

INDIGO VOSS

K. LEIGH

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**k. LEIGH**

## DEDICATION

To Trevor: I didn't know what unconditional love was until you came along. Thank you for seeing me for who I really am. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for being beautiful in the way that only truly kind people are. I will hold your hand until the end of time and beyond, for as long as I have one functional atom in my body, I'll be at your side.

To a special someone: I heard every word and felt everything. That's why this book is for both of us. Witness your demons so you can let them go. I love you more than you can feel. I hope you can feel it, someday.

To my cat: You're my hero, even though you'll never understand what that means.

Finally, this book is for all those who fell so hard they didn't know if they could get back up again. For the imperfect victims, the self-destroyers, the toxic-damned who took on everything raw and wrong without knowing it. I promise that you can escape and drop all you were forced to hold. It just takes time.

Breathe.

## CONTENT WARNING

The following story contains depictions of mental illness, manipulation, abuse, exploitation, bigotry, violence, eating disorders and drug use. Triggering (accurate) depictions include: psychosis, panic attacks, dissociation, alcoholism, gender dysphoria, autistic trauma, suicidality and more.

There are also explicit consensual sex scenes depicted.

Moreover, it includes marginalized groups such as sex workers, LGBT+ characters and abuse survivors struggling in a different time, on slightly AU earth, across two countries. Please keep in mind that there is a difference between sex trafficking and sex work while you read.

Consider this your warning for a work of fiction that exists as a spiritual companion to books like Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and television shows like Sam Esmail's *Mr. Robot*.

Finally, I ask that you read with empathy, as this story hopes to reach and heal at least two real people, and hopefully very many readers. I aim to give you what you haven't been taught exists: mercy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kira Leigh". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'K' and 'L'.

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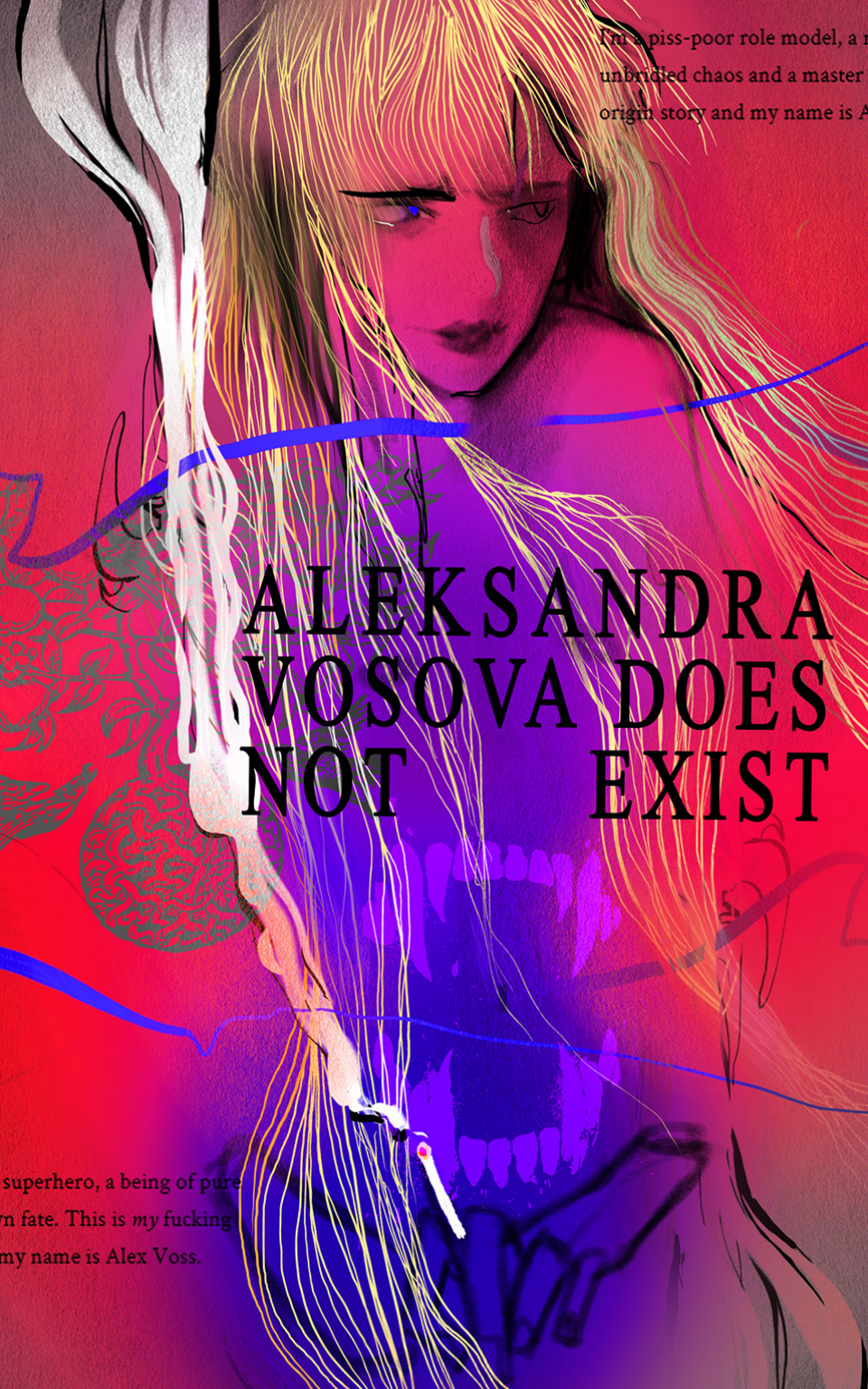
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Thank You For Reading  
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*PART ONE: NURTURE*

“People speak sometimes about the ‘bestial’ cruelty of man, but that is terribly unjust and offensive to beasts, no animal could ever be so cruel as a man, so artfully, so artistically cruel.”

