipated by anyone. They’d all been too wrapped up in taking their pound of flesh out of Steve. Steve who hadn’t known who Bucky had been for Lela. Steve who didn’t know…just didn’t know.

But then, Lela hadn’t known either. She didn’t know. How that was possible he didn’t understand. She didn’t know and she was the one caught in the cross fire of all the people that should’ve been holding her up and caring for her.

And then James had been here too. He’d shown up like a damn wraith from the shadows to pull what little remained of the rug out from under Lela’s feet. He’d shown up and made an already volatile situation all the worse. Though, in his defense, James hadn’t known either. None of them three had.

When he’d walked off that lift, confused and eyes searching, everything had turned violent.

All it took was Steve catching his gaze and offering his apologies and James had known. Dark acknowledgement burning him up from the inside out. And then Natasha had moved, as had Clint and so had Tony followed suit.

Blows had been exchanged. Or at least, so he thinks. It had all happened too fast for his eyes to follow.
Lela’s coffee table had splinted in two where Clint had fallen upon it. The window leading out to Lela’s fire escape had shattered where Sam had thrown Steve back with a nasty punch.

It’d been violent and chaotic. The only reason blood had not spilled had been because he’d opened his mouth and snarled with every inch of him. The Other Guy helping give his roar a nice and heavy punch. The sight of his pack tearing into the people Lela had willingly given her heart to twisting him up harshly. The evidence of them destroying all the pieces of her home that she had delicately arranged to welcome them all on any given day burning him up.

His gamma instincts had roared in his face. To care and protect what precious space his Omega packmate had carved out for herself. The need to protect all that she held dare burning fierce and unrelenting.

Everyone had settled after that. Their hostility towards one another a thing barely leashed by the threat that hung over their heads by the green monster he could be.

Steve and James had left when it was made abundantly clear that they weren’t welcome here. Or at least, until Natasha, Tony and even Sam had said so.

They’d spent the rest of the night in waiting. Hoping Lela would come on back so that something could be addressed. If to apologize, he’s not sure. But Lela never returned and so they’d all called, messaged and hoped that she’d answer at least one of them.

They’d gotten their response just a few hours ago and only because Jarvis had relayed it to him.

What had been relayed hadn’t filled him with reassurance as he had hoped it would.

Gritting his teeth, Bruce scrubs down the counter top and attempts to ignore the fact that his phone has yet to ring or ping with incoming calls of messages. The force he uses is unnecessary but the Other Guy is too close to the surface now to be beaten down.

The monster in him is urging him out the door. Urging him into action to find—to fix—to make right everything so that Lela may come back. So that she may not be out in some nameless place. So that she came home.

The bond he’s been holding close to him, coveting as if built by the worlds most fragile diamonds, has been flayed open by the cold hurt in Lela. Now it was numb. Frozen and then submerged into prickling nothingness that made everything in him frantic.

“I think you got it,” Tony drawls from where he sits on one of Lela’s barstools. His tone is far too sarcastic to fall upon Bruce without cutting in past flesh.

Growling low in his throat, Bruce snaps his head up and bites out, “What?”

Surprised, Tony’s dark brows pinch together as he delicately explained as if Bruce might be too dense to understand, “The stain. I think you got it babe. You’re gonna wear a hole like that.”

Pinching his lips up tight, Bruce grips the sponge in his hand and tries to reason with the otherness in him that violence begetting violence really didn’t solve anything. Also, Bruce knows if he threw a punch now, it’d probably send Tony straight to the hospital. Despite feeling the need to rip into the Alpha man before him, Bruce decides against it and turns to drop his sponge into the sink.

“Brucie, babe, you seriously can’t be mad at me still.” Tony says to his turned back. His tone carrying with it an edge of exasperation, “I wasn’t the one who drew first blood. That was all Nat.”
Spinning on his heel, Bruce glares at the man and growls out, “This isn’t a joke Tony!”

“I never said it was,” Tony bit back. His shoulders squaring out as he narrowed his eyes upon Bruce’s face.

“You’re acting like it’s all some big misunderstanding. Like you’re faultless in all that happened last night!” Bruce throws out as his irritation climbed higher and higher. His growls growing deeper and deeper, “You aren’t, you know. You made it worse!”

Bruce isn’t unaware of the eyes currently trained on him as he rages. All of them watching and listening but not a single one of them moving to intervene. None of them willing to step up and gather the guilt they all shared.

“I made it worse?!” Tony snaps out, his eyes growing wide with his disbelief. His head tilting like he’s working himself up into a full blown rant, “How in the hell did I make it worse? I’m not the one who sunk my shiny knives into Barnes! I’m not the one who put Roger’s head through a fucking window!”

“Maybe not, but you didn’t help stop it either!” Bruce accuse bitterly as he rounded the counter and made for the lift.

He ignores, with everything in him, all the pack members that line Lela’s couch. Can’t stomach the sight of them lest he do something he’ll regret the moment his anger simmers down.

“What the hell did you want me to do? Was I supposed to protect Barnes? Or Steve? They’re big boys, they know how to take care of themselves,” Tony shouted as he followed after him.

His words make Bruce still. Roughly jerking around to pin his glare on the man, Bruce bites out, “I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about what happened when Lela was here. We’re supposed to be on her side. We’re supposed to be her pack. We’re supposed to be there for her. What we’re not supposed to do is throw her under damn the bus. What we’re not supposed to do is let her get caught in the cross fire like she’s collateral fucking damage! And that is what you did! You didn’t think about what it was going to do when you started piling it all on Steve like he went out of his way to—to…seduce her or whatever! You just kept going because you were mad.”

“Of course I was mad! How in the hell didn’t he know that Lela and Barnes had been a thing! I don’t believe it for one fucking second!” Tony growled out, his face pulling with the snarl he wears.

Shaking his head, Bruce tries to swallow down the burning anger on his tongue and only half succeeds, “You should’ve just listened. You should’ve just kept your mouth shut and waited to be there for her when she found out. Instead she left because you—all of you—couldn’t put your fucking anger aside to help her through this!”

“Oh so I’m the reason she left? I’m the sole reason she left? Not Rogers? Not Barnes? Me?” Tony sarcastically hisses out. His lips twisting into something Bruce only ever remembers from the worst parts of their shared past.

The sight of it makes Bruce grow simultaneously cold and hot somewhere deep and low. For one split second Bruce remembers all the reasons why he’d left Tony and hadn’t come back for as long as he had.

That callousness the Alpha man is capable of rearing up and baring it’s long fangs at Bruce. Reminds him of all the worst things Tony is willing to do when he thinks he’s right.

“Hey!” a familiar beta bark breaks through the rising tension in the air. Bruce doesn’t need to turn to
know it’s Pepper who has shouted. He can feel the harsh yank in the bond they share with one another.

With sure steps, Pepper marches over to them and says on a cool and fierce tone, “I don’t know what the hell is going on here but both of you need to quit while you’re ahead. I know both of you are worried about Lela but biting each others heads off isn’t going to do a lick of help.”

Grinding his teeth together, Bruce pulls away from where he stands toe to toe with Tony and heads off to the lift as he had first intended. He doesn’t bother to add in another word as he heads for his shared level. He merely glares at Tony until the man falls out of sight.

*~*

“Can you believe that shit? Putting it on me like I’m the only one at fault here,” Tony grumbles as he chewed on the inside of his cheek.

Silence is all that greets him. Glancing down and over to blonde beside him, Tony takes in the severe glare meeting him. Tony doesn’t need Pepper to open up her mouth to know what’s lining her tongue. There’s an accusation in her baby blue eyes screaming up at him. Damning him just as much as Bruce had.

Aggravation, frustration and worry pull tight in Tony’s whole being. The fact that no matter how hard he yanks, Lela’s bond doesn’t flare to life with her irritation. It remains, cruelly, quiet and empty.

Pulling in a ragged breath, Tony crosses his arms and demands, “What? You think this is on me too?”

“I don’t think you’re as blameless as you like to think you are.” Pepper announces as if there is actual proof being piled up against him.

With that she moves away and back over to where she’s been trying to tape up the broken window. A truly pointless task seeing as to how Tony has already called in for someone to come replace the stupid thing. Her shoulders set themselves in cold defiance as she brushed him off.

Blowing out a tired sigh, Tony waves his arms out and argues, “Why am I getting the end of the shit stick here? I wasn’t the only one giving Steve a hard time. Nat was pushing. So was fucking Sam!”

“Everyone shares blame here,” Pepper states into the open air. Damning everyone in attendance so simply. Her fingers working to pull more tape off the roll.

“He deserved it.” Clint bites out as he tossed up a broken leg of the demolished coffee table. The gamma man catches it without looking.

Tony’s about to agree, or at least, he intends to but Pepper cuts him off with a harsh:

“No, he didn’t. Neither did Lela.”

“It was bound to come out,” Natasha states easily. Her eyes cutting over to where Pepper worked. Something like tension lining the bow of her lips and straining her jade eyes.

That makes Pepper still in place. Her head whips around as she narrowed her eyes and bit out, “It didn’t have to happen the way it did. She was so excited for us to meet him and all we did was ruin this for her. Each and every single one of us is supposed to lift each other up. We’re supposed to look after one another. We’re pack and we didn’t act like it last night. Not for her.”
Silence rings for a spell. A heavy thick thing that threatens to suffocate Tony where he stands. It’s only broken by the hiss of a curse Sam gives as he pulls himself to his feet.

“Where’re you going?” Clint asks of the beta man. His green eyes shining with something Tony cannot name.

Pulling a face like it physically pains him, Sam mulishly admits, “Gonna go apologize to Cap.”

“What, seriously?” Clint’s words are coated in his disbelief.

“Gotta set this shit right while I still got the chance.” Sam offers with his eyes running over the entirety of room. A not so subtle demand sitting in his gaze as he wordlessly tried to force them to do just the same.

Sam leaves after that with no one calling him back or keeping him from what he’s set himself out to do.

It’s second nature to fall back onto something like anger. Indignation breaking through and pulling from him wild words, “What the hell does it matter what we did last night? We need to go find her and bring her back. We don’t even know where she is!”

That brings Natasha’s attention up from where she’s been lazily watching Clint fail to piece together the coffee table. His words spur her on to pull herself up to her feet as well as Clint too. Renewed purpose ringing in their eyes at the prospect of bringing Lela back from wherever she’s hold herself up at.

To catch a bird that hadn’t found its way home yet.

“No.” Pepper hisses out, angry and as unyielding as mountain stone, “Don’t you dare!”

“Pep, she could be hurt out there. She’s probably all messed up over what happened last night, we should bring her home,” Tony argues, seems to find some sense of logic in his own words.

Shaking her head and tossing down her roll of tape angrily, Pepper bites out, “She said she’ll come back on her own, so let her. She’s obviously out for a reason. After last night, leaving her be is the least we can do for her. She’ll come home when she’s ready.”

“I don’t take orders from you,” Natasha easily says. Her tone is simple—half gentle—if not for the anger now lining her face. A certain type of dangerous burning up in her emerald gaze.

Shocked, Pepper reels back as if struck, her blue eyes widen as she says, “I’m not ordering you to do shit. All I’m asking you to do is respect what she’s asked for.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Clint tersely states, “We don’t know where she’s at. She can run into some trouble without her suppressors or blockers. Just seems…safe, to bring her back home.”

“Don’t do that,” Pepper bites out. Her chin growing firm as she narrowed her eyes and continued on, “Don’t make it out like you’re just looking out for her. You want to go out there and track her down because you want her to come home whether she wants to or not. And guess what, sorry to be the one to tell you this, but you don’t get to decide that. If she wants to not be here then she doesn’t have to. Her being bonded to you doesn’t mean you get to dictate her life.”

“Pep, that’s not what—” Tony starts to say, ready to defend himself.

“No, I’ve kept my mouth shut about this for as long as I could, but I’m done!” Pepper shouts into the
open air. Her body trembling as beta growls spilled out of her mouth, her scent growing acidic with her anger Pepper rages, “You, all of you, just walk all over her!”

“No we don’t!” Clint roars, his face twisting in anger as he took a rough step towards Pepper.

Tony is torn—caught in his anger as he is—on what he’s supposed to do. His Alpha instincts blaring to keep Pepper safe despite the need to side with Clint’s declaration.

“Yes you do!” Pepper hisses through long fangs. Her pretty face twisting into something Tony has only ever seen once when she’d been captured, experimented upon, and set wild.

“Everything—every single damn thing she does—she does for each of us. She lets us come and go into her level. Never closes that damn lift door, never locks her fucking door, because she knows what it’s like to find herself alone. Even back when it was James she was seeing, how many fucking times did you come through that window just to push space between them?! How long did it take you to find your target after Sam told you she was seeing someone new? How long did you guys wait to try to pull her privacy away from her? How many times did you call her when you found out she was out with her friend? You meddled when it was clear she didn’t want us to!”

“She’s pack—we’re just looking out for her,” Tony growls. His own fangs lengthening in his mouth as he fought to keep from turning into the phantom figure of his own father.

Issuing a laugh that almost mirrors the one Lela had left them with ringing in their ears, Pepper rubs at her forehead and says down to her feet, “That’s my point Tony. We’re her pack. We’re supposed to be there for her. And all we’ve been doing is trampling over the lines she draws.”

“What lines?” Tony rages as he threw his hands out. For the life of him, Tony cannot find a single moment in which he has pushed Lela when he shouldn’t have.

Pulling in a ragged breath, Pepper levels him with a stony gaze and says on an exhale, “She wanted a garden Tony. It’s the only thing she asked for. A fucking garden.”

“Wha—I…” Tony fumbles, reels back because he can’t understand what’s happening here and now. Can’t piece together how all this is getting away from him, “She picked this place! I spent days sending her places! She picked this fucking place!”

“Yeah, she did,” Pepper agrees, looks tired as she crosses her arms over her belly and turns to glance over the whole of Lela’s place, “But only because she wanted us—all of us—to be together. She would’ve chosen a dumpster if she could have us all together.”

“What the fuck has that got to do with this?!” Clint growls low. His face pulling down in his anger.

Shaking her head, Pepper stoops to pick up her discarded tape and resigns herself back to fixing what she can. For a long moment she is silent with her back turned to them. She doesn’t look at them when she whispers into the silence, “You know, I think Lela’s biggest fear is living her life as an Omega. Of having her own autonomy stripped from her. Of having someone tell her what she can’t do, what she can do, where she can go and with whom. I know she’ll never say it, but, I think she still fears it to this day. And it’s really sad to me, that that’s exactly what we all did to her. We’ve told her what she can do, what she can’t do, where she can go and for how long. I don’t think any of us ever did it out of anything other than love. But we’ve caged her in the way she’s always feared.”