— Fyodor Dostoyevsky



I'm a piss-poor role model, a  
unbridled chaos and a master  
origin story and my name is A

# ALEKSANDRA VOSOVA DOES NOT EXIST

superhero, a being of pure  
n fate. This is *my* fucking  
my name is Alex Voss.





## 1 / THE END

I am an invisible man. I was born an invisible woman. I will die in invisible chaos and the most important person in my life will not know why I let it happen. As a gun digs into my temple—held in the sweaty palm of the man I like least—his cigar stink stings my war-blue eyes and oil-slick pigeon wings obscure my face, let me tell you an invisible story.

Let me tell you the invisible story of a life deemed so unimportant it was pillaged from my near-birth to my death, all the way into the future of breathing machines and dictators with stolen faces. Let me tell you the invisible story of a life I deemed so very unimportant that *I* let death stick his fingers in my guts and dig around until he found a toy to mangle: my invisible soul.

This is my superhero origin story. We start where all things end, with time.



## 2 / THE BEGINNING

Time is a tricky little minx. One assumes it charts on a straight path, plodding ever forward and leaving our bodies in its wake with each shivering decade. But that's only part of it. Time lives in the body, what it remembers and what it *hates*. My body was not made for the pageantry of womanhood. Neither was it made to be weaponized against its will, as no one's body ever *should* be. Suffice to say, the fucked up knife with an indigo handle doesn't take well to an entitled palm. And that is how you make a human weapon; *acute pressure over time until a bomb is born*.

The first time I weaponized was when I was small. Red-lipped and feral, I was starved for self-defense. The second time involves bible-beating; both metaphorical and literal. The third? Well, we'll get to that soon. To make it simple: walking wounds like me defy much to survive all.

Despite my painful life, at least I had time on my side and defiance to protect me. That is, until my mind unraveled like a loom and led me to embrace an outcome where a bullet brains me on New York streets.

However, at the beginning of it all, time certainly wasn't on my side. I hadn't yet sheared the locks, learned to fight like dancing, ruled my body by my *own* design and didn't understand what it means to be unkillable.

We are in the distant past in a land you know distantly from gangster movies and propagandized textbooks. I am slight, weak, stubborn and paper-thin with paper skin. The dark circles beneath

my eyes paint me as a bloodless beast of burden. I am very pretty but awkward, as though my bones don't fit my meat. Nothing I wear is anything I own, and the very food I eat is someone else's property. As am I.

My room is filled with light. The sun blinds me. A cloud rescues me and hovers beyond the window; I wonder if someone owns that cloud. *They must.*

"Aleksandra Vosova." A woman with button-black eyes mutters my name like a curse. "You must watch that." She gestures at the small breaded sweet in my fist.

Saying nothing, I swallow what little saliva I have in my mouth, glare at the woman as my heart throttles like a motor, shove the whole confection in my cheek, and then she slaps me.

### 3 / STARVED

Tonight's thief is a silk-shirted beast stitched with geometric patterns. *Perfect geometry* and yet his hair is uneven. Devils always dress well but forget the scum layer that spies on them. *We all notice.*

His fist is in my long blond hair while I play dead. A mistake is made: I struggle when he shifts his weight. He stops to look down at my body, which they always do. His eyes gouge my navel, linger on my hips and stab my thighs. When he gorges himself on my face something in my chest snaps. *It's in the eyes, I think.*

It's the sort of glance a man gives when leaning too-far out of the passenger seat of a vehicle, braising the backsides of people who don't know he exists until they feel the hair on their necks stand up. It's the sort of glance a man gives a hunk of marbled steak he covets, drools for and whines at for no other reason than it's *there*. It's the sort of dog-hungry look I want to pluck from his skull and pop wetly in my *fucking* fists.

My teeth are in his throat. I tear with everything I have as he hollers out foamy pink screams. Scarlet drips over my face, leaks into my gold hair, infects my bird bones and dip-dyes my soul. Like a hunting dog crushing a pheasant, I latch on, ride out the flood of hot human paint and don't loose my jaws until he's good and *fucking dead*.

Sitting on the bed that isn't and will never be my own, in clothes that aren't and will never be my own, in a body that has never and will someday be my own, I'm catatonic. A violently

stuffed vessel, I finally burst apart at the seams and exploded a grown man's esophagus.

Flickering back to life, my blue eyes trail across the room. The black-eyed woman is here haunting me, as she always does. She curses at me, as she always does. She raises her fist above her head to strike me, as she always does. I snatch her fist and ram my forehead into her nose, like I *never* do.

Possessed by defiance, I war against other body thieves who swarm in plague-waves to descend upon me—as if they'd need a small army to subdue something as frail as I am.

"Useless girl!" a single man roars, clamoring to pin down my jeering legs. My wings beat hard enough to bruise as the devils are surprised that I'm not made of glass. I spit blood in one's face, and for that I'm knocked out cold with just one thick punch.

When I wake, I notice I've been cleaned and dressed in a taupe slip with frayed edges. Bruises from my little war linger up my arms, now bound at the wrists. I can still taste the man's hot metal in my mouth.

The black-eyed woman peers at me as I rouse, blond locks muddying her shape. "Food," I command, flicking my head to loose my bangs and drill my eyes into the woman's skull, willing her buttons to pop.

She snorts and drops an empty dish on the floor with a clatter. I won't be fed until I behave. I will behave in order to survive. *Until I won't, in order to truly live.*

#### 4 / BEATEN

It's a great deal of time after my first war and I still don't have mastery over anything useful. I'm taller now, but not by much. Mother nature keeps me small to make it easier to poke me full of holes like stabbing a fucking bug in a jar. *If I don't behave, I might even be crushed.*

After the first fight, I've behaved in order to survive. I may have even enjoyed behaving depending on how I've been treated. Today is one such day. An attractive man wraps his arms around my body and pulls me to sit on his lap. He smells like green things I don't have names for. Maybe he enjoys spending time in nature, which I remember doing in my watercolor-past where birds ink a canvas of sky.

"I was told ya were a biter," he says in a foreign language, chuckling into my back. "Butcha don't seem all tha' bad." He places not-unwanted kisses on my shoulder.

His words are untenable, but his warm mouth explains the rest. I don't hate their mellow, fernsome feeling. "This, I have never done," I admit, as he holds me closer. "Strange?" I ask, placing my hands on his arms to guide his flat palms against my chest. *I've never been held like this before.*

"What, bitin' people?" He chuckles into my hair and twists me around to face him. He's very handsome and not unkind. In fact, he's the only one who ever made sure I enjoyed myself. *I don't even know his name.*

"No." I shake my head, suffering a half-smile. "A feeling." My



thoughts gurgle foolishly, which makes me turn away. He catches my fingers, drawing me back to the sun of his arms.

My eyes hitch as I scan this tender stranger. He's as tall as an oak with tanned skin, expressive brows and a broad smile. Later, I'll meet someone not unlike him and fall in love; I'll file him away as a secret. Much later than that, I will love a similar man and he will love me like a sibling. In the distant future, I will distort a spaceship to reincarnate the third man. I'll say it's because humanity needs his heroism, but that's a lie. *I need his heroism and so I imprint him wherever my ghost lives. Yes, even in the future. Maybe even in your world, too.*

The stranger smiles. "You mean...you've never?" He kisses my chest as I smile and don't understand him. Then, he places his hands on the small of my back where eyes will someday live. Eyes that will shame me and make me hate this closeness. *I don't hate it now.*

"N-no." I chuckle. In his arms alone, I'm a piece of abstract art to marvel at, not something to cut into chunks and swallow. *Why does he study a nobody like me? Why would anyone?*

"Didja enjoy it?" he asks expectantly. This must be new and unusual to him. Impressing me is also new; *nobody ever wags their tail for a bit of stale vatrushka.*

"Yes. Good. Unusual. Usually," I mumble, worrying my lips. "Treated difference—different-ly. Feels different." He studies me from below the mounds of flesh on my chest. Nonsense words form dark shapes in my mouth as I study him back.

"The parts...feel wrong," I explain, placing my palm to my breast. I hesitate, then curl my fingers off and away, as if unspooling a knot.

"Feels off sometimes, yeh?" he asks.

Draping my arms around his shoulders, I gaze into his eyes. "Yes. All off."

My body is a flesh-prison and I'm its poltergeist. No part of me fits; not the words I'm given to call myself, nor what I have that makes money *I never* get to fucking see. This feeling was there *before* I was ensnared, shoved into a wooden box and cut up for money. *I just didn't have the language for it. I still don't.*

"I am haunting this. I will tell you, maybe," I begin, briefly kissing this kind stranger's ear. "I had friend. We play by river, you know," I trail on, gesturing out the window, leaving my other

hand to nestle near the nook of his neck. “Younger, we were like brothers—” My sentence is sliced with a grimace.

When he kisses my ear and places his hand on my back again, something unfurls in me. Maybe I’ll try to talk to someone who seems like they want to listen. In later years, this openness will be beaten out of me as everything always fucking is. Much later than that, someone smart will help me find it for one single night, and after that it’ll slip through my fingers when a handsome bastard breaks my heart hard enough to make me killable. That’s the sad script of my life. *I never get to keep anything good for very long.*

“I didn’t understand different—difference,” I correct myself. “But with time, he sees difference in me. Treats me different-ly,” I ramble as the man in my arms sits back on the bed to scan my face.

“I am ghost, I think,” I say softly. “Haunting toy I do not own. Do not want.” My fingers tap on his skin as my words traipse into native umber-syllables. *The kind stranger won’t understand.*

“I am off.” My words paddle back to English. “Nothing fits.” I pause, slicking my lower lip with my tongue. “But with you I did not haunt.”

My mouth goes dry as my hands drop to dangle limp at my sides. My words could mean anything; I’m talking about what it is I do, or maybe what it feels like, or maybe what it is to be a fucking object. Luckily, this archetype always wants to listen, but that doesn’t mean they can always hear it. Even in my native language, so few people listen. Every language I’ve learned is for other people’s fucking benefit and they translate nearly nothing. *It’s no wonder I’m broken.*

Silence.