It feels like a blow. A bullet flying through the air and hitting Tony straight in the chest. It knocks the wind out of him. Makes him feel like he’s bleeding out all the warmth in his body and leaving him ice cold.
These accusations—he wants to argue his innocence against them. He aches, with everything in him, Alpha and Man, that he has done nothing of the sort. That he’s only ever looked out for Lela. That Tony has only ever wanted to give the girl the world stripped away of all the dark.

But a sinking coldness keeps him from opening his mouth. It keeps him silent as he remembers all the times he found reason to pull up an excuse and have Lela cancel one of her many outings with her friend. Tony remembers, now, the way he’s always managed to get Lela to do as he wanted if only by guilting her into not leaving him behind.

The district need to vomit bubbles up in his stomach as he stands there—wordless.

“If that’s how she feels, she would’ve told us,” Natasha snaps out. Her tone ice cold as she dug her nails into her upper arms.

“No, she wouldn’t’ve,” Clint suddenly admits on the strangled silence. His eyes are wide on his face as he shakes his head and pushes away from Natasha, “Nat, she wouldn’t’ve. She—fuck, she wouldn’t even know how. Nat! Fuck! Nat, oh my god, we’ve been pinning her down!”

Clint sounds half hysterical as he says this. His eyes grow wide on his face as something like horror spreads across his face. Shocked, Natasha reaches for Clint only for Clint to flinch away. His whole body jerks until he runs away on silent feet to the stairs. Natasha follows hot on his heels. She stills only once to send a deadly glare Peppers way.

It takes Tony a long moment before he can summon up the courage to say, “I never…I only wanted the best for her.”

Something like compassion, like sympathy, like sad understanding, shines in Pepper’s baby blue eyes. Nodding her head, Pepper whispers into the air between them, “I know. But that doesn’t mean it’s right.”

*~*

She’s not entirely sure why she’s here. It’s only that, seeing as she won’t—can’t—go home, so this seems like a decent enough location.

This being the apartment complex she’s looking at. Lela’s never actually been here before. Not even to pass it by. But she’d found it easy enough after she’d found the long forgotten address in her messages.

There’s probably a million and one different reasons that Lela shouldn’t head up there right now. A simple one being that it’s late now—nearing midnight—and she’s not expected at all. But none are solid enough to stick in her fucked up brain.

All Lela can think of is the relative safe haven it might be. All Lela can think of is of the warmth that it might house. All Lela can think of is that it’s the only place she can go to that won’t charge her for a fucking hour to sleep.

So she heads on up and hopes she’s not putting anyone out.

Knocking on the door, Lela waits in the too narrow hall of the building. The walls are a dirty brown color that reminds Lela of nothing good. There’s a couple arguing down the hall in a language that sounds vaguely like maybe it’s from Venezuela. None of which Lela can make out but it catches her attention regardless. Makes her bloodshot eyes stay glued on the way the alpha female bites out growls at a gamma man like she’s hoping to slice him up with her words alone.
It makes Lela snort out a laugh. Half of her eager for the alpha to sink her fangs into the dude she’s arguing and spill blood into the air. Lela hungers for that smell the way she is now.

Lela’s too wrapped up in what she’s hearing and seeing that she almost misses the way the door gets pulled open. It’s a near thing, but not entirely.

“Lela?” a familiar voice calls out. Surprise and confusion bleeding into one in that single groggy croak.

Turning, Lela smiles what she hopes isn’t a manic thing and happily chirps out, “Yo! Amber!”

Brows pinching in confusion, Amber rubs at her wild mane of curls and glances down at Lela as she asked, “Hey girl, what’chu doing round here?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Lela leans against the door jam and hums out, “Just wandering around. Ain’t got nowhere to go. Thought I’d stop by. Chill with a homegirl. You?”

“I was, uh, sleeping.” Amber announces as she stared confused down at her. Her dark brows pinch together when she follows up with a simple, “Girl, are you okay? You look…you look a little…”

“High?” Lela finishes off for her. Her lips spreading wider and wider as she tipped her head back and felt the weird rush of weightlessness tip and sway her.

Lela feels good. So fucking good she can’t remember why she ever stopped doing this in the first place. Without the ugly cut of shitty suppressors and blockers fucking her up, Lela was just getting the swirling slide of gorgeousness that came with this shit. The beautiful warm flush of euphoria that made the world so much nicer to be a part of.

God, Lela never wanted to get off this shit. The world was so much nicer in all these swirls of color and nonsense. Looked prettier too. Felt bearable this way. Like maybe if she did head on home, met up with all the faces she doesn’t want to see, it might not hurt as much as it normally would.

Under the carefully woven demons spell she’s on, Lela can’t feel anyone of her bonds. Can’t feel her fucking face if she’s being entirely honest. Can’t feel much anything except…good.

“Shit. Are you?” Amber heatedly whispered as she reached a hand out and yanked Lela past the threshold.

A grumbling growl of irritation slips out of Lela’s mouth as she shook off the offending limb. Snapping her teeth together, Lela snarls out what she hopes it a decent enough thing and rights herself as best as she can.

“What the fuck are you on?” Amber demands as she flicked on her lights and illuminated her tiny apartment.

The blare of too many lights makes Lela wanna duck her head down and away. But she won’t do that, high or not. Through stubborn will alone, Lela keeps her swaying head as straight as possible. Keeps her glassy eyes trained on Amber as she tried to keep from falling right over.

A feat she barely manages to do seeing how she betters from side to side.

“Does it matter?” Lela laughs out, feels the strangeness of her low laugh on her tongue, “I feel fucking amazing!”

“I—I didn’t even know you got high!” Amber exclaims on a heated whisper like she’s afraid to be
overheard by someone with a badge hiding in her place.

Shaking herself out of her jacket, Lela barks out a laughs that is a twisted thing and drops her jacket at her feet as she announced, “Used to be I was on this shit every fucking day. Then I got nice and sober. Shit ain’t worth it bitch.”

With that Lela turns in place and takes in all the colorful things that make up Ambers home. Curiosity sparks underneath the sludge of her brain and makes it so Lela moves without thought. She’s got something made of blue glass in her hands when Amber speaks again.

“What the fuck happened?”

Huffing out a rumbling chuckle, Lela drawls, “I was fucking born wey. Had to deal with that shit with some…with something lining my fucking veins.”

“No, I mean, what the fuck happened that you’re using again?” Amber clarifies. Her voice growing twisted with some kind of worry.

Arms growing tired and heavy, Lela sets down the weird globe with a clack. Lela’s not real eager to dive into the shit she’s pushing down. But the words slip out of her loose mouth, “Pack met my dude. Shit got pretty fucked.”

“Fuck.” is all Amber says to that.

Laughing, Lela nods her head and turns to look at her friend, “Yeah, fuck’s about right. Turns out they know him. Turns out they hate him or something. Turns out my fucking boyfriends fucking related to my ex. Turns out I’ve been fucking my Ex’s brother. Turns out I’m a bigger fucking whore than I thought.”

Wide eyed, Amber stares at Lela like she’s whole heartedly shocked.

“Oh, and then my Ex shows up at my door.” Lela says with a twist of her nose, “Fucker looked so pretty standing there. Waiting for me. Looking all kinds of happy to see me. Looking like all he wanted to do is fucking kiss me. Prolly won’t wanna when he finds out. Steve prolly won’t either.” Lela tells her, her eyes growing heavy as she fought to keep upright, “Shit’s real fucked right now.”

She’s crashing again. Out of fucking drugs as she is. She’s going down again.

“No fucking shit,” Amber heaves out as she stepped closer. With careful hands she moves Lela back until she’s seated on her lumpy green couch.

Letting herself be moved, Lela slumps low onto the sofa and hums a rumble of appreciation. The shit feels nicer than it looks. But then, that might have a hell of a lot more to do to the fact that Lela’s been walking for near two days straight. Wandering from street to street with all the energy her coke provided.

But she’d run out of both sets of devils some hours back. And fuck was she crashing again now. Falling down from the orbit too fast to catch her breath.

Amber must leave, or something, because she returns to Lela’s hazy line of sight with a blanket. One that looks to be old and hand made. Gently, Amber drapes it over Lela’s body only after she’s undone her boots and pulled her legs up onto the couch.

“Didn’t have nowhere to go,” Lela admits on a mumble as she dropped her head onto the couches arm rest. Her words coming out slurred and heavy as one of her eyes fell closed, “You—you need
me to go?”

“Nah girl, you can stay as long as you need. Long as you keep your hands to yourself,” Amber tells her. Her hazel eyes flashing like she means what she says. Like she’s half afraid that Lela might rage out on her and sink her fangs into her.

That pulls Lela up short. Makes something strange rattle in Lela’s drugged up mind. With a struggle, Lela pulls her head up and admits, “You’re my friend, bitch. Won’t hurt you.”

Amber’s smile is soft even if it twists with something sad and old at the ends. Shaking her head, Amber agrees, “Yeah, you’re my friend too bitch. Get some sleep and we’ll figure shit out in the morning.”

Closing her eyes, Lela admits against the black of her eyelids, “Don’t wanna wake up. Don’t wanna feel sober. Don’t wanna deal with…deal with all this shit. Just…I jus’ wanna not fucking be, ya know?”

“I know girl, I know.” Amber whispers as she ran gentle fingers through the mess of Lela’s tangled and dirty hair. Her voice is gentle against the rage of Lela’s clogged up mind.

Lela opens her mouth to say something else, to fucking keep rambling or something. Only she doesn’t get to because Amber hushes her like she’s putting an unruly child to bed. Gamma purrs falling from Ambers mouth like a lullaby. It does the trick to keep Lela nice and quiet. Puts her to bed faster than the crash Lela’s currently flying down on.

So she drifts off to sleep and hopes this time around she really won’t wake.

*~*

Pain makes her fangs grow long. Pain makes it so that every time her stomach twists she growls violent and deadly. Pain makes it so Lela feels like bashing her face against the porcelain bowl she’s been hugging all morning long. Pain makes it so Lela is hoping to lick the empty bags in her jacket pockets.

Dry heaving, feeling every muscle in her stomach twist uncomfortably, Lela groans and spits. Sliding down and away, she braces herself against the rim of the tub behind her. Sweat slicked as she is, her hair sticks to her face and neck in a way that makes her feel disgusting.

Turning from where she’s been filling a blue plastic cup of water, Amber hands it over and mumbles through a tired voice, “How’re you feeling?”

With a trembling hand, Lela takes the cup and sips from it if only to get the taste of bile out of mouth. She knows it won’t stay down. Knows out of experience. But she sips because Amber’s been pretty clear on the fact that if she starts looking like she’s dehydrating Lela was getting her ass dragged to the hospital.

And that’s a whole new set of problems Lela ain’t about to deal with. Not now. Not anytime soon. Aside from the drugs in her veins Lela hasn’t taken any of her suppressors or blockers. Soon as this shit ran out of her, even a little, Lela’s gonna be fucked for a whole new reason.

“Like a fucking shit smear,” Lela croaks through a shredded throat.

Nose wrinkling, Amber takes the cup from her hand before it went tumbling down again. The gamma girl is quiet for a long moment before she asks, “You got any idea how long it’ll get out of your system?”
A strangled kind of laugh leaves Lela’s mouth as she tipped her head up and stared up at Amber’s weird teal bathroom ceiling. Shrugging her shoulders, Lela says honestly, “Shit takes longer than a night.”

“You want me to call in to work for you?” Amber offers. Sounds half like she’s ready to do it regardless of what Lela says.

Since the moment Lela had blinked back into awareness, Amber has been at her side. A constant presence that had made Lela want to snap and snarl. But then she’d remember that sad and old smile on Amber’s face. The clear way in which Amber was afraid—so fucking afraid—but willing to pull Lela from the bullshit of last night. Ready to put herself through a hell of a lot just to get Lela from digging herself deeper into the shit.

It’d kept Lela from sinking into the worst of her withdrawal hitting anger. Kept her from lashing out when all she wanted to do was sink her teeth into anyone around her.

The bone grinding guilt that she’s here at all keeps her from doing anything else. Lela doesn’t want to retrace all the steps that led her here to Amber’s place. She doesn’t want to know how fucked she was last night that this place seemed like a decent option.

Going home to a friend’s crib, high as a fucking kite, was bad fucking form. Running through withdrawal on their bathroom floor was crossing some kind of line. Lela’s pretty sure about that even if she doesn’t know shit about having fucking friends.

Guilt and self hatred chokes her up more than her vomit does.

“Honestly,” Lela starts, dropping her head down so that she can level Amber with a dark twist of a smirk, “I could give two fucks if Owens fired me right now.”

“You don’t mean that.” Amber argues as she broke open a tablet of alka-seltzer and dropped it into the cup in her hand. She lets it fizzle for a moment before handing it over to Lela with a firm order to drink it.

Lips twitching, Lela does as she’s told and says only when the cup is half drained, “I really, really fucking do. Works the last thing on my mind wey.”

Settling herself a little more comfortable on her bathroom’s deep navy blue mat, Amber remains quiet for a spell. Her brows pinching tightly as she nibbled lightly on her bottom lip. Lela may be working through the first legs of withdrawal but even she can see all the questions sitting on the gamma’s face. All of them fighting to be the ones to be voiced first. Eventually, Amber gathers up her courage and asks:

“What…what is on your mind, right now?”

“—the fuck you mean?”

Lela’s got nothing on her mind expect maybe the desperate need to not be crashing as hard as she is. Nothing other than the fucking hunger to chase down her dealer and demand more. Lela’s got nothing on her mind except that.

“I mean…are you like—do you wanna get clean?” Amber pieces the words together like she doesn’t know if she’s even got a right to ask. Like she’s half afraid that the moment she says this Lela might just get to her feet and run off to gather more shit to fuck herself over with.

“Don’t really matter if I do.” Lela huffs out darkly as she glanced down at her fizzling drink and
entertained the thought of dropping it into the toilet bowl.

“What the fuck? Yes it does!” Amber starts, her eyes growing wide and confused as she tried to make sense of what Lela was saying.

“Nah man, it really doesn’t matter if I wanna get clean. I gotta. My packs gonna shit a brick house when they find out,” Lela admits with no small amount of growls lining her mouth. Something too sharp and white hot sinks into Lela’s rattling chest. It pulls like it’s got crooked barbs and tears flesh from bone.

Feels like one of those other things that’s set in stone. Like one of those two things Lela knows without a shadow of a doubt are true about herself. Lela needs to be clean. She’s got no fucking option except to get herself back on track. Or else…or else she can kiss fucking goodbye to the life she has with her pack.

Early morning breakfasts will be gone. The laughter they share stolen. Their tender care and warmth spilling out of their respective bonds.

It seems pretty self explanatory, even to Lela fucked as she feels now, she’s got no choice. None. And damn if that doesn’t make her want to throw up some more.