This stranger spots spies in my severe brows, sharp jaw and half-cut smile. He hunts my lapsed phrases, dips into the whitespace between each postured breath and reads the constellation of my awkward limbs.

Raising an arm, he threads his fingers in my hair and sifts through my long blond leash. “Y’know,” he murmurs, “I think you’d look fetching witha bob.” He pauses to look into my eyes. “We ‘ave some o’ yer lot.” He wraps his arms around me to sweep me into the air, then sets me on my feet. “Noticed it when I walked in,” he explains.

*I don’t know what ‘it’ is.*

He presses his lips to my brow. "Kinda hard to miss, innit?" He speaks soft sounds into my paper skin.

"Explain more," I command, stepping back. I search for something unsaid, unknown, unseen, invisible and only conjured in the mangled cry of a bird who flies uselessly on wax wings they were never born to use.

"S'way ya move, mate." He kisses my cheek. "S'way ya speak. Kinda like one of me mates back home. Like he's stuffed with feathers n' all, but could bite yer 'ead off in a flash." He pulls back and snaps his fingers. "Like that."

The blue-eyed doll blinks wildly; I am Aleksandra's vicious confusion.

"T'be honest, you even look a bit like 'im," he reveals, looking away as if his own words would wound him.

I snort. "You choose me because I look like friend stuffed with feather?" When he laughs, I cock a half-grin then continue. "Ridiculous."

"Life's ridiculous, mate. And I think ya'd look ridiculously fetchin'..." He turns me around, then places his hand above my rear to steer me to the vanity. Clutching my hair, he pulls the long locks behind my head so only my bangs remain. "Jus' like this. Yeh?"

My eyes skim the smudged mirror as something like violets blooms within me. An anemic little bird squawks at the moon and this stranger heard its impossible language. *He's a fucking bird whisperer!*

I fumble for the drawer near my hip, rip out a pair of shiny silver scissors, slam the drawer shut and face him. "Show me," I command, holding up the scissors in my palm.

The man smirks and shakes his head. "Right now?" he snorts. "Right now. Show me."

---

A not-thief is cutting my biggest selling point: long, fine, yellow-gold hair that curls when the damp clings inside my cage. Hair that men love to yank me around by. Hair I'm forced to wear by the button-eyed woman who slathers my dark locks in chemicals. Goldilocks, with her bowl of gruel in a dog's dish. Goldilocks, punished because 'she' dared to eat 'her' own fucking porridge.

Goldilocks, devoured by scavengers who imagine themselves proud, noble men in any other fucking circumstance. *Beasts, all of them. Vultures, scavengers, thieves.* This man is nothing like them.

Slivers of gold scatter like bodies in war across sheets of blue. Blue, but not like heaven. This is the blue of space. It's dark, deep, purple and alien. I'm afforded this color because it's advantageous for displaying my corpse. It matches the marbles in my skull.

He sweeps my shoulders free, then guides me back to the mirror. "All set, mate," he says. His expression is open skies, verdant green fields and mornings where nothing hurts.

"What do ya think?" he murmurs heat across my ear.

I flick my fingers over the uneven ends. He's all but cleaved it off, leaving starts and stops like all my broken sentences. It's how a child might cut their own hair in all its messy charm.

"Aw mate, ya hate it somethin' fierce, yeh?"

I twist around in a flash and bite into his lower lip. Startled, he's thrown off balance and stumbles oafishly. I push him to the bed and straddle his lap. He's lying in a sea of blue surrounded by gold clippings. I'm backed by a pocked ceiling with my face framed in an awkward haircut.

"No," I comfort him, a devilish grin tugging at my mouth. "Perfect."

Soaking him into my skin is an act of gratitude and his warm arms are a response. He smells like heat-kissed landscapes, feels like real tenderness and he's given me something. Something I don't understand, something that feels like seeing myself for the first time, something like truly *fucking* living and he's *holding* me.

Knowing only one way to thank him, I kiss his shoulder and reach between us to grasp him in my fist. He makes a stunted sound as I spread fire between his thighs with a flick of my thumb.

"J-just' like I said," he stammers as my hand quickens. "Can bite yer 'ead off in ahh—"

"Time up soon," I breathe into his skin. "Let me give." My words are lost in a delicious red mark I leave on his throat: *Let me give you something others take from me.*

Raising myself up, I spread myself over his lap. He drifts his knuckles over my hip and grasps my sides. Grinning awkwardly, I tilt back, wrap my fingers around his length and nestle his sex against mine. As I press down, he slides inside of me and I let gravity do the rest.

We settle, joined together, breathing and so very vulnerable. Romance isn't something I know, but he gives it to me by threading our hands, even as the clock ticks. With a quirked brow, I roll my hips just once. A sinful half-smile blooms as I make his eyes flutter and render him mute.

Most of them are speechless when I stop being a corpse, but he's not like most of them. He's not like most of them when I milk his cock with short, slight, bursts. He's not like most of them when he pulls me down to twine his fingers in my lacerated hair as I ride him. He's not like most of them when he slaps my ass. He's not different because he lets me fuck him into the bed while the springs whine. He's different because he wants to enjoy this feeling *with* me.

As I draw out our time together, we're soon covered in the remnants of my gold massacre. Sweat clings to our limbs as we chase the rush of pleasure, together. *I didn't know it could feel this soft.*

My cheeks flush as he places his hand to my chest to feel my trembling heartbeat. When he grasps me for a kiss, the pleasure in my gut flutters like a million wings, screws my eyes shut and pulls slight, soft moans from my mouth. He feeds on them, breaths shared as my brows twist and I ache beyond reason. *I didn't know it could be this warm.*

After enough heady kisses, he decouples and turns me as if in a dance. I chuckle as he splays his hand to the center of my chest, pulls me back to meet him and rests his mouth to my ear. Breathing against me, he slides the head of his slick cock just barely inside. Gentle, romantic, fluid, vulnerable, beautiful hot-white heat; the space between my legs burns. Kissing my ear, he waits for an answer I won't speak plainly. A murmur ricochets from my abdomen and drips from my lips. *There's your fucking answer, bird-whisperer.*

He wraps one arm around my waist and lightly grasps my throat as he pushes inside. With every centimeter I respond in half-gasps. My legs shake as he pulses inside of me, but not from pain. It's pleasure that parts my lips and floods hot blood to my face. *I didn't know.*

I'm not a poltergeist haunting my brittle body as he fills me to the hilt. I am not somewhere else frozen in time as he slaps against me and pulls from me throbbing vowels. I'm not separated from

this skin. *It's mine. It belongs to me.*

"You are not," I gasp out. He makes speech difficult by repeatedly pounding my backside. "Wayward." I strike my hand to the headboard to level myself. "Virgin."

"Issat whatcha thought?" he asks, then swiftly snatches my hips to pin me to the bed, which makes me laugh into the sheets. I may have even snorted.

He kisses my shoulders, then raises himself to hook his legs under mine, pressing against me deliciously. A sunrise smile spreads across my face as he starts up again. The heat is impossible.

"Y-yes," I admit with a breathy laugh. "Staring at my painting." A ship would crack under the pressure between my thighs.

Concocting a devious thought, I blurt out, "Is because I look like feather-man?" My words make him press my head into the pillows playfully. "You imagine him?" I ask as his face burns into my back.

"What would he say?" The sound of our fucking echoes against the walls, but he says nothing. Nothing at all.

Tilting back, he listens to what my body says, and gives me leverage. I snake my hand between my thighs, twist my fingers inside myself and imagine my pleasure takes a different shape. A shape I never knew I could have. A shape that aches in an unseen, unreachable place that I can only fumble at.

"Tell me," I command, which makes his thrusts quicken. I don't care if he imagines I'm the friend he secretly wants to fuck and love and hold and kiss. I never get to have this. *I never get to fucking have anything like this.*

"Put your back into it, Thomas," he stammers in an accent not unlike my own.

I cackle—I can't help it. "Put your back into it, Thomas," I mimic his foreign words and snicker myself stupid in between obscene sounds. Thomas must approve, because his crashing grows more erratic.

Pleasure pools in a place my hand can't reach as he holds me tight. My face burns, every brush against my erect flesh shoots lightning through my groin. I'm impossibly warm, my thighs drip and my fingers can't keep up with the spasms made by the hot-running blood this stranger boils within my very fucking veins. I still my hand to stave off small quakes. *I want this to last.*

Thomas groans until hoarse and slams his hips against me. Hot liquid coats my insides. He cloisters my body in his arms and jams himself into me at the base. My entire pelvis seizes with the blood-rushed feeling of my heartbeat. I flick my fingers, send a bolt of nuclear heat up my spine, clench down, tip the explosion into a scalding throb and screw my eyes shut as my body throws itself into a euphoria strong enough to boil an entire ocean to nothing but seabed. *Holy—*

“Блядь—” I groan as I ride out one of the best orgasms I’ll ever have in my life. I remember this vividly. I imagine that this is what love must feel like. It’s a pattern I’ll cement so hard that the bowl of my mind (attached to my crotch) sieves into space because I’m *stupid*.

“Ah, mate,” Thomas whispers, pulling out slowly for my comfort, “that was—” I wish he’d been able to finish his sentence. I wish to this very day we’d had even just one moment more together. Thomas falls into his clothes and is rushed out immediately. I don’t even get to say goodbye as the door smacks his ass on the way out and I only just turn to see it.

He ran over time and a theft was starting far too soon. Too soon to get cleaned up, too soon for really anything at all. My gold hair is all over the bed, my shorn locks are ghastly, I am the worst creature in the world, and I’ve ruined absolutely fucking everything for daring to have any fucking fun at all. *No fun, never any fun. Never.*

At least that’s what the button-eyed woman tells me with a glare cold enough to freeze anyone else’s blood as she looms in the doorway.

Like a sated feline, I stretch on the bed and look up at her. She gawks down at me like I very much killed her entire family by setting her house on fire. All I can do is laugh in that joyous post-coitus cackle I’d come to learn in later years is usual of incredible sex.

Reaching across the end-table makes me wince with soreness. I fumble for the cigarettes and shiny silver lighter I’d stolen from an impotent devil and proceed to smoke in her face.

The woman glares. *She should take a fucking Polaroid.* She stalks forward, snags my hair in her fist, twists me around and yanks me from the cigarette I’m trying desperately to place at my lips. Even as she drags me about like a stubborn mule, I chase the damned

thing.

“What have you done?!” she screeches.

I cackle ferociously, rip myself away and scamper back as she aims to strike me. Rolling around the gold-covered bed, I half-fall off of it, then half-land with a half-snort.