“They got me clean before, ya know. Got me off the streets, cleaned me up. Feels like I just shit on all of’em doing what I did.” Lela says as she pulled another mouthful of drink down. It hits wrong and heavy into her empty stomach, “Ain’t…ain’t got no choice in this wey.”

For a split second, Lela remembers the way she’d gotten clean before. The way Natasha and Clint had found her and bared with both her withdrawal and heat combined. Lela remembers how much she hadn’t wanted to be clean in the beginning. She remembers how much she’d hated being locked up in that hotel room being told this was the way it was gonna be for her because Natasha and Clint had deemed it so.

Lela remembers how much she hadn’t wanted to let go of the needle yet. Clutching tightly to it like it was the sole thing keeping her above the water. How everything in her hadn’t been ready. But she’d been caught between a rock and two immovable assholes.

In the back of her mind she knows that’s exactly what’s gonna happen again. With everyone of her pack members being who they are, Lela knows she’s gonna be put on the tightest of lockdowns until her hungers die down again. Broken into like a wild horse that was refusing the bit.

Bonds wrapping around her tight like wires on a bonsai tree. Telling her which direction to grow, which way she was supposed to expand while they clipped away what wasn’t good for her.

Then there was Steve. Steve who she’d left abandoned at her place. What would he think when he found out what she’d been doing while out on her own. Lela wonders what he might have to say to the fact that all it had taken was one solid push and she’d jumped into the bullshit again. Not even a backward glance or a second of hesitation pulling at her.

Oh, and not to mention the other love she’d left abandoned at her front door. James—gorgeous and gentle—fucking James. Looking at her like she was the his first and only chance at hope. His face pulled tight like he didn’t understand why Lela had snapped the way she had. Lela’s not ready to fucking know what disgust looks like on either of their faces. She doesn’t think she has the fucking heart.

They’ll know, without a shred of doubt, that Lela’s not good enough for either of them. They’ll
know, now, that Lela is nothing but a fucking junky at the end of the day.

_Fuck, Lela thinks, this is why I’d gotten high in the first place. To not think about this shit._

The whole of her chest aches at the thought. Makes her feel worse than the fucking shakes she’s got running through her.

“Okay,” Amber nods her head, her shoulders growing tense as she carried on, “I don’t know how shit in your pack works Lela. But, you always got a choice. Even if they’re not so good ones. If you wanna get clean, get clean. But do it for you. Don’t do it cause it’s what your pack is expecting you to do it. Get clean cause it’s for you cause it’s how you want to live your life. It’s not them that’s gonna have to deal with temptation sitting on every corner. It’s not gonna be their heads filling up with hunger when shit gets to be too much. So, what do you wanna do?”

Confused, Lela stares at Amber and tries to make sense of the girls words.

“I…” Lela starts only to have her words fail her. Guilt rings in her as she stares into Amber’s burning hazel eyes. Something dark and twisted almost wants her to say that she doesn’t want to get clean. That she’d been happy to burn half of herself with the flames of narcotics.

But then her hindbrain pulses. A fevered thump that twirls and undoes at the thought of going any further down this road when she knows it’ll fuck with the very structure of her pack. Lela’s grown enough to know she’s too much of a chicken shit to actually burn the bridges she’s built side by side with each and everyone of her pack. Too fucking scared to turn around after done dancing her dark dance and find herself alone again.

Alone with only a needle and spoon to get herself by. Alone…fucking alone. Without all those she loves so damn fucking much.

“I…I don’t know what I want,” Lela admits on a shaky exhale. All those shitty emotions she’s been pushing down bubbling up then.

Her eyes water up and threaten to spill over. Something tight and dangerous wraps its hands around her throat and squeezes. A pressure that is vicious and unrelenting. Pushing and pushing until Lela can’t pull in a breath without a whine somehow spilling out.

All her second natured instincts rear up, bloody feral monsters that they are, and cry for something to soothe the ache. Beg her, with a voice that is too small to be hers, to find somewhere to hide until the storm passed.

The honesty in her own words scare the ever living shit out of Lela. The way it sounds like heartbreak and like the voice of a little girl she hates remembering.

Looking all kinds of fucking shocked, Amber rushes up close to Lela and lays her hands on Lela’s sweat soaked face. She cradles Lela’s face gently, delicately, as she stated in fierce conviction, “You ain’t got shit to be scared about girl. You fucking got all the balls of an Alpha in your left hand. Ain’t nothing you can do.”

Snorting a laugh, Lela’s tears fall from her eyes in gushing rivers as she shakes her head and admits, “Ain’t an alpha Amber. I’m—I’m a fucking omega. There’s a shit fucking ton I can’t do.”

Rearing back like she’s been struck, Amber stares at her like she can’t make sense of what Lela’s telling her. Lela doesn’t know what she’s expecting. She doesn’t know what Amber even feels about omegas. But Lela’s so fucking tired of hiding something that seems to make up every inch of her. Of pushing it down when it is a piece of her that she can’t cut out for the life of her.
But damn does she hope that Amber won’t look at her the way she knows others have looked at her before. Lela hopes—with something twisted and young—that Amber will still be with her when the shakes stop with all the care and warmth she’s holding her now. Lela’s so fucking tired and everything is hoping to find somewhere safe to hide against the rain beating her down.

When more of her tears, sobbing whines spilling from her too dry lips, Amber hushes her with a gentle gamma purr until Lela grows quiet and still. Pushing her hair back and out of her face Amber whispers, “You’re the toughest perra I know Lela. You being an Omega ain’t gonna change that. I’ll help you through this shit, yeah? And we’ll figure this shit out when you’re better.”

Something wrecked and black breaks open in Lela. Her hindbrain twirls and slithers as a whine spills out loud out of her mouth. A sad thing that leaves no doubt in Lela, or Amber’s, mind that she is what she claims to be.

An omega at the end of her fucking rope.

And despite knowing the risk of Lela spewing vomit all over her, Amber holds her close and lets Lela cry and cry. Her baby soft green shirt soaked with Lela’s bullshit. Shot as her nose is, it takes a while to pull in the scent of the other woman.

It comes slow and careful, flooding her until Lela is burning it there for the next time she’ll go looking for it. The warm scent of freshly baked bread hits her first. Settling over her and thawing what remained of the ice in Lela’s chest. Then the sweetness of brown sugar flutters in. It comes in soft and careful like all the gentleness the gamma seemed to be.

Though Ambers arms aren’t that of a packs—one Lela’s half desperate for—they are the arms of a friend that doesn’t judge her or demand a thing from her. They hold her and keep her from breaking right down the middle. They keep her safe until Lela can find her feet from under her again. They steady her until Lela finds the will to figure out the shit she’s put herself into.

*~*

6 Days Later

“So, there’s this dude I know,” Amber starts only after she’s clicked off her electric stove. With sure movements she pours hot water into Lela’s designated mug and drops in the herbal tea bag inside. When that’s done, she locks eyes with her and announces, “He’s a pretty chill dude. Used to be pretty deep in the game when he was younger. Got clean a while back. I think, maybe, you should talk to him—if you want.”

Digging her fingers into her temple, Lela glances down at her steaming mug and wishes with everything in her to go up in smoke too. She feels like actual fucking shit. Like a freshly laid pile of dog shit dropped onto the sidewalk.

It’s like a hangover, but, worse. Her stomach aches in the only way vomiting for a week straight can accomplish. Her head hurts in the only way dehydration, starvation, and withdrawal can force into motion. Her body aches in the only way she’s known comes from going without can conjure into being.

Lela’s sober. So painstakingly sober it fucking hurt. All of her thoughts sitting deadly and concise in her battered mind. Breathing down the nape of her neck like demons.

All of them waiting for the moment Lela slipped so they could pick her bones clean.

Running a tongue over her lips, Lela snarks, “You know a lot of post junkies?”
“Not really. But, we used to date back in the day. When we were kids. He’s…he went through some tough times. I think it’d be good if you met up with him. Talked to him.” Amber states as she dipped and dipped her tea bag into her own white mug.

The act kicks up the scent of mint so hard that Lela’s weak stomach twists and clenches. Nausea swirls low and makes Lela’s mouth fill with saliva.

Ignoring the mug in front of her, Lela leans back in Amber’s kitchen chair and asks, “What’s this fucker’s name?”

Eyes lighting up, as if she’s been half expecting Lela to shoot the idea down in an instant, Amber easily supplies, “Marko, he owns this bar downtown, Pantera. You want me to go with you.”

“Ain’t you got work?” Lela prompts. Her eyes running to the kitty clock hanging over Amber’s kitchen doorway. It reads out a quarter till nine.

“I can call in, if you need me to,” Amber offers despite the clear fact that she’s already been doing that these past few days.

Amber offers like she’s got a billion and one sick days left. Amber offers like Lela doesn’t know for a damn fact that Owens had called her up—four different shades of pissed—and chewed her the fuck out. Amber offers like she’s not dangerously close to being suspended or maybe fired. Amber offers like she’s willing as all shit to get canned just cause Lela might need help getting around on the streets.

Her hindbrain—the sober piece of shit it was—twists and uncurls from it’s many knots. It slips out long and dangerous and flutters in the raging winds of Lela’s mind. Warmth unfurls in her empty chest and drowns out the hollowness she feels from the bonds she’s stuffing down. Reminds her she’s out and about without anything to cut her down. Reminds her she’s a useless ball of bullshit made primarily of second natured instincts right now.

It reminds Lela that stepping out the front door right now might not be such a great idea. Not on her own anyway. Not without her suppressors or blockers. Not with the smell of drugs bleeding out of her frame the longer she goes without. Not with her scent—whatever the fuck it smelled like—spilling out of her.

Shaking her head, Lela grumbles, “Nah, I’m good. I’ll look it up or whatever.”

Looking like maybe she wants to argue, but isn’t willing to because she’s not sure it’s her place, Amber quickly nods her head and says, “I’ll call him and let him know you’re coming by.” With that said, they lapse into a small silence. One that’s filled with the nothingness of maybe a million and one questions unasked.

After a while Amber glances up and asks the biggest among the million and one questions sitting in the air.

“You gonna call your pack?”

In the entire six days that Lela’s been hiding out here, in Ambers apartment, the gamma hasn’t once actually asked why Lela hasn’t gone home. The obvious reluctance in Lela seeming to have been clocked a ways back. When Amber had attempted to recharge Lela’s phone, Lela had thrown the shit back into her jacket pocket and left it for dead.

“What fucking for?” Lela spits out as she gripped her mug and drank from the too hot mug. It burns the whole way down.
“They’re probably worried wey.”

And yeah, probably. Most definitely, if Lela’s being entirely honest. But she’s not ready to go back around and kicking the hornets nest so soon. Doesn’t think she has it in her to not run right back to the needle if she picks up that phone. Lela just isn’t ready for it. Not yet.

Too much of a fucking coward to pay the piper just yet.

Too fucking scared to deal with her mistakes in full.

Too fucking terrified for all the disappointment she’s bound to meet when she goes.

“You should let them know you’re alright. That you ain’t dead or some shit,” Amber gently pushes. Her brown hands settling the mug onto the table between them.

Lips twitching down into a frown, Lela roughly rakes her fingers through her hair and hungers for a smoke. The one thing Amber had been pretty firm about was smoking inside the fucking apartment. So Lela’s been going without that too. Shaky trembling legs keeping her from going down and out.

“I’ll shoot them a text,” Lela concedes if only to get Amber’s gaze off her in that moment.

Nodding her head, Amber says as she stands, “I’mma head in to work. But, if you need anything just call me and I’ll—“

Waving off the girls words, Lela immediately tells her, “I’ll be fine wey. Ain’t my first time getting off this shit.”

And even though it’s supposed to be some kind of reassurance it falls off her tongue less than fucking confident. Even Lela knows that it means literally shit. That it’s only really damning her if nothing else.

Nose wrinkling up, Amber offers a simple, “Look girl, you’re my friend. I’m just worried about you, yeah? So if you need anything, just call me and I’ll get off as fast as I can. Kay?”

Feeling entirely too fucking warm, Lela chews the inside of her cheek and nods her head. She chooses to say nothing because she’s not sure what to say to that. Doesn’t know what she’s supposed to do to the open and unflinching loyalty Amber seems to have in spades. Lela stays quiet and simply lets her hindbrain do it’s stupid twists and turns inside her until Amber looks away and starts gathering her shit to leave.

With a few last reassurances, Amber steps out the door. She makes sure to slap a spare key into Lela’s hands as she goes. A quick reminder to call if anything happened falling from her lips as the door closes.

And it’s like that, that Lela gets left alone. Her mind spinning in place as she sat in Ambers little kitchen and borrowed clothes. She waits all of thirty minutes before she spills out her mug and washes it out. She waits a little more to slip out of Amber’s baggy pajama pants and Boho pink tee. Pulling on her dirty clothes—an attempt to mask as much as her scent as possible—Lela glances into the mirror hanging behind the bathroom door.

For all that Lela’s been through the wringer, she doesn’t look much different. Sure she’s got bags under her eyes, a little, but she looks much the same.

Her skin is still that soft shade of brown. Her face isn’t as guant as Lela remembers it being a whole year back. It’s rounded out some since everything began. Her hair—though a fucking mess—falls
around her longer. She looks—maybe—like she did when she’d been getting dressed to meet Steve for that failed fucking dinner.

Of course, without the makeup and with her clothes stretched and dirty from the two days she spent on the fucking street.

And she’s not sure why, only that it does, that fucking burns Lela. Grips her tight and crushes into her chest ugly. Lela’s not sure why, but, she kind of has this filthy urge to grip something cold, shiny and sharp and rake it down her face. To make the outer reflect the hideous inner. To rip into herself and pull pounds and pounds of flesh off to pay for her crimes.

Snarling at her own image, Lela goes in search of her jacket and curses the person she is.

Taking care to make sure that every light in the place is off, Lela locks up Ambers front door and pockets the key. She pulls on her jacket as she goes. When she hits the streets she’s quick to light a smoke. Her hungry lungs greedily swallowing up the toxic fumes.

For one wild minute the realization that she’s not on anything stronger than tylenol hits her. The glaring obviousness that she’ll be found out for what she is hits her with such callousness she almost falls right on over.

But then…something old in her twists and snags. It’s a combination of the oldest in her and the newest. It hisses and growls with frustration at always having to be hidden. Of always having to be on high alert. Of always having to hide who and what she is because pain might come if she didn’t.

This feeling—so new and foreign and yet not—forces Lela to pull herself tall and straight. Her shoulders filling out with a confidence she does not really understand. This feeling yells in her face that even if someone did sniff her for what she was there wasn’t shit they could do about it. Lela could still knock their teeth out if they ever got close enough to lay a claim on her.

This feeling—the worst of her breeding with the best in her—welcomes them to try. Because Lela’s all kinds of fucked up right now and she’s all for unleashing her frustrations at anyone who crossed her here and now.

Smoke on her lips, head held high, shoulders set in welcome to any challenge coming her way, Lela walks off and hopes to set right at least one part of herself today.

Chapter End Notes
first and fucking foremost, The amount of love that has poured in has seriously rocked my entire fucking world. You guys do not UNDERSTAND how much I cried reading y'alls comments. Seriously, I was a fucking mess reading them. I love you guys so fucking much you do not even understand. 
I get we don't know each other, not at all, but I love every single one of you that took the time to comment and offer a good word. 
I love y'all so much that I cannot put it into words. Helped me write this chapter out.

I don't even know what this chapter was about guys. Seriously. Lela's gonna go looking for help. Packs starting to come to some slow understanding that they've kinda been running circles around Lela while she wasn't looking. 
I had intended to go wayyyyyy darker than just a quick jaunt into the drug episode but I don't have it in me to wreck things any further. This is a bump everyone and their mothers is gonna feel. Nothing that can't be fixed but a hell of a lot of talking is gonna need to be done by everyone in question. 
I wasn't able to shove Steve and Bucky's interaction because I'm not entirely sure how to handle all that. I do know that they're gonna go and do something fucking stupid. They have at least one shared brain cell between them guys. So, yeah, get ready for that.

I really hope you guys will like this chapter. 
If not, let me know how to better fix it all! 
I'm so fucking hyped up after all those comments I'm ready to take on the fucking world!!!!!
She’s got a slow sinking feeling in her chest that says she’s got no fucking right to drag them all into this shit. She’d been the one who’d run out into the cold night and gotten high. Lela had been the one who’d tossed herself into this shit fest and it was on her to fix her mistakes. Expecting her pack to help her out now—as willing as maybe they had been in the beginning—they weren’t obligated to do jack shit else for her.

He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say or do. An apology sits on his tongue, impossibly weighted, but does not fall. He feels betrayal run bone deep into him. Curling and bowing his spine until he wonders how he’s standing at all.

In the end, he doesn’t curl or bend. He keeps himself upright as he faces down his oldest friend—his brother—and confesses his sins. He forces himself to stand tall because it is the very least he can do here and now.

“Buck, you gotta believe me,” Steve starts, his face pulled into such grief it screams, “I didn’t know.”

Bucky, for his part, says nothing from where he stands. His body is stone still. The whole of his face—an echo from the long lost past—is pulled into such emptiness Steve feels it tear into the mangled bond they share between them.

For one long moment, it is feels like it did that day on the ledge of SHIELD’s burning helicarrier. The gut wrenching weightlessness of the ship falling down through the air twisting him up inside. The man that stands in front of Steve wears the face of his brother but is not him. It is someone else. Someone built darker and only for violence. Steve feels everyone of his Alpha instincts rip into him to prepare itself for the onslaught of bloodshed.

“If I’d’ve known, I wouldn’t’ve—you gotta believe me, I wouldn’t’ve—“ Steve soldiers on. Can’t help but try to explain that this—him and Lela, beautiful gorgeous Lela—hadn’t been planned.

That it’d been fate, or something crueler, that had brought them together. That he’d fallen for her—loved her—without knowing. If he’d known, if he’d known, he would…hell, he doesn’t know what he would’ve done. He doesn’t want to think he’s the kind of man to fall in love with his best friends
girl. Steve desperately doesn’t want to believe he’s that kind of man.

But something small, traitorous, and wicked whispers in the back of his mind. That he’d have fallen for those dark eyes the moment they’d have brushed over him.

There was this pull between them. Almost ancient in it’s feel, a red thread stringing him to Lela and Lela to him.

Steve knows, with a bone rattling belief, that he’d love Lela no matter which walks of life they’d have crossed upon.

That love he has for her, soul consuming in it’s hunger, feels—for the first time since it’s creation—like something he cannot hold. Something that is forbidden now that he knows she is the one Bucky has given his heart over to. Lela feels like a faraway star he cannot even look at.

Because she’d been Bucky’s first and Bucky had been hers.

That stone cold realization serves to gut him. A rusty dull blade that tears more than it slices. It sends the very soul of him down to his boots.

“Please, Buck, I’m—"

“Don’t.” Bucky hisses. His gray eyes bleeding dark as he narrowed his gaze onto Steve’s face, “Do you love her?”

Steve opens his mouth, is ready to toss down anything to get his brother to stop looking at him the way he is, though nothing leaves his lips. Everything in him is desperate to say something, anything, but the truth. But the truth—whole and undisputed—must sit on his face because Bucky simply asks:

“Does she love you?”

And while Bucky’s voice is just as empty as his face, Steve thinks he hears heartache. Devastation rings in the air between them. A thick and heart wrenching sound that serves to cleave Steve’s entire world in two.

One for Bucky.

One for Lela.

Split down the middle for Steve to stare at from where he stands so far away. Two paths. One of which he knows he must choose. One he must forsake for the other.

Again, Steve cannot answer. He cannot say what he knows to be the truth when he’s staring into those gray eyes. Bucky must hear the answer to that too. For he tears his gaze away and continues back to his task.

That damn duffle bag of his is steadily being filled by all the clothes Bucky owns. Where he plans on going this time, Steve does not know. He wasn’t given an answer when he’d asked. When Steve had first walked in, it was all Bucky was doing. Emptying out the Stark issued quarters like he was ready to go up in smoke once more.

Grasping at straws, coming up short each and every time, Steve scrambles to find anything to keep his friend from leaving. In the end, he falls back on what he knows to be the truth as well.

It feels like more of that betrayal he seems built of at this moment. But he carries on because the
paths are already splitting. Nothing he can do now but watch their individual lines become more solid and further apart.

“She—Lela still loves you too.”

His words serve to still Bucky’s hands. In movements too fast for Steve to process, Bucky rushes over to him on deathly silent feet. It’s only through years of war that Steve manages to deflect the first few blows. Instinct keeps those deadly fists of the other alpha from actually landing.

A little late, Steve’s mind yells out at him that—if anything—he deserves a good hit to the face for his crimes. Which man didn’t deserve at least one hit for stealing another girl out from under their friends hands.

But then, something wild—something built of old alpha instincts—rears up in him. It unleashes a fire in him he didn’t think himself capable of housing. It yells for Steve to defend, to fight, to earn in full, the love he’s found with Lela. It screams, violent and hungry, for Steve to throw his fist back and tear into the love that broke Lela. To even the scales because he’s well aware of the hurt that lies in her heart still—and maybe forever.

The hurt that had kept this dark longing look in her eye anytime she thought he wasn’t looking. The hurt that he could smell off her when she looked at him and smiled soft and so very far away. A hurt that always made it seem as if she were too young, too small and far too fragile for the pain lining her eyes.

With a roar, Steve pushes back until he is meeting each blow—not deflecting them, but letting them fall where they may—and throwing some of his own.

It is a violent thing. Two alpha’s tearing into one another almost always was.

Something breaks. Something shatters. Bucky’s fridge garners a hole down the middle where his cybernetic arm crashes into it. The copper tang of blood spilling rings in the air. Though who’s bleeding, Steve isn’t entirely sure.

Both, probably. Undoubtedly.

Growls lining his throat, Steve bites out with his fangs on full display, “You left her!”

“I had to!” Bucky rages, his eyes flashing silver as he ducked and sprung into motion. His left fist crashing into Steve’s ribs.

Something gives under the punishing pressure. But Steve is too lost in his rage to stop. To falter now that the paths have split so far.

“I couldn’t stay.” Bucky hisses as he reels back from the rough kick Steve sends his way. When he’s back to his feet, he glares murderously, “She’d’ve gotten hurt.”

At the separate ends of Bucky’s small kitchen, the fight ends as abruptly as it had begun. Both of them relegated back to glaring at each other from opposite ends of the room.

Panting, Steve bites out in a snarl, “She got hurt Buck. You leavin’ hurt her.”

Face twisting, no longer a void, Bucky turns his glare away from him and over to the far north wall. He’s quiet for a spell, the muscles on his jaw clenching tight underneath the dark scruff that has made a reappearance. Only when they’ve both caught their breath does Bucky say:
“I didn’t—I thought…I almost killed her. I couldn’t take that chance.”

Heart shattering guilt floods Steve once more. It fills him until he feels as if he is sinking deep into ice cold waters again. He feels the frigid arctic water filling his lungs because he knows. He understands why Bucky left.

He knows, without a shadow of a doubt, he’d have done the same. If for one minute he thought he could hurt Lela, he’d run as fast as his legs could carry him to the opposite ends of the earth.

In that moment, Steve’s heart aches for both of them.

“I—“ Steve starts and stops. He finds himself scooping up his thoughts with a spoon riddled in holes, “I know why you left Buck. Hell, I understand it, more than I’d like, why you did it. But…but she didn’t. You didn’t tell her. You didn’t tell her why you left. You just broke her heart and left her to pick up the pieces on her own.”

Slow, like a glacier stuck on the ice, Bucky turns to level him with a soulless glare. Lips tipping into a frown, Bucky grits out, “Not all on her own, right? You were there to help her pick up some of those pieces. Right, pal? Good ol’ Stevie, coming in to fix what I broke.”

The callousness of the words hit Steve harder than Bucky’s cybernetic arm. It hits him harder than the plane crashing into the water. It hits him harder than waking to all of his loved ones being lost and dead. It hits him harder than finding his brother brainwashed and twisted beneath hydra’s cruel rule.

Everything in Steve feels rattled. It serves to un hinge his jaw and for his eyes to grow wide as he stared in the others direction.

For all that Bucky could be a stranger to him at times, he was never…he was never cruel like this.

And like he can’t stop himself, Bucky continues on. Twisted words leaving his lips like a torrent from a tainted polluted stream:

“How long did it take you to find her? After I’d gone? A month? A week? A fucking day? How long did it take for the white knight to come in and save the day? How long did it take for you to kiss her? To sleep with her? She couldn’t have loved me all that much if she just jumped in it with you, right?”

Swallowing down bile, Steve hisses, “Buck, stop. I get that you’re mad. You’ve got every right to be. Hell, I don’t fault you for it. But don’t you dare be mad at her. You left her and she moved on. Neither of us knew that you…that you were…”

“That I was what? The trial run?” Bucky spits at him. Fury rolling thick on his words.

Shaking his head, Steve clenches his fists tight and tells him, “I may not have been here when you two were together, but, I know she loved you. I can see it in her eyes every time she thought of you. I saw it anytime she thought I wasn’t looking. She loved you—loves you still—so don’t…cheapen what she feels for you still.”

His words serve to take the wind out of Bucky’s sails. The tightness of his shoulders bleeds away leaving them to slump. Carefully slow, the like the rush of thick bitter sweet syrup, Bucky unwinds.

Running his tongue over his bottom lip, catching droplets of his own blood, Steve says, “We, uh—I really didn’t know Buck. I had no idea. She didn’t either. Took Stark yelling it at me for both of us to
“How—” Bucky starts only to fail. His question sitting heavy on his gaze. Though it goes unsaid, Steve knows what’s being asked. So he answers as best he can.

“She, she didn’t take the news all too good. Just stood there, with this look on her face. Christ, that look. It was like someone had punched a hole right through her and ripped out her heart and soul. Did you…did you get to talk to her? Before coming up?”

Tilting his head a fraction, Bucky nods and merely admits, “She—she didn’t say much. When she looked at me, for a second…it was like I’d never left. It was like, she was ready to fall into my arms again.”

A low throb aches in the pit of Steve’s belly at that. He’d made his peace to knowing that Lela loved still someone that wasn’t him. He had. Knowing, though, that her love was Bucky and that she would’ve fallen into his arms that night—if not for the truth coming to light—makes something bitter coat the inside of his mouth.

The fact that he’s feeling any kind of way over it makes him feel sick too. He’s got no right. None. To feel any kind of way over this. But, god help him, he did.

Looking down and away, Steve clenches tight his fists until his nails dig past the meat of his palms. It takes him a long moment, but he wills the words to fall from his lips. They come out clipped, broken and skewered, “What…what do you want me to do?”

“What do you mean, what do I want you to do?” Bucky calls out.

Forcing his blue eyed gaze up, Steve takes in the carefully neutral expression that has taken over Bucky again. Working his jaw, Steve tries to explain his question. He tries, to put into words, that he’s not about to be anywhere near Lela if Bucky doesn’t want him to. He tries, to put into words, the fact that he’ll drive himself back into the ice if his brother’s about to be put through more pain over this.

“Buck, I can’t—I can’t be with her knowing how much you love her. I can’t—I won’t do that to you.”

Lips twisting into a harsh frown, Bucky’s eyes grow dark and thunderous as he snapped out, “What about Lela? You ready to break her heart the way I did?”

Steve’s standing closer now to that fork in the road. It’s come time now to make a decision on which path to choose.

He does his damnedest to not think of the girl he’s leaving behind. Of the smiles, of that beautiful laughter he loves, of those razor sharp grins of hers and the pitless dark eyes she has. Or of the stars that sit uncharted within her gaze. He tries hard not to think of that smoky scent of hers. The one made of brushfire and something namelessly sweet. Steve does his best to ignore the cracks forming on his heart as he pulls himself tall and does not move.

There is no doubt in his mind that Bucky deserved happiness and love. There is no doubt in Steve’s mind that Lela deserved the entire world. The two of them—having lived through as much heartache and tragedy—deserved to find that peace and happiness together. And so he must do this. Must break his sweethearts heart too.

Shaking his head, Bucky takes a step back until he drops onto his only surviving kitchen chair. With
his head hung low, his long hair obscuring most of his face, he admits, “She left me behind Steve. Ain’t got no right to go after her now.”

Shoulders slumping, Steve feels all his courage, his strength, seep out of him as he leaned against the broken fridge. When his knees give out, he slides down until he’s seated onto the floor. Carefully slow, Steve confesses:

“I can’t be with her knowing what it’ll do to you Buck. I can’t be with her knowing how much she loves you. I…I can’t.”

Silence stretches, thick and oppressive. A sentient thing that wraps around Steve and pushes him down and in.

Not for the first time does he wish for his mother. For her cool words of comfort and her cutting wit. Not for the first time does Steve ache for her. He feels like a child here and now. Lost and confused. Something in him burns with the need to reach out and take hold of a familiar hand as he cut down the best girl he’s ever met.

“You’re an idiot, Rogers.”

Startled, Steve looks up and over. His eyes land on the sad expression lining his friends face. It looks ancient and sad and solidifies Steve’s feet on his chosen path. Nodding his head, Steve drops away his gaze as he agreed with a twisted grimace of a smile:

“Yeah, that makes both of us, Barnes.”