She screams at me in whatever words she can find as I croon into full hysterics. My laughter stops when she slaps the cigarette out of my hand and beats the side of my head with a book. A bible, left in my room for God knows what fucking reason, thwacks my skull.

On my knees, holding my head in one hand, I look up at this woman who I *suppose* I should consider my guardian. Truly, she is a devil, with small black eyes and an even blacker heart.

Usually, my expression would be vacant. Even after small wars, my resolve never lasts for very long. This time, my bright blue gaze is not vacant. I’m not catatonic in rage, nor am I split from my body and hovering. I am not a poltergeist in my skin. I’m not going to haunt myself any fucking longer for as long as I *fucking* live. This is a battle of wills I have never won—I reach for the discarded cigarette as we lock eyes—until now.

She raises the book to smite me. I launch up to drive the cigarette into her button-eye. The smell of burning flesh licks the air as she screams. Wrenching my hands in her brown hair, I jerk her head back and dig the smoldering paper into her wet socket with all my might.

Her skin immolates and I feel no sympathy for her sizzling screams. She will never again lay a hand on me for as long as I survive under her roof.





## 5 / TIME

Survivalism grinds time to a halt. Precarious and alone, those like me hide in the forests of our minds, for that's all we have. As I'm only ever surviving in this fucking prison, I freeze subjective time without knowing it. *Without knowing I can do far more.*

I am meat lying on a mattress on top of my blindingly blue sheets. A freshly killed corpse stops nothing because men like to imagine they've murdered me. Baring my fangs and dying is erotic for men who need death to feel something. I could pity them but the knife prefers to dabble in backbiting. *I will never not prefer it.*

I'm elsewhere. Plucked from one of few good memories, a river bleeds past my eyelids. Thomas is there, with bright eyes to match his smile. He doesn't love me, but I imagine he does under a blush-colored sky. I imagine I'm taller with broad shoulders and none of the careless weight on my chest. I imagine we're catching little fish in our hands as he's babbling like a brook about nothing and everything. I imagine the sun is setting and painting his skin in warm colors.

The man on top of me twists me over, which makes my eye twitch. The coral sun coats the entire sky in golden-orange ink. Reaching up to the heavens, my leg is jacked above my head. Even in all this hell, I draw a scene within my mind of a time where I will be *loved*. Maybe loved by a man like Thomas. Maybe loved by a woman. Maybe loved by anyone at all, really. I imagine *possibilities* of lush kisses beneath leaflets, sunrises in lemon-yellow,

rushing water and a sea of a thousand beautiful birds above me. Birds that dot a clear blue sky where there's no violet-blue war, no theft and nothing hurts.

I'm twisted around again and my grasp on time falters. I drag my searing blue eyes over my robber's mug. My soul rejoins my body as a feral grin splits my face. "If you lift my fucking leg any higher I'm going to gut you like a fish and dump you in the *fucking* river."

The man lets my leg lax. Bringing it down comfortably, I resume concocting something better than all this. There has to be something better than all this. There has to be. *There just fucking has to be.*

I imagine maybe many people at the river. Maybe many people enjoy sweets, laugh, catch little fish and spend warm moments together. Maybe many people have a party. I've never been to a party. Maybe many people celebrate a special day—what's the most special day? *Is there a holiday to celebrate living?*

There's a quaint couple kissing, embraced by music; music that I must invent because I rarely get to listen to anything outside of what I hear through the walls; walls of wood that cage me as I paint a scene of eating fruit. The sweet-sour citrus drips down my chin. It's then that I realize what's being done to me. Too distracted to paint a prettier picture, my mind-body dissolves into the inky shadows of my skull. The clock stops, my corpse rots and nobody who *could* care or make a fucking difference gives a fuck.

I am an invisible woman, an invisible person, an invisible man. I'm a ghost, but not for long. I will spare you the details of further vanishings in this clump of frames. I just wanted to show you where the rage comes from—that matters, I think. Or maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe I've never fucking mattered. Maybe that's the depression using my mouth to speak.

*The depression that invited Boris' bullet in to kill me dead, in cold blood, on colder asphalt with no one who could care anywhere in sight.*

While I die in the present as a too-thin shadow against blood-splattered bricks, I know now that depression *always* lies. We must choose to live because it is a lying, agency-stealing thing. I wish I'd learned that lesson on Earth and not on a fucking absurdist spaceship in the future. And why the fuck would I get a chance to learn it then, *anyways?* *Who would ever care to help me learn what I never could?*

God isn't real, but there must be *some* cosmic dickhead who took sympathy on me in order to give me another chance at all this. Maybe in a way it gave *itself* a chance by letting me lord over a space that belonged only to me, in a body that could do *anything*. Why else would I be given that if not because something *else* fucking needed it? *I am given very little.*

I look at the space beyond and see a thing that hides between the letters. In an umber shadow, it glimmers in a sea of stars. I reach out my hand to touch the wet shadow. When I pull back, my palm is stained blue.

*Do you cry for me? Or do you cry because you wish someone else would?*



## 6 / PISTOLED

Today's thief looks rather important. To test just how important he is, I dig my hand into his pants pocket and steal his expensive cigarettes. As I pull one from the pack with my teeth, he marvels at me like one would a puddling butterfly. Important enough *not* to vibrate with machismo at my antics, here for a reason *other* than robbery and clever enough to know I'm unpredictable. Only the truly powerful have no reason to crush the discarded. Only the truly clever are smart enough to see the *something* beneath my skin. I steal his cigarettes without complaint, sup ephemeral blood and feel that *something* writhe.