And like that, the silence plunges back onto them. A monster that grows larger with every beat of their hearts. The knowledge of the hell they’re about to impart on another bowing their heads and spines.

*~*

There are moments in her life, scattered and ever fleeting, that Lela thinks, she doesn’t know who she is. She’s worn too many faces. Pulled on too many different sets of skin. Thrown too much of herself out and away to try to hash out just who she is in the marrow of her bones. Like the smoke off her many lit and killed cigarettes, they take fragile forms until they extend and flutter out of being.

There is the girl she was, who Lela only ever remembers with vicious and volatile disdain. A girl who had been too naive to understand the darkness of the world. A girl who had believed that good came to those that waited and not all of life had to be as dark as those that had come before her. That girls skin had been too soft for the monstrous bite of life. She’d been a shit kicker, a little rebel of a thing who was too young to understand anything. She hadn’t known pain though she made a good show of pretending she did.

Then there is the girl she was forced to become. A beastly little thing. Knobby spined and sharp toothed. Fury molding her to become harder than petrified wood. A thing built of darkness, of rage, of self loathing, of such darkness it clung to the deepest parts of her. A girl who sunk into the cold dark waters without ever looking up. A girl who willingly carved out the softest bits of herself and ate them so none could hurt her again. Killing herself in the name of survival, of practicality—in the name of mercy. That girl had been a disaster of a thing. Burning herself up from the inside out to shorten her own life. Chasing death like it owed her the damn bloodiest end.
There is, or was, maybe still is, the girl she’s become now. A mismatch of both of those girls. A patchwork doll with too many seams overrunning one another. One who didn’t know what to do, how to move or what to say.

It’s messy. A goddamn travesty of thing if Lela stopped to look for too long.

More often than not, Lela finds herself wondering which she’ll be in any moment. Which version of herself she should be. Which version of herself was better suit for the mood—for the climate of the day, for the bite of that moment, or the tone of a conversation. A doll with multiple faces that turned and turned whenever something came up.

Like now, sitting in an empty tattoo shop, she wonders which version of her will come on out. Undrugged as she is, suppressors and blockers gone, Lela’s not sure which one will tumble to the forefront.

Scent strong, metallic and sharp, the man who sits across the way is clearly a Dom-Beta. It was the first thing Lela’s nose had picked up. His dynamic screaming in his scent even when his body, gaze and mouth did not.

Marko was a pretty man. Dark skinned and littered in tattoos of raging brilliant color, he was gorgeous. Eyes the palest shade of brown, sharp faced, Marko could give any runway model a hell of a run for their money. His black hair is twisted into neat dreads that fall somewhere past his shoulders. A loose blue tie keeps them back.

When Lela had, eventually, come upon the place known as Pantera she’d been somewhat thrown off. For one, it’d been a tattoo shop. A pretty flashy kind of place littered in black and gold trimmings and crimson colored walls. Not the kind of place Lela had expected to find. The person she was set out to find being more unexpected than that.

She’s not sure what she’d envisioned when Amber had announced she had an ex that had once been a junky and now wasn’t. But this—six long feet of pure dark muscle—was not it. Half of her had pulled back and waited for the moment the first slip up of the well concocted ruse happened.

But then Marko had opened his pretty brown lips and Lela had found herself rooted to her spot. Marko’s deep timber had openly spilled onto Lela’s booted feet a story not unlike her own. Though Marko had picked up his habits for wildly different reasons, Marko had suffered just the same. The wounds may be of different sizes, pierced in different places, but they’d been done by the same assailant.

And while Lela had kind of been hoping that this wouldn’t work, it—begrudgingly—was. It was easy to sit still—force all her thoughts away—and listen to the man before her. To push away all her fear, all her paranoia and simply take what she was given with an honest voice.

“It took more than I really understood at the time.” Marko admits simply. His pale brown eyes fixed onto her as he swirled his water bottle in his left hand. The skull on etched into the back of his hand flashing and showing the roses blooming out of the open maw.

Chewing on the inside of her cheek, Lela nods her head in understanding. She understands that. Gets it more than she’d like to, really. Though she’d never wanted to acknowledged it, running to get herself high on any off chance she had, it’d stolen pieces of her. Ripped them out of her in pieces that were bloody and misshaped and tossed into the wind.

“How long you been clean?” Marko asks, only after he’s taken a sip from his water.
The whole of the shop is quiet on account of how Marko had kicked out two of his workers and flipped the sign on the door to closed. Something he’d done the moment Lela had sat her ass down on his cushy ass black couch in the lounge.

“Today’ll be the sixth day,” Lela admits softly. Her eyes fixing themselves on Marko’s and refusing to fall away.

Untreated as she is, Lela makes sure to keep from bowing her head in any small way. For all that she hasn’t run her way up to Queens to pick up her medications, Lela isn’t all that eager to be found out just yet. She’ll keep all the cowering of her hindbrain internal and caged. A battle of her dirty instincts sinking their teeth into the softness that has somehow regenerated limbs.

Half of her, a half Lela will not acknowledge here and now—or ever, probably—doesn’t really want to grab hold of the things she’d once clung to. That half of her is strong with it’s desire to keep herself blessedly sober and clear as it is now. A mess of a thing, twisted and warped, but so fucking loud and clear.

Nodding his head, Marko says, “That shit’s tough. You got a support system, or you on your own with it?”

“I—“ Lela starts to say she’s got a pack now. That her packs her support system if nothing else. But the words never fall out. They stay lodged in the back of her throat. They feel heavy and weighted because…Lela’s not sure they are.

She’s got a slow sinking feeling in her chest that says she’s got no fucking right to drag them all into this shit. She’d been the one who’d run out into the cold night and gotten high. Lela had been the one who’d tossed herself into this shit fest and it was on her to fix her mistakes. Expecting her pack to help her out now—as willing as maybe they had been in the beginning—they weren’t obligated to do jack shit else for her.

This realization makes something thick and uncomfortable sit high on her chest. Those bonds she’d been pushing away since she went and got fucked remain quiet now. A dull throb that ached like a limb that’s had it’s circulation cut off. Lela’s too afraid to touch them now. Too afraid to feel what might come spilling in if she did.

Lela also feels like she’s got no right—none—to touch anyone of them.

And that makes something burn and cut into the heart of that softness that has hatefully returned.

Taking the beat of silence of what it was, Marko offers a simple, “Amber’s got your back if nothing else. She’s a down ass girl to have on your side.”

Those words, uttered so simply, pull Lela out of her head. It reminds her that Amber—sweet and compassionate—had helped her when maybe she didn’t need to. It reminds her that Amber’s her friend. One who’d helped her through the worst legs of withdrawal without a blink.

It reminds Lela that she’s not entirely on her own with this and that settles some of that sickness on her chest. Lets her breathe a little easier. The thought of that sweet gamma girl and her promise to walk beside her pulsing in the pits of her hindbrain. All those damnable things that come branded into what she is slithers in something like happiness and relief.

“Yeah, she is,” Lela agrees. Slowly striking her lighter to catch her smoke, Lela says around the butt of her cig, “She—I showed up at her house, fucked up, and she just let me inside. Didn’t even hesitate to help me even when I was puking my brains up on her bathroom floor.”
Nose wrinkling, Marko smiles softly and tells her, “Yeah, that sounds like her. She’s…she’s a pretty
down ass girl. Amber’s got loyalty fiercer than any alpha I’ve ever come across.”

Something old, nameless and so heartbreakingly sad makes itself known in Marko’s scent. It kicks
up like a wave off some low tide and washes over Lela. It makes her want to wrinkle her nose too.
To kick it away because Lela can smell everything like it’s been magnified by the fact that she’s not
on suppressors or blockers.

“I don’t…” Lela starts, ashes her smoke into the ash tray provided and then says, “I don’t really feel
like I deserve it, to be honest. Like, she’s my friend—yeah—but this is some heavy shit to get caught
up on. We’re tight cause of work, or whatever. But we ain’t—like, this fuckin’ tight, ya’know? Ain’t
got no fuckin’ business getting her pulled into this shit, yeah?”

“It ain’t about what you deserve, Lela. Life don’t work like that. No matter how you look at it.
World isn’t built in black and white like that. Shit, I know a fuck ton of people that deserve to get
their teeth kicked in but they keep on walking around without a scratch on them. And I know more
than enough people that deserve so much more than what they have but they don’t get.” Marko
announces as he stared at her. An old kind of acceptance and hard edged wisdom making it so his
eyes looked decades older and infinitely heavier, “Life just is. Sometimes we’re lucky enough to run
across some good folk and all we can do is sit there and appreciate the universe for puttin’em in front
of us. So, just—you know—appreciate that you’ve got a friend who’s willing to walk through this
shit with you cause you could be alone.”

Something uncomfortable lodges itself in Lela’s throat. It makes it hard to pull in a breath in as she
stares at the beta man. Gritting her teeth, Lela forces herself to be honest. To confess why maybe she
should walk away from Amber. To keep the sweet gamma out of the twisted web that’s currently
tangled around Lela’s throat. A web of lies, strung up in blood and filth and choking the fucking life
out of Lela on a daily basis.

Lela damns herself half in hope to get Marko to toss her out and away. Half in hope to get the man to
talk reason to the girl who had combed back Lela’s hair and helped her shower when she couldn’t
stand on her own two legs. Her strength had been the first thing her withdrawal had taken and had
been the last thing returned to her. It is honest for the sake of some sort of excuse to get Marko to pull
away an innocent bystander from getting caught in the flames of Lela’s destruction.

Because if history was anything to go by, Lela was all kinds of fucked enough to drag others down
with her. Her whole pack could fucking testify to that at this point.

“I’m…I’m a—“ pulling a ragged drag from her smoke, “I’m a fucking omega. One that ain’t claimed
or bonded. One that’s got a drug problem that won’t go away. One who used to stand on a street
corner and fuck people for their cash. One that’s only ever broken every good thing that’s come my
way. Amber doesn’t deserve dealing with…with any of this—with me. No one does. I’m not…I’m
not right. Never have been. ain’t got no right pulling anyone down with me.”

Silence rings in the empty space of Marko’s flashy tattoo parlor. Her words bouncing off the crimson
walls to slam themselves back onto her face. Her words gaining spears and spikes and drawing
imaginary blood from where they land. In that silence, Lela glares at the beta man and waits for the
moment he agrees. She waits for the realization, the understanding and the acceptance that yeah—
she’s fucked, a burning ship going down in open water far from shore—maybe everyone around her
is better off getting far the fuck away.

“Lela,” Marko starts, a sad kind of smile works it’s way over his face as he looks at her. He doesn’t
even look all that surprised by what Lela’s admitted to him. But then, he’s probably clocked her for
what she is because they’ve been sitting here far longer than Lela had anticipated and cigarette
smoke can only hide so much. There’s no kind of judgement in his eyes as he says, “Like I said, ain’t about what we deserve, life just is. We take what comes our way and work with what we got.”

“And what? Shit’s like a bad hand dealt out to me?” Lela growls out in anger. Her fangs growing in her mouth as she fought to keep the swelling self aimed rage from spilling outward.

A tense silence follows after Lela has growled out her words. A silence that feels like it can go only two ways. One being violence and the other being…well, Lela’s not entirely sure. She’s pretty sure it’ll be the first one though. Marko being a Dom-Beta being aggressively challenged by a lesser omega pretty much assured that much. Lela’s seen Dom-Beta’s tear out peoples throat for less.

That girl inside her, coated in layers of her own blood, aches for the first. For violence to unleash so she may fall back onto something that is steady and true. Something that she knows as much as the rhythm of her own heart.

But nothing happens.

Nothing.

No violence.

Marko breaks the silence with a simple shrug of his shoulders and an easily muttered, “Fuck if I know. Just met you.”

The words, so casually stated, throw Lela for a loop. They sweep the fury out from under her and leave her feeling wrong footed. It rocks all her hard earned conditioning enough that she forgets she’s supposed to hold her ground. That she isn’t supposed to relent a single inch of space if she wanted to keep herself alive.

Rearing back and away, Lela stares at the man confused. Her brows pinch on her face as she pulls in a nose full of his scent and notes that nothing has changed in his metallic air. Nothing ticks up or down with any kind of offense he might be feeling. It stays perfectly leveled like Lela hadn’t been spitting him growls at all. Like he was perfectly content to sit still and let her rage all night if that’s what she was feeling up to.

A none to subtle cloak of peace clings to the very man as he looked her over. Leaning back in his seat, Marko waits until Lela says something, anything, so that he may offer what he can. Almost as if he’d half expected this and welcomed the blackness swirling inside her in whatever form it came in because he was resolute to sit through it.

Its strange, if nothing else. So much so, that it shakes Lela’s view of the world a little because she’s been trained since her birth that Omega’s ain’t got a single right in the world to growl at a single fucking person. Growls, bites, violence and pain are what Omegas should endure and not dole out. Omegas simpered and cowered and begged. That was their lot in life.

But here he sat, a Dom-Beta—scent thick enough to scare off any alpha around—looking completely unfazed by her angry display.

Confused, Lela pulls feigns disinterest despite the rush of her thumping heart. Clicking her tongue, Lela looks away from him and smokes down to the filter. Stubbing it out on the ash tray between them, she squares her jaw and remains stubbornly quiet herself.

Eventually, though, Marko breaks the silence with a heavy exhale through his mouth. He runs a rose tattooed hand down his face and puts out, “You know, I gotta ask, you even wanna get clean?”
There’s that question again. The same one Amber had asked her when she’d been hugging a toilet. It lashes at Lela and cuts deep as if lined in broken shards of green bottle glass. It burns her down to the softness in her growing larger and larger. She doesn’t understand what that question has to do with anything and she says as much.

“—the fuck does it matter if I wanna? I gotta. Ain’t you supposed to be telling me to get off that shit no matter what? Telling me drugs is bad or some shit?”

“I think we both know that shit ain’t good for you,” Marko laughs, his eyes pin her down with hard edged knowledge when he adds on, “You wantin’ to do anything matters. Getting clean, it ain’t hard. Easy to just stop. It’s staying clean, really fucking committing to making yourself better—that’s hard. You wanna do all that? Work through all your shit so you don’t run back to what helped you get by?”

Leaning his elbows onto the table, taking what space was between them, Marko levels her with a serious stare and informs her, “It ain’t gonna be easy. Looking into the mirror never is, not for people like us. So, you gotta decide now, that something you ready to do? If it ain’t, tell me upfront. Shit won’t work if you’re not.”

Lela’s grown enough to admit that she was, without a fucking shadow of a doubt, not ready for that bullshit. Not at fucking all.

The thought of rifling through all the things she’s settled down and buried for the sake of smiling and laughing—fucking breathing without hurling—with her pack, terrifies her. It makes something twist and turn over in her belly like a knife being twisted when she hadn’t known she’d been stabbed in the first place. Her hindbrain slithers and coils like a snake ready to sink it’s own fangs into itself.

But she’s got to. She knows. If she wants to get herself right, really earn the happiness she’s managed to cheat off the game—a happiness she’s undeserving of, she’s got to look into the tar pits of her own mind. Terrified as she is, Lela knows her answer in an instant.

Pulling in that old kind of confidence that barely fits her here and now, Lela steadies her heart, straightens her shoulders, raises her head and meets the stare pound for pound. With a swift jerk of her head, she says, “I’m down.”

Whatever kind of expression Lela wears must reassure Marko for he smiles wide and happy. His face splitting in half he nods his head and says, “Alright then, let’s do this. I’ll be there with you through all of it. You feeling like a fall, you call me. You need to talk, you call me. You have an itch and you fucking call me. No matter the day or time, you pick up your phone and call me. I’ll answer and I’ll come get you if I need to. You ain’t in this on your own Lela. I got your back.”

And for all that she doesn’t really know shit about Marko, Lela feels the absolute honest oath he gives her. For all the fear she feels, Lela’s hindbrain kicks and unpins because at least she’s got this. A lifeline where she once had bonds.

It’s not the same, she knows, nothing could ever compare but it settles and soothes the softness in her that throbs in relief.

There’s a light slowly being lit by a half burnt out candle in the dark she’s surrounded herself in. And Lela’s never been much for hope but she can feel it sinking it’s warm fingers into her chest and refusing to be cowed by all else that it finds there.

Lela’s terrified of what she’ll find, of the path she’ll have to walk down once more, but she’s doing it for the softness in Clints eyes. She’s doing it for the acceptance in Natasha’s eyes. She’s doing it for
the all encompassing love in Sam’s smile. She’s doing it for Tony and his firm belief that she is better than she knows. She’s doing it for the soft gentleness that Bruce worries after her. She’s doing it for the sweetness in Pepper’s touch whenever it lands on her.

She’s doing it for her pack.

And…Lela is doing it for the two men she’s loved with all of her—loves still, would always love, would never touch again—and hurt and betrayed by loving both in one life time. For the prize that’s James gaze when it landed on her. For the brilliance of Steve’s laughter. For the men she should have gotten better for since she met them. For the men who had deserved to have been giving more than just pieces she’d handed off herself.

She’s doing it for them two.

But…she’s also doing this, actively making this decision, because she owes it for the girl she killed for the sake of the one who breathes now.

It’s a sort of penance, she thinks—believes—for all the wrongs she’s ever done. And all of her, old and new, soft and jagged, cannot help but agree that she deserves far worse than this.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my friends. My buddies. My pals. My babes. My muses. My inspirations. I am SOOO SORRY for the delayed update. But life is a raging monstrous thing with claws, teeth and fucking bills. I meant to update a long time ago but this chapter never worked the way I wanted it to. And then I made the mistake of watching Endgame and then I was genuinely fucking devastated by everything. (I was a crying mess and I refuse to acknowledge half, if not ALL, that happened there.) I know it was short but I just couldn’t add more without taking it further away from where I’m trying to force them all to move along. So I’m sorry about that and promise to make up for it on the next one!

I know it's looking pretty dark and the tone is sounding a hell of a lot of like my earlier chapters but I swear I'm going to fix it! I've got a plot, a scheme, a fucking magic wand! They are going to get together despite what our super-solider dummies think!!!

Anywhooo, I hope someones still reading and that y'all enjoy!
As always, thank you so much for reading!
And I hope y'all leave a comment down below!
With love,
Ani
In all honesty, it doesn’t take more than a day for Sam to find just where Steve—and by default James—have hidden themselves. It’s an old SHIELD compound. One that’d been used as a training facility back in the day. One that was hardly used anymore seeing as to how the organization had it’s very public fall from grace. It’s still operational and available, or at least it was, to those with high enough clearance.

For all the trouble they’ve caused, both Steve and James could walk into a bank and leave with the entirety of the vault if they so choose. Not that either one of those idiots would ever do anything like that. Steve still won’t touch that military check that’s accumulating more and more zeroes in his bank account. James refuses to acknowledge he has a back account at all. Neither one of them think they deserve what is owed to them, the humble bastards.

Sam had found Steve there almost immediately after he’d left home. Pepper and Tony spitting hard edged truths for all to hear. Sam had found them both with every intention to set right what he had had a good hand in twisting.

But, blame it on that bullheaded stubbornness that came from his father, Sam hadn’t. Sam couldn’t walk in without feeling like he was about to murder one, if not both of them. For all that he knows neither one of them have actually done anything, Sam wants to swing at them regardless.

How dare James come flouncing back the way he had. After he’d left his girl hanging in the wind. Her heart twisting, breaking and bleeding because she couldn’t understand why he’d left her. Sam can still remember the pain that had ached in his chest from the bond they shared. Lela burying herself inside the heartache until the whole of the pack was hurting right alongside with her.

And yet, not once did she open her mouth against the asshole. Not once had she grown angry with James. Sam knows she blamed herself. Lela had blamed herself entirely for the way things had ended. And that pissed Sam off more than anything.

Then there was Steve. Fucking Steve. Steve who Sam had thought was the most brilliant, most caring, most attentive sweet man that had ever fucking lived. Steve who had apparently been dating, had been kissing—touching, fucking sleeping with—Lela all while completely unaware of how he
was going to break her world right in half.

Sam can’t make sense of it no matter how he look at it. He can’t put his head around how neither one of them didn’t know. How, Sam rages, how had they not known?!

It takes him a total of five days and nights for Sam to grow calm enough to enter that training compound without fear of kicking their asses. Five days and five nights that he’d spent sleeping on Lela’s couch hoping he could trick himself into believing she’d just walk right in with a smile on her face. Five days and five nights where he stared at his phone willing a call, or a damn message, to pop in and tell him she was alright. Five days and five nights where Sam has had plenty of time alone now that Clint and Natasha were drowning themselves with one mission after another.

Five days and five nights where Sam had talked himself into settling this. After all, Steve was—is—his friend. Sam had become an enemy of the state for that damnable alpha. Sam had crossed through hellfire all because he’d wanted to stand by Steve and be there for him no matter what it took. It’d taken five days and five nights before Sam had kicked his own ass into motion over it.

Sam knows he’s gotta apologize. He knows it’s owed of him. If not for them then for the girl who had sounded like her heart was breaking right in half as she laughed. A laugh so dark and twisted everything in Sam had curled in on itself and broken too.

These men—stupid fucking men—are who Lela had given her heart over to. These men were the ones she had chosen. These were the men—at least one of them now—who she was still with.

Sam knows he has to apologize. He knows he has to make his peace with it because it was Lela’s heart and life so it was hers to do as she wished. Sam knows he has to apologize if anything was ever going to be smoothed out. Sam owes it to Lela to fix what he had a good hand in fucking up. What kind of pack-mate would he be if he stood in front of her happiness like that?

A shitty one. One that wasn’t worthy of the bond they shared. So he’d swallow his damned pride and do the right thing here. Because he’s be damned if Lela came home to an entire pack that was against her.

If, Sam darkly thinks, she ever decided to come back home anyways.

Reluctantly, Sam makes his way up the stairs and over to the front door. His hand hovers over the knob for far longer than it ought to. With a tight grit to his teeth, Sam pushes the door open and looks for the two assholes he’s come to…to fucking apologize to.

Surprise coats Steve’s golden face as the man turns to take in the intruder. His blue eyes go wide as saucers as the man calls out, “Sam?”

Miffed as he is, Sam doesn’t acknowledge the greeting. Miffed as he is, Sam aches to be as petty as his little Gamma could be and turn right the fuck around and pretend he hadn’t seen or heard anyone. Miffed as he is, Sam knows that’s a shit decision.

Glancing away from Steve, Sam clocks James where he stands unwrapping black bandages from his human hand. The silent twirling of his cybernetic one stills as gray eyes track Sam’s every movement. James face is as blank as a mask. He neither looks surprised by Sam’s arrival nor does he let on to any other emotion he might be housing.

Coming to a stop in the middle of the large training room, Sam stands tall and plants his feet shoulder width apart. Gritting his teeth, he wills himself to be calm as he says:
“I came to apologize.”

That surprise Steve wears morphs into something like shock before it ripples into confusion and then bitter understanding.

Shaking his stupidly golden head, Steve frowns and mumbles, “Sam, there ain’t nothing you gotta apologize for. If anything, I think I owe you—all of you—an apology for how everything went down. I wasn’t…I wasn’t thinking. I should’ve never let it get so out of control.”

James, for his part, remains quiet. His eyes glued to the side of Sam’s face but his face just as motionless as before.

The urge to grind his teeth swells in him for a moment. Of course, Leave it to Captain fucking America to get his ass jumped by a whole pack and turn around to be the first to apologize.

Fisting his hands tight, Sam bites out as smooth as he can manage:

“No, Steve, we’re all to blame for how fucked everything got that night. Emotions were…they were running pretty high. We didn’t react like we should’ve. We let our anger get the best of us. We got…after the first time around, we’re all a little bit overprotective of our girl. We should’ve backed off. I’m sorry we didn’t. I’m sorry I took a swing at you.”

Shuffling on his feet, rubbing at the back of his neck, Steve offers a strained smile as he mumbled, “Hey, no harm no foul.”

That almost startles a laugh out of Sam. A bubble of familiar laughter swells in his chest only to petter out with all the swirling emotions currently raging against the others.

Pulling his gaze from the blonde man, Sam settles a glare onto the raven haired asshole. The snarl that slips onto his lips is involuntary as Sam growls out:

“I really don’t want to apologize to you.”

Looking like that neither offends him or effects him, James merely stares at him unmoving. His dark gray eyes never blinking as he listened on. When James’ lips finally part, he says, “Then don’t.”

And oh, what a simple thing to say. What a simple set of words. Two small and simple words that fly into the space between them all and fizzle out before they ever really take form.

It’s an out, Sam realizes. A small escape that James has laid out for Sam to take. James—the unflinchingly self damning bastard—was ready as ever to keep all the guilt he seemed to have settled onto himself alone. It’s an out that James offers because Sam really doesn’t want to do what he came here to do.

But, fuck, Sam knows all the hurt James had left in his wake. Sam remembers what it had been like for Lela those first few weeks. The way she’d looked like she was a hollow shell of herself. How her eyes had been swollen and puffy from the nights she laid awake clinging to a phone that wouldn’t light up with a call or text. Sam remembers hearing her locked in her bathroom crying so hard he thought his own heart was breaking with her.

Sam remembers the way her bond had been soaked in pain. A pain so sharp, so raw, so utterly soul consuming, that Sam felt like he was being crushed by it. A pain that had stripped Lela of all her hard earned strength and left her looking far too young, too vulnerable and raw. A pain Sam can still feel pulsing through her bond in thrums of pure longing.
Sam remembers all of this and his hatred for the man only grows tenfold.

But then, Sam knows, it’s not his place to hate. It’s not his place to hold grudges on Lela’s behalf.

For all that Lela was a furious hellion when she wanted to be, Sam knows the girl is built entirely on a foundation of love and forgiveness. She might not say it out loud, but Sam knows because he knows her heart now, that she’s forgiven James. That though she was hurt she does not hold it against the man for leaving her. That he heart my bleed from it still but she could only ever hold love for James still.

So, it isn’t his place. Sam knows that. But damn if doesn’t want to rage for her. To spit growls at this man until he felt every last inch of his ire down to the bone.

“You…” Sam starts, forces himself to remain as calm as possible as he threw into the still air, “You broke her fucking heart James.”

This time around an emotion does skitter across James otherwise dead eyes. It’s a flash—less than five seconds in total—but there just the same. Sam see’s regret, anguish and something like soul consuming guilt. Sam see’s it like a raging fire of black before it is quelled by the mask James has had beaten and fitted for his own face.

A mask that has come from hydra. A mask that had ripped the mans soul out to be seared into place.

It is a mask that reminds Sam of all the black James has endured. A mask that reminds him that James does not need anymore people laying crimes across his back for him to carry. Least of all from someone like Sam.

If anyone was going to pick a bone with James over what had happened that was squarely with Lela and no one else.

Shame and guilt bubble up Sam’s belly. They twist and climb until Sam heaves out a tired sigh and grumbles out:

“I don’t like what you did, or how you did it—but, I can see why you thought you had to do it.”

Lord fucking knew how Sam had thought about packing up and leaving town when he’d first felt the fledging bond between he and Lela. The fear of putting her in danger for who he was and what he did kept him up in those early days. But Sam was like his mother in most things. He took the good and ran with it and loved in the bright morning sun unabashed.

But Sam had stayed because Lela had needed him and had dared to want him close. She had welcomed him with open arms when she was still so gaunt with all the darkness of her past bleeding her dry. Sam could’ve never walked away. He wasn’t that strong. Not when she looked at him with her frail soul unflinchingly in her eyes.

Sam doesn’t want to know the extent of hydra’s brutality that they could’ve built James that strong. To walk away when he was leaving his own heart behind. Sam doesn’t want to know because he’s afraid of what he’ll face when he does.

“I—” James starts only to loose his confidence as he pulled his dark gaze down and away towards his hands once more. When it looks like he’s gathered enough of himself, he finishes off with, “I just didn’t want to hurt her.”

“Like I said man, I get why you did it. Doesn’t mean I like it or think it was the right thing to do.” Sam tells him gruffly.
“Sam,” Steve starts, a warning in his voice like he’s about to work himself up in a raving defense on James behalf. It almost makes him want to roll his fucking eyes.

Steve’s words—and eager tirade—is quelled by James soft words of, “No, Steve, he’s right.”

*Course I’m fucking right,* Sam bitterly thinks but does not say. Instead he settles for a simple:

“She was—*god,* I can’t…I can’t even put it into words Barnes. She was—she was fucking *devastated.* She kept waiting for you to call her or show up. And fuck, she…she just cried! Fucking *cried* for you. Took a solid three months for her to not look like she was standing on a ledge! And then, and then you just show up. On the worst fucking night. You just show up! What—what the fuck were you *thinking?*”

Balling up the bandages up in his left hand, James steels himself and says, “I…I just wanted to see her. I—the whole time I was gone, I just kept thinking about her. How much I…” here he stops, his eyes cutting over to Steve and then away as if he cannot bring himself to say what he almost has.

Either way, Sam hears the unsaid words.

*How much I love her.*

Steve must hear it too for his face grows heavy with pain and something like guilt.

There’s a hell of a lot Sam knows he can say to that. A lot that probably won’t lead to any kinds of good. A lot that might really burn the bridge between them all. A lot that is built up on the pain he’d felt screaming in Lela’s bond.