Eventually, the *something* that I am must go *somewhere*. Those unlike me shut down, let it cake in the limbs like clay and atrophy. Those *not* unlike me become reactors primed on fucked-up actions they had no way of cleverly avoiding. Despite being *very* fucking clever, I will eventually react hard enough to ruin my life. That's the script and design that the clever thief sees. Stilled, he watches me move, translates my tells and grows more clever by the second.

The way I hold my head perfectly still as I flick my gaze to this expensively dressed stranger is a tell. The way I tilt my chin up as though he's beneath me is a tell. The way I burn his cigarettes and wield his lighter as he darts his eyes over my blood-sucking body is a tell.

I take a step forward as he eyes my slack right hand. My fingers curl around his shiny lighter. *I want to burn his fucking face off.*

His cocked eyebrow tells me he knows.

"Do they know what you are?" he asks.

"Do you?" I reply, shifting my weight to my hip. I cross my arms as smoke from my nose rises to the ceiling in a thick gray ribbon.

The clever thief mulls his mouth with his hand, then stands and steps around me like a circling dog. He strikes out a fist at my naked ribs, time twists as I do, my foot slides back, I lock his arm in place, and his silver lighter clatters to the floor. *I didn't even move my head.*

"A natural, aren't you, little bird?" he asks. I let his fist go, then pluck the cigarette from between my teeth to flick ash.

"A natural at what?" I ask, eyeing the expensive-looking demon.

"Why do you think they keep you if you always cause so much trouble?" he asks, looking me over. *He eyes me like I'm a viper.* My smile is criminal.

"Not sure," I reply, inhaling smoke. "Maybe it's because I'm very fucking pretty."

He laughs, shakes his head and dares to walk toward me. Foolishly, he places his gloved hand to my clenched snake-jaw.

"That, and they're afraid," he says simply. He isn't afraid, it seems, but he *is* cautious. He continues with a smirk. "You'd do too much damage on your way out. Yet you bring in too much money." He pauses to swallow words he cleverly keeps from me. "It's a no-win situation, little bird."

"I'm not sure I like that nickname." I breathe smoke before recoiling from him. His hand hangs in the air for a moment before he places it at his side, then fumbles for something in his tailored jacket.

The glint of gummental begs me to stare at his palm. Magnetized, I'm drawn to it. He holds up the weapon, the cuff of his suit sliding as he moves. *Stars, snakes and other things I can't name.* *What are you?*

"Do you know why I'm here?" he asks.

I shake my head and continue glaring at the gun. He grabs my hand, curls my fist around the weapon and steps back. I hold the pistol loosely as if I'd have to warm it up to make it work. I study it like an artifact.

"Do you remember tearing out a man's throat?" I nod at his

question absently, gorging myself on the details of his weapon. *I've seen many men with guns, I've heard copious gunfire and I've always wanted to be the one to litter the air with metal.* I linger on the weight of it, hoping it's loaded. I aim it at the clever client's head.

He smiles, then holds up his hands. I pull the trigger. Nothing happens. I gawk at the gun, then try again. *Nothing.* I drop my arm with a sneer as he bolts laughter from guts that deserve gunfire.

"We've been keeping an eye on you." He pauses to glance at the far corner of the room. "Boris wants to move you to a higher-end clientele who'd be interested in how much you can take." His words are sour. "Because he thinks you can handle it."

I cock an eyebrow. *He can fucking try.*

"I have a different idea," he says, prying the gun from my reluctant fist and placing it on the bed. He turns quickly and snatches me by the hair. The cigarette falls from my lips to the floor. I note it, then flick my eyes to the well-dressed devil's face.

"Tell me what you'd do if I tried to strangle you," he says.

My eyelid twitches before I speak. "I'd fall to the ground with you, brace the weight on my arms as I shove my knee in your groin and reach for the cigarette and lighter."

"Then what would you do?" he asks while my fingers play across the vanity at my back.

"Then I'd cozy up nice and sweet into your arms and offer you a fucking smoke." I wrench the drawer open, rip free the silver scissors and stab at him. He blocks and strikes me across the face, sending both me and the scissors clattering.

Pressed against the vanity, I make myself a static object. I watch him as he stoops, plucks the scissors from the wood and stands. He places them on the bed and gives me a rare smile; earnest and mild.

"Training starts today. I'm your new regular. Every day." He fumbles for his carton on the vanity at my side and continues. "This time. I've paid that awful woman in advance." He stoops, grabs his lighter and lights up a cigarette.

My eyes dart as he smokes. "Why are you doing this?" I hiss, slinking low to the floor to reach for my fallen comrade and shove it between my teeth.

When I stand, he flicks his lighter, bathes my face in orange and I inhale. *This clever thief is rarer than Thomas.* He's a boon in a



sea of absolutely fucking *nothing* but the cities of my body robbed for profit that I'll never get to fucking see. *I need to know why.*

"I'm sorry." He flips the lighter closed, steps back, smokes for a moment and rolls his thoughts in his skull before he speaks again. "I'm sorry that I let them take you."

My eyes widen as I glare at a man I don't recognize. He isn't remarkable, nor is he arresting. He's average in every single way besides cleverness.