But, he says none of it. Sam reminds himself it isn’t his place. Sam reminds himself that as much as he loved Lela—forever would—his place was to be by her side. His place was to protect, to encourage and to help where he could.

His own hang ups here weren’t why he’d come. His own anger didn’t belong here.

It was solely up to Lela to collect her pound of flesh from the Alpha man. It was squarely up to her if she wanted to forgive or to condemn. Until she cast James out, Sam could do no more than to be by her side for it all.

That’s what it meant to be pack. It meant family until the end. It meant love unconditional no matter his own opinions on ex boyfriends.

“I wanted to…” James starts after a long silence has stretched and worn thin, “I wanted to…see her. Or maybe, I think I just wanted to tell her how sorry I was that I left in the first place. But…but I can see how that…how bad an idea it was. I know I probably don’t…*deserve* to. After…*everything.*”

And fuck, Sam thinks, he *really* doesn’t want to say what he’s about to. But fuck if he’s not his mothers son. He can’t look at suffering like that and not want to rush on in and ease wherever he could.

All that anger he’d felt for the man bleeds right out of him then. It leaves him in a grace of a punctured lung. Sympathy, compassion and something else reaches out to try to soothe someone who’d once been a major part of Lela’s heart.

Scrubbing a rough hand across his face, Sam heaves out a tired and bitter sigh before he admits, “Pretty sure if you apologized to Lela, she would’ve forgiven you in a heart beat. Whether you *deserved* it or not. You know that.”
At that, they go silent once more. James wears a strangled expression of guilt and regret. Steve himself looks like he wants to simultaneously leave the room while sticking close to his friend.

Now that his anger has left him, Sam feels way too tired to be standing on his own two feet. He has, after all, been running on little more that a couple of hours of sleep these days. With Lela gone, just fucking gone, Sam hasn’t been able to sleep in the dead of night.

The horrible thought of her being out there, on her own, strangles him. The fear, the bone breaking worry for her, wrapping its cold hands around his neck and giving him no rest. The pack is no better.

Nat and Clint were burying themselves in work. Running through missions like they were dead set on filling a quota that had never been given to them.

Bruce had not left his labs to so much as come home or shower. The scruff on his face growing as dark as the bags under his eyes.

Pepper kept leaving work early to drop into Lela’s level and clean until the place sparkled. The Beta desperate to have everything in place on the off chance Lela wandered home.

Tony…Tony looked as lost they all felt. His eyes always pinned to the door as if he could magic the girl into being again. His worry thick in his scent as he wrestled with the want to find her. But he hadn’t gone searching for Lela.

None of them had gone looking. Not after that message Jarvis had relayed. All of them to twisted in their guilt to destroy the space Lela had suddenly carved out for herself. All of them afraid of what it’ll do if they disregard it like they had so many times before.

All of them too afraid of who they’ll lose if they do.

Each and every single one of them too terrified to become like the monsters in Lela’s past.

What Sam wouldn’t give to know something—anything—about where she is and how she’s doing. What Sam wouldn’t give to know that she’s safe and sound wherever she is.

What Sam wouldn’t give to make his bond between them two come alive. For the static hiss of a denied bond to fall away. For the life to be injected back into it. For Lela to smile and laugh somewhere he can hear and see. For the scent of her brushfire smoke to stick to his skin once more.

Glancing upward, Sam pins his gaze on Steve and wonders if he knows. Sam wonders if Steve has her holed up in his apartment in Brooklyn. Sam wonders if that’s where she’s at sinking in the hurt that she must be feeling. Hurt so deep it blotted out all the bonds she’d built for herself. Hurt so deep Sam hasn’t felt a stir at all in their bonds.

Hurt that keeps her away. Gone, missing from the home she has built with them all.

Sam really doesn’t want to ask the man, but, the need to know is swallowing him whole. The need to make sure she’s somewhere safe—even if Steve knows and Sam, a pack mate, is being left out—has him licking his lips and asking:

“You, uh…how’s Lela?”

Confusion is what he’s given instead of an answer. Confusion that sits high and bright on Steve’s face and mirrored on James. Confusion that has Steve opening his mouth and wordlessly floundering on air.
And just like that, Sam’s worry triples and multiplies into a thousand times more. In that simple confusion, Sam knows that these Alpha assholes don’t know. They don’t know how Lela is because she’s hurt. And Lela has left them all out. She has run off and thrown herself into the silence to mend what they have all broken. She has carried her hurt elsewhere. To people that do not bog her down, who do not cage her in, who do not burst forward with their own grudges and troubles. Lela has gone…fuck, Sam doesn’t know where.

A rattle of a pained breath shakes up out of his chest and into his throat. It mingles with a distressed beta cry that he will not acknowledge here and now. Shaking his head, Sam takes a step back and heads for the door.

“Sam—” Barnes calls out. His voice stronger now with whatever worry he now carries.

Stilling his feet Sam turns to look at the damned raven haired man. He is reluctant to stay in place. He is reluctant to have stopped at all. But, he’s angry not cruel.

“What—” James questions dies on his tongue. His dark eyes flash from Sam’s face to Steve’s suddenly alert expression. Something dark and twisted claws at his eyes as if he’s begging to ask but cannot for all the shame he holds for himself.

Steve steps forward then. That hard won confidence of his—the one he wore to face down roving teams of armed men with nothing more than his fists and shield—appears. He holds himself tight as he asks what James seems unable to, “Why…why would we know how she is?”

Oh, and there it comes again, that anger Sam had let die to smoldering embers kicks up into a flame once more. It rushes through his chest; not unlike the flames that lined Lela’s once vibrant bond. But it’s different because he’s so fucking pissed by the question.

Face pulling into his ire, Sam repeats the question as if he wishes to be corrected entirely, “Why would you know how she is? Why would you? Aren’t you fucking dating her?”

Steve’s golden face of American dreamt perfection twists into something so utterly complicated it takes a moment for Sam to understand it. There is guilt, shame, regret and even longing. Steve wears them all at once that it is a struggle to understand. Or, at least, it is until it clear isn’t.

In a flash of something too bright to name, Sam understands. He knows why they’ve been holed up here together: these two men. In a facility that they otherwise never would be in. Not with all that is offered to them by Tony and the actual government.

“You haven’t called her,” Sam whispers, hoping against all his anger to be corrected in an instant.

But his answer comes to him in twin actions. Both alphas turn to look at one another. A sea of words crosses between them in silence within that look. Then they look away and down at their feet.

They haven’t called her. They haven’t picked up their fucking phones and called her. They hadn’t called because…what? They were busy working out in an all but abandoned training facility? They were busy drowning in their shared guilt?

Sam grits his elongated fanged teeth against one another in an effort to keep from roaring. And oh, how he wants to roar. How he aches to demand how many nights they’ve lost sleep worrying about she’s dealing with the utter disaster that was all three of them. Sam burns with the need to know what the fuck they’re doing here instead of out trying to fix the heart they’ve mangled.

But then, he knows, he fucking knows why they’re here.
They are hiding. Hiding from what they’ve done. Hiding themselves from the world. Hiding from the love that they have no intention of taking up.

They’re hiding.

“Sam,” Steve starts, taking two steps forward only to still at the dirty look he receives from Sam, when he stills he works out, “What happened to Lela?”

“What do you fucking care, Rogers?” Sam spits out as he stomps forward in a challenge.

The lines of his own shoulders have filled out. Every instinct in him, man and beta, are rearing to a head. They pulse and scream to throw a fist and bust open Steve’s stupid lips.

Everything in him screams that Steve—and James—have no fucking right to ask him when they should be asking her.

“I—” Steve starts thunderous and unmoving as a mountain only to choke on his words and be left silent. Whatever he was about to say dies on his tongue.

Silence, thick and oppressive, settles over them. Like a mudslide encasing cars and crushing them down. Sam’s not about to break it. Would rather drown in the water and dirt than do it. He’s all for glaring at Steve in not so subtle murderous rage. Hoping, beyond all hope, that Steve meets this challenge like all the ones that have come before it—with ruthless abandon.

It’s broken, in the end, not by Steve or himself. But by James and his half silent question.

“Why don’t you know how she is?”

The question hits him with all the grace James can throw his fists in a fight: deadly and efficient. It hits him right in a weak spot. It knocks him to the side and has his head ringing like it first did not so long ago. When Sam and he were enemies. When they were throwing rounds to break bones.

The distinct need to follow that fucking question up with a well dressed ‘fuck off’ burns in him. It already stands at the ready with enough scathing disdain he can sum up before it sticks to the roof of his mouth.

Everything in him wants to lob the truth—hurtful and so very bitter—at James and Steve both. He wants them to feel as shitty as everyone else is feeling. Sam hungers to sink his teeth into their weak spots too and have them lie awake at night haunted by the not knowing. The utter hell it is to be kept in the dark when she was out…wherever the hell she was.

Her phone dead. Her bonds closed. It was purgatory, Sam thinks, not hell. It was a terrifying limbo that stretched on and on with seemingly no end in sight.

He’s about to say it, his mouth already open with the words, before he remembers what Natasha had relayed to him. Pepper’s words, so damning and yet so true, blare bright in his mind.

They remind him of all the ways he’s trampled over Lela’s boundaries by telling someone something she’d trusted him with. Chismoso, she had told him. Her eyes dark with her anger that would eventually bleed into fond acceptance. A snitch, she’d called him, when he kept ratting her out.

He’d only ever done it out of his concern. Out of his need to help her despite herself. He’d only ever done anything because he thought it was only right. He’d only ever spilled everything at Nat, Clint’s, or Tony’s get because he thought, I’m keeping her safe. He’d done it because she was pack, his kid sister, and meddling is what big brothers do.
But it isn’t all the reasons why he’d done it. He’d done it because she was theirs to protect, to guard, to…horde. Lela was the hearth to the whole of the pack. A place to warm their hearts and souls and for that reason Sam had tried to keep her home. To keep her close to him even when she had wanted to spread her wings and experience the world she’d been denied her entire life.

It is then that Sam is hit with a bone breaking clarity.

Steve and James may have been the catalyst but Sam himself had laid his fair share of stones to the path that led to this.

Steve and James may have broken her heart, but Sam knew he wasn’t as guiltless as he thought himself to be.

There was a pound of flesh he owed to Lela too.

And, the knowledge of it all, breaks his heart.

Dropping his head away, abandoning the challenge he’d issued, Sam takes stumbling steps back and away. His heart feels heavier now than it did before he walked in. He feels worse after these stupid fucking apologies. Even though, he knows, he only officially said one.

The need to run right out to the streets and hunt down the scent of brushfire smoke overwhelms him. He wants to go looking so desperately. To apologize, to tell her that he’s so fucking sorry he treated her. That she has wings, wings stronger than his, and they deserved the strongest winds to carry her off on. He wants to scream at the world for her because she’s just a kid who’s never had love, family and pack and so she’d bent where maybe she should’ve stood tall. He wants to cry, here and now, and just bring her home to the level she’s filled with every single one of their preferred snacks.

Sam won’t sell her out again. Not to anyone and especially not to them.

So as much as he wishes to rage at them, Sam turns and walks off. He heads back home even though he knows it’ll be empty. He heads back because he hopes against hope that Lela will be there smiling at him as he steps off the lift.

He heads home because he owes it to her to keep his mouth shut and deal with the decision she’s made.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, first off, I am sorry for the long wait AGAIN. But work has been few and far between and I'm struggling to keep up with adult responsibilities alongside single-parenthood. So though I promised to keep the updates frequent, I'm sorry to say, that probably won't be the case. I'll still post when I can but it won't be as frequent as it used to be. Hopefully you guys will still stick by me!

Second, holy shit-balls batman. This chapter was supposed to be Sam kicking these Alpha assholes into motion. It turned itself into a true and utter angst fest. Everyone's hurt. What the ever living hell is going on.

Third, I intended to write Sam out as a more upbeat kind of guy but for all that golden precious baby smiles and is optimistic on the outside he's somber as all hell. A fucking surprise to me.
I hope you guys enjoyed the update, harsh as it was, if there are any kinds of wonkiness to it, it is due to the fact that I spent literally next to no time editing it because I wanted to give you guys a chapter after so long. And to edit it meant I was probably going to let my depression and anxiety get the best of me and erase it completely. So I'm sorry for the errors.

Let me know what y'all thought in the comments below, whoever is still reading this utter disaster of thing!

-Ani
He’s been running himself ragged. Keeps taking on missions left and right without bothering to stop and breathe. He never goes in, not like he’s supposed to, but gets the details over secured classified lines. Then he flies out to where he’s needed.

Dealing with bullets flying, hitting him, dropping bad guy bodies, is easier than dealing with everything else. He’s in the wind as much as he can be will still being weighed down by anvils at his feet.

Anvils that come from Peppers words. Her accusations. Her fucking damnations.

Clint doesn’t want them to be true. He fears how much they might be. He’s fucking terrified of what it’ll mean if they’re true.

So he keeps himself moving. Keeps ducking out of town with the flimsy excuse of work. Of duty. Of the fucking greater good bullshit. He figures, so long as Lela is not there, he has no reason to be either. His hearts not there and so he flies into the winds that take him far and away from himself.

The pack, he knows—because Sam had managed to drop down somewhere he’d been deep in the middle of busting up some kind of white power terrorist meet—is doing no better. Though, Clint can’t find much of himself caring when he knows he should be.

If the words are true—and, god, how he begs them not to be—then they, all of them, deserve to be as they are. Anguished and terrorized by them. Horrified that they’ve become the smiling faces of the fears Lela has grown all her life avoiding.

He’s in the middle of reloading his empty gear stack in an otherwise empty SHIELD locker room when he’s met by someone else he’s been avoiding.

“You’re stretching yourself too thin.”

Natasha’s cool words are a breeze on a winters dead night. They offer him no relief or warmth. Not
right now. Not like he’s always known them to be.

Today, they make him grow stiff. Today, they make him want to bare his teeth and rage. Rage at her,
rage at all of them, but more than that rage at himself. They make him want to scream until his throat
is bloody with it.

“I’m fine,” Clint bitterly grits out. His back is to her, he has not looked up from his task of reloading
his quiver with all the explosives he’s been prone to use these days.

There is no sound—never will be sound—as Natasha moves. She is the devil on wayward winds.
She moves with grace only those born of death can.

When she speaks again, she is by his left side, close to his elbow enough to touch, “You’re not fine.”

He’s not. He knows he’s not. She’s right. She’s always right. Clint is run ragged. He’s been
stretching himself out too thin. The grooves and etches that make him up disappearing under the
strain. He hasn’t slept much—refuses to sleep—and has had nothing more than a cup of coffee in the
last 28 hours. The bullet hole in his upper left thigh still sluggishly bleeds from the shit poor job he
did to dress it.