When he tosses me a boyish grin, something tugs at the back of my skull, settles itself in and twists its fucking fingers behind my eyes to show me moving pictures.

The river, the friend, the birds overhead, the yellow sunrise and pink sunset, downy clouds that brush the blue of the sky, the quivering fish in my palms, the way he treated me differently when I stopped looking like he did. Every single bittersweet note stings behind my eyelids. I can't escape them; they fill my mind with the only time I wasn't made into something I'm not. *Even then, I was mutating against my will.*

"I didn't know what was happening, little bird. You always loved watching them fly. I thought you'd remember me from that... I thought you'd remember," he confesses as his smile evaporates into the solemn ink of pain.

My lips part.

"I can't just *buy* you. It doesn't work like that." He gestures with his cigarette. "Buy your freedom. Buy you out of this cage. And certainly, I can't mistress a slave to set her free."

"Тыр..." I breathe out. My heart fills with putrid blood as it pummels my ribcage, my guts dissolve, bile floods my throat, I sag against the vanity and take a jittery inhale to choke the reel of memories from my eyes.

"But if you're very useful," he continues, solemn and sincere. "If you're very useful and very good at this, you can make a case. I brought the option to the table. Mind you, this has never happened." Tyr smokes and gives me a conflicted smile. "But Boris said he might entertain it. He finds you entertaining."

"Entertain *what*?" I bolt through my smokescreen as water leaks down my face without my consent.

"The girl we know, that no one knows but us, could possibly be the man—the prince—that everyone knows."

Instinctively, I jerk forward, a butchered marionette thwart-

ed by time's trauma with every step. Every memory of the only point in my life when I wasn't used, abused, chewed up, broken, battered and beaten turns my steps to quicksand. I force myself to reach him in a sea of tar-fucked *nothing*.

"And you'll teach me to fight. To shoot the gun. To *kill*." I speak in absolutes against a backdrop of obsidian hell.

"Yes," he says as his eyes dart across my own.

"But, *why*? Why now?" My fists clench at my sides. "Why after all this time? Why now?!" His silence is deafened by my shaking, war-filled body. "And m-my parents?" My voice grows shrill. "Tyr—where are they? What *fucking* happened?!"

Curling my fingers in my hair, my heart jacks into my throat and I crumple to my knees. *It all deserves to fucking roast*. I want to burn this one alive and crawl back in time to meet my makers and rip their jaws open on the pavement with my heel on their fucking *skulls*.

I've reached the point where the *something* of trauma evolves into a nuclear-grade weapon. Usually, it doesn't atrophy like clay, for me at least. It reacts in an explosion that, if directed, can pull off impossible feats. This time, that feat is feeling real pain. I twist like a snake, but Tyr's arms come out to catch my broken wings before I molt feathers for scales.

Folding into his body, I can do nothing but scream. He holds me as I wail at the loss of the child I was. I mourn, sob and dig my fingers into my once-friend's too-expensive jacket. Tyr can do nothing but haunt himself for what feels like hours as I break apart in his hands.

After a while of heavy silence spent sitting on my indigo platter, the tears finally subside. His arm is draped along my shoulders as he whispers why I was never rescued: *my parents loved me less than they loved surviving*. I can't be sure if this is the truth, but he seems earnest and his cleverness is comforting.

"Alright." I shudder, smearing my hands over my face. More tears threaten to fall but I hold them hostage.

"I want to make one thing painfully clear before we try to change my fate," I rattle, turning to face the man who was once a boy. "Don't ever treat me like a lost little girl or I'll *fucking* kill you."

These are my terms—this is not a becoming-thing or an escaping-thing. This is who and *what* I am and I'm fucking accepting it.

I accept the offer to become the little bird, the would-be prince, the man everyone knows and something mostly unkillable. I accept my new destiny, a destiny where I'll someday free other little birds who never asked to be what they were made into. I will play at being a hero but only succeed at being a villain. I will find friends—better fucking friends than this one—and I'll use them to help me do *and* survive the impossible.

After all that, I will die because the king I used to play hero destroyed my heart. I will die because my trauma did, in fact, atrophy into my very fucking bones over countless decades. *It let the wrong devil dwell inside me.*

Afterwards, I will be found completely frozen in the river my body was dumped into, ice-capped in a blizzard. I will be found and experimented on—my Earth is not quite like your own—and even in death I will be fucking stolen from. Yet, this will allow me thousands of years in the future to do this all again as a machine of war.

And I *will* do it all again in every dimension I'm born within. I'm born within many, like a necessary virus. You've no doubt ignorantly passed my pestilent specter in the streets, underestimated what I am and walked the other way. This is the mistake of man: missing the manifestation of a promised *something*, he picks up the pieces of his empire from between *my* fucking teeth. That's the lesson never learned: *Me.*

I'm the promise of vengeance in a blood-stained smile, an indigo creature stuffed to the breaking point and forced to explode everything around me to survive. I'm a piss-poor role model, a necessary lesson, a survivor, a warrior, a being of pure unbridled chaos and a master of my own fate.

This is *my* fucking origin story and my name is Aleksandra Vosova—my name is Alex Voss.



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## *ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

K. Leigh is a 35-year-old once-painter, sometimes-freelancer, forever-artist living in Providence, RI. They write hopefultragic stories full of funny, horrible characters, in various genres.

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