Clint knows he needs to take care of at least one of those things. Quite possibly, the bullet hole first.
He knows the trouble it is to move with something torn open. He knows what it’s like to deal with an
infection that comes later from it.

But he hasn’t. He doesn’t really want to.

Especially now with his beta at his back speaking so smoothly, so carefully, so utterly unaffected by
the entirety of the world.

Hands stilling, Clint glares down at the equipment in his hands and begs, “Tell me I got this wrong
Nat. Tell me…tell me I’m looking at this all wrong.”

Clint’s man enough to admit his short comings where he had them. Gods above and Demons below,
Clint knows he has his fair share of them. One didn’t become who he was—what he was—without
being born with less than a handful of them.

One of those short comings has—and probably always would be—that he can ignore the black and
white shades of the world for whatever shade of gray Natasha handed him. He could ignore the
worst sins he has committed—took part in making—so long as Nat can look him in the eye later on
and tell him it was the right call. That he'd done what was asked of him and could go to sleep
knowing it was done and in the past.

It’s a form of cowardice and something else.

Natasha is silent. Silent like an empty graveyard in the middle of the night. She is so still, so
damnably silent that Clint burns with an urge to turn and look if she’s there at all.

But he knows she’s there. He can smell gunpowder and black berry. Clint can feel their bond pulse
with something with how close they are. Lately, Clint’s been ignoring the two of the three bonds in
his chest. Ignoring them because he’s afraid when he goes looking he’ll find them being closed to
him.

Lela’s is the only one he refuses to turn away from. Though that gives him no peace. Her's is empty.
Her's is built of static and nothingness. Her bond, always burning with the life of her, is cold and
faded. A bond that is being choked.
“Nat,” he means to bite out. Instead, it is a begging cry. A cry that is drenched in gamma whines and all the pain he feels, “Nat, please.”

When Natasha speaks, it is with a tone that Clint has never heard. Or, at least, not anymore. Not since she used to be who she was and he used to be who he was. Not since they were standing on opposing sides leveling guns, knives and death at one another. Not since she was a nameless Beta and he a lost Gamma. Not since Clint had been as unfettered as a robins feather on a wind.

“You’re looking at it wrong.”

It’s a lie. A fucking goddamn lie. One Nat is giving him because…because she’s willing to look away from black and white and swim in oceans of gray. It’s a lie she’s willingly giving him so that he can wade on in with her.

Spinning around to level his eyes on her, Clint glares murderously and viciously. His fangs lengthen in his mouth as he bites out in boiling anger, “Don’t fucking lie to me Nat. Don’t…just fucking don’t.”

Pale face fluidly changing into nothing, Natasha simply stares at him and says, “We did what we had to, Clint.”

All the things he’s been avoiding, all the things he’s been letting simmer beneath the surface, buried by gunfire and adrenaline threaten to burst through his flesh. It aches to spill like boiling hot lava out and over him until he’s taking down the entire city.

But, it doesn’t. Clint forces himself to remain still. To remain as smooth and as unmoving as Natasha now is.

“And what did we do Nat. Tell me. Tell me so I can stop looking at it the wrong way and start looking at it the right way. Tell me because I can’t…I can’t stop fucking seeing it the way it is,” Clint demands. He feels wild now.

As wild as a cornered and feral gamma can feel. As wild as Lela had been in the first few days when she first woke in that suite. As wild as her growls had been because they’d stolen her, locked her in and told her the rules of a game she couldn’t possibly win because they were set against her.

Those thoughts, horrible and tainted, swirl in his mind and beg him to look where he hasn’t wanted to. They scream at him to look, to really see, all the things he’s ignored because Nat was living in shades of gray and Lela needed to be saved. They scream, deafening and vengeful, for him to look at what he’s had a fair hand in creating.

A gilded fucking cage. One lined with good intentions to keep his girl singing sweet songs for only them to hear.

Anger simmers in Natasha’s emerald colored eyes. It simmers dangerous and cold as she stares him down. A challenge lines the bow of her lips as she stands tall, proud and unafraid.

“We didn’t do anything wrong Clint. We did what was best for her. She needed us to do it for her because she’s never known how.”

And there it is, all his fears coming to life in one instant. All of his worst fucking fears being injected with the last bit of life they need to open up their jagged jaws and snap his neck.

They run rabid in him. Tearing into his flesh and pulling meat from bone. They twist his neck until it breaks and snaps. Forcing him to look at all the things he’s been blindly ignoring. They force him to
see all that he should’ve been seeing since the beginning.

Since the day on the ledge on that suite. When Lela—so fucking small and vulnerable—had looked like she was two seconds away from tumbling down. She’d worn desperation and hopelessness in her eyes. She may not have begged—would never beg for anything in her life—but she had been so close to it. She had wanted her freedom then so much she had been willing to jump down and away. Lela had wanted to run, run from them, run from herself, she was halfway down already.

Instead she’d been caught mid flight, harrowed, and stuffed into their cage.

“No,” Clint says with as much firmness as he can put in his words, “You’re the one looking at it wrong, Nat.”

A crack starts to form in Natasha’s porcelain mask. A crack that allows her face to twist with her anger as her ruby red lips snarled. Her crimson curls sway as she shakes her head and bites out, “No I’m not. You tell me what the fuck we did that was so fucking bad. We picked her up off the streets because she was falling. We got her off the drugs that were killing her. We helped her! We’ve only ever fucking helped her!”

His mouth feels dry as he opens his mouth to lay down a nail in his own coffin, “We forced her to do that. We locked her up. We didn’t…we didn’t let her go even after she got better.”

“What? So we’re supposed to have left her out there? Let her run right back to the shit she was pumping into herself?!” Natasha roars as her own fangs descend. That scent that never really spills into something tangible begins to pour out. It smells like death and destruction.

“We saved her. We helped her. We’ve only been fucking helping her!”

A million and one different things flood Clint’s mouth. A million and one sins that he’s committed against a girl with a broken heart and a tangled mind. A million and one accusations that damn him and Natasha in turn.

He settles for one, “She didn’t ask us to. She’s never asked us for anything. We just took and we kept taking until we fit her into a box we could pick up and move with us.”

The words he says throw Natasha back as if he’s cocked back his gun and fired. They hit her and she scrambles away from the shock and the pain. Her perfectly constructed mask crumbles into dust. The woman beneath—neither Beta, assassin or red room survivor—explodes to the surface. The woman he knows—the woman he loves with everything in him—looks devastated by his words.

“No,” Natasha spits out as she backed away. Her eyes are wild as they train themselves on Clint. As wild as if Clint is holding a weapon to truly end her life.

Shaking his head, feeling the weeks worth of fatigue finally catching up to him, Clint stumbles back until he hits the bench. He falls down onto it like a sack of meat. His head bows as he tries, desperately, to run down all the ways he’s fucked this up.

He hadn’t meant to. Had never meant to give her anything but good. Had only ever wanted for her to be so filled with love that she never needed to go elsewhere for it.

But that, he thinks, is probably how it all went wrong.

Lela was a girl. She was a person. She was a fighter. She was a hurricane’s spirit trapped within flesh. She was a fire never meant to be banked. She was not a mockingbird to be befriended and fed through the bars of a cage. She was not meant to be kept. She was a pack mate, bonded to him and
them, and she was meant to roam as far as her heart pulled her. She was meant to shake the world and Clint had helped put a muzzle on her.

“I—we…” Natasha stumbles, lost within her moment of shock, to fit words into sentences. It is a long beat until she continues on, “She’s ours and we’re hers. I just…I wanted her to be…happy.”

There’s pain in Natasha’s voice. Pain that is built of heartache and loneliness. Pain that stems from the little girl that was twisted to become a weapon to suit the needs of evil men. Pain that clutches so fiercely at the very soul of who Clint is. Pain that is mirrored by the girl they’ve trapped beneath the heel of their love.

It is for that pain that Clint looks up. It is for that heart ache and loneliness that Clint turns to his Beta. It is for that little girl and the other that Clint meets Natasha’s devastated gaze.

“I know Nat,” Clint tells her with so much understanding sincerity that it bleeds off his words, “I know.”

“Why didn’t she—why didn’t she fucking tell us?” Natasha growls out as her eyes fill with tears. The red lashes of her eyes clumping thickly to one another. The roar in her voice bouncing in the small room their in.

Scrubbing hard at his dirty face, Clint feels a ragged smile strain his lips as he answers, “She wouldn’t even know how Nat. You know she’s never…she’s never had this—us. She’s never had pack, family. She doesn’t know she’s in a cage. She doesn’t know we’re the ones that put her in it.”

“No,” Natasha argues, finds enough of her old self to blink back her tears and deny, “She’s smarter than that. She’s—fuck Clint, she’s stronger than that. You saw what she’s been through. She would’ve…she would’ve done something. Told us. Bitten us until she was free.”

This time it is Clint who denies, it is he who argues, “No she wouldn’t’ve. She loves us Nat. Loves us so damn much she bonded with us when she’s lived this long without anything to keep her sane. She loves us and so she’ll keep herself in her cage for as long as we want her in it. Life’s broken her like that.”

After Natasha has heard his words, listened to them, pulled them apart piece by horrid fucking piece, she looks winded. Her sharp shoulders dip and her body sags. Whatever illusion she’d used to feign strength seeps right out of her in one shaky breath. She looks at him with tears in her eyes and looks as disgusted with herself as Clint feels for himself.

With a tired hand, feeling a million years of fatigue crushing him down, Clint calls her to him. Natasha, for once, doesn’t argue. She doesn’t roll her eyes or click her tongue. She doesn’t offer a witty remark about Clint waving her like she’s some dog to come when called. She simply comes to him on her too silent feet.

Her body is heavy despite how trim she is. Her body is too built of deadly muscle to be anything but firm and weighted. She falls onto him and curls up tight upon his lap. Her long willowy limbs fold—like a bird’s wing—down and into herself. She tucks her head into the crook of his neck and does not move.

Sometimes, Clint forgets the size of Natasha. Because of her strength, her sheer will and her unbendable fury, Clint forgets she’s smaller than him. Here and now, he is reminded of it in painful clarity. He’s reminded—harshly and brutally—that she’s just as much human as he is. Her heart beat a defiant rhythm but she was made of flesh and bone too.
Sometimes, Clint forgets that Natasha had been caged in too. Her cage hadn’t been as gilded as Lela’s. Built of the bones of her mother, father, red room sisters and the endless victims she has downed. Natasha once had a muzzle put on her too.

Maybe, most definitely, that is why Natasha had fought to deny this all so hard. She had not wanted to be a jailer. Had never wished to be a captor. Had hoped with everything in her to be better than the black hands that raised her.

Clint tucks his head down until his lips lay upon the crown of her curls. Sorrow and forgiveness lines his lips as he kisses her. He smells her blackberry and nutmeg scent. He smells the harsh edge of gunpowder. He smells her sadness and her regret too. He breathes it all in and tries not to choke on it.

“Why didn’t we see it?” Natasha whispers against his chest. Her voice holding something too fragile for Clint to readily name here and now.

Something he does not have the courage to name.

Closing his eyes, Clint fights against the tears that burn behind his lids, “We didn’t see it because we love her. We didn’t see it because…we didn’t want to see it Nat. We didn’t want to.”

His words only make Natasha curl up tighter. They only further drive in the nails upon their coffin. But Natasha does not argue them. She does not try to deny them. She merely clutches at him with her pale hands and grips him tight until the tiny trembles in her bond ebb.

In this moment, Clint longs for the third bond in his chest. The one made of soft petals and tangling roots. In this moment he wishes to go back to the home he’s been avoiding because his hearts not there. In this moment, he wants to go back in time and fix all that he’s twisted up wrong. In this moment, Clint wants to call up Sam so he can carry him down into a peaceful sleep.

In this moment, Clint does not move because one of his beta’s is down and he’s just as low. So he’ll stay in place for as long as he’s needed before she gets back up.

“What do we do now?” Natasha asks on a trembling whisper.

What she means to ask is, ‘Will she forgive us’. Clint hears it. He feels it.

“I don’t know.” His answer fits both questions.

He doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t know if Lela will. He doesn’t know.

“Sam might,” Natasha mumbles into his chest.

Nodding his head, Clint wraps his arms tight around Natasha and agrees, “Sam might.”

Sam, his other Beta, would know how to fix all this. Sam, with his sunny smiles and golden heart, he’d know where to go from here. Sam wasn't like them two. He wasn't built to dole out death. He was built to love, to care, to fix hurts. Clint knows--like he knows rain blesses--that Sam will wade through the dark waters and lead them out the other side. With how bone tired he is, with how much his heart hurts, Clint aches to find his other beta and curl up beneath his strong arms. He knows Sam will banish the cold in his veins like a warm summer day.

Right now, though, he cannot bring himself to move. Neither one of them seem to have the energy to go anywhere. Not with what bogs them down.
“We need to set it right Nat,” Clint whispers down into her hair, “We need to…we can’t…we need to set it right.”

Nodding her head, Natasha clings tighter to him and says like an oath, “We will.”

Clint himself has seen the horrors, the sheer destruction, that Natasha could bring about upon the world. He knows—with surety—that when Natasha set herself out to do something neither Heaven nor Hell could stop her. Clint hopes this is one of those times. He needs it to be one of those times for Lela.

“We will,” Clint agrees and falls to silence.

though neither of them move Clint knows they’d fix what they’ve broken. Though they don’t move in this moment, Clint knows they’ll break the cage they built around their girl. Though they don’t move, Clint will be damned if it stays up past tonight.

If their girl was meant to shake the world—fucking burn it down or flood it—then not even he or Natasha would keep her down. As he sees it, the world has tested her long enough to have readied itself for her to finally fly. Clint only hopes she lets him close enough to see it with his own two eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Oh wow. So apparently, when it's angst this shit just writes itself. Go figure. I'm a trash baby.

So I know, suppppper short chapter. Barely eight pages on Word. But here I was with it. I thought about leaving it be pieced to another update but I don't know when I'll be able to get the wrinkles ironed out of the other one. So I decided to post this just incase I hit a rut in life and am unable.

OKAY, it was not my intention to have everyone falling down into the pits of fucking despair over all this shit. But apparently every single one of these assholes is over emotional bastards. they are falling the fuck apart because Lela's not there. Which, seriously, what the hell is going on even!?!? But I swear I've got a reason for it. Pay attention to the bread crumbs I'm leaving y'all. This shit has been like two years in the making.

Hope no one is put off by what I'm posting! to get to the bright spring time flowers rains must come. I promise everythings gonna mellow out in a bit. Scouts Honor. Just got a few more key players to get through their angsty epiphanies.
I hope you guys enjoyed the update!
drop me a line and tell me what y'all thought!
-Ani

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!