



# Feral Creed

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

**Description:** Lotus and her mates take shelter on a Polloi compound, where they must navigate the matriarchal hierarchy that demands alphas should be seen and not heard, and that omegas command.

An alpha's desire is to his omega. She helps him best by having him serve her whims.

All of which might be fine, if they could just get their bonding bites and secure the pack. However, they have the evil scientist Dr. Acker locked in their basement, and she keeps triggering the alphas' deadly training to kill omegas.

They should just kill Dr. Acker.

They should just bite Lotus.

They should just give in to their instincts.

But when they do, everything changes.

Contains: dub con, blood play, Knight's-brand-of-sweet-is-psycho, feral violence, biting frenzies, discussion of cult-like religions, thoughtful discussions about polyamory versus monogamy, trauma healing, heat, nesting, and all the feels.

[Read less](#)

**Total Pages (Source):** 107

1

calix

“I’M TELLING YOU,” I say as I walk down the hallway of the Cedar Falls facility, speaking to Tammy, “it was food poisoning or something. You should have let me come back in. I didn’t even throw up again. Total waste of a day.”

Tammy is my immediate supervisor, and she’s dressed the way everyone is who works in this part of Cedar Falls, in scrubs with a white lab coat. People know that there’s an experimental wing doing cutting edge medical work on designations in the bottom levels of Cedar Falls. But it’s not common knowledge that alphas and omegas who’ve been damaged by the drugs that Cedar Falls administers are here, lab rats to be experimented on this way, treated like animals, locked away from the world.

“Better safe than sorry, Cal,” says Tammy. “I made that call, and I’d make it again. But I’m glad that you’re feeling better today.”

“Me too,” I say. I had to get up at the ass crack of dawn to drive all the way down here from the compound where my pack is staying in upstate New York. My pack? They’re all lab rats from this place who’ve been healed by... Goddess, we don’t even know what? The magical power of a scent match? Whateverthe case, weeks ago, they were all too feral to speak words or remember their names. Now, they’re fine.

“Yeah, I’m glad I’m feeling better, too,” I say. “Like I’m saying, I could have come back in yesterday.”

“It’s cute that you’re trying to be such a loyal martyr here, but I don’t need that from you,” says Tammy. “This is a job, not a calling.” She sighs.

Anyway, I wasn’t sick yesterday. I was just pretending to be sick so that I could get out of working. And I only did that because I had to help my mate Knight escape with Dr. Acker, who’s the evil science-bitch who turned some of my mates into killing machines.

“I like that,” I say, nodding. “A job, not a calling.”

“I think there’s this expectation sometimes, with people you work for, to make things into something mystical when it’s just an exchange of skills for monetary compensation,” says Tammy. “And there’s really nothing worse than that sort of expectation on a day like today.”

“Right,” I say. “Any idea what happened to Dr. Acker?”

“It’s like she dropped off the face of the planet,” says Tammy. “Coltrain’s losing his mind.”

“Yeah, what do you think?” I say. “About the rumor that they’re fucking?”

Tammy raises her eyebrows. “Well, I hadn’t heard that rumor, but it explains a lot.”

“Doesn’t it, though?” I say.

“She’s dead,” says Tammy in a low voice, a final voice.

“Well, we don’t know that,” I say. Of course, I actually do know that she is alive, in the basement of the punishment house on the compound where we’re staying, and that she’s also a massive bite block. If it weren’t for Dr. Fucking Acker, I’d have a

life bond with my pack right now, but that didn't happen. Thanks so much, lady.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," says Tammy. "What she did to those alphas, it's unnatural and disturbing. And it's karma in a way. She taught them to kill women, and they kill her? I don't know. I'm not saying she deserved it. No one deserves that. But..."

"Hey, she could be alive," I say. "Maybe she programmed something into those hounds, so that they can't actually murder her. Some safe word or something."

Tammy stops walking and eyes me. "Can she do that?"

I mean, I happen to know that the answer is yes to this question, too. It was such a fucking weird night last night.

I shrug. "We really don't know what she did with them."

"True," says Tammy. "We don't. Well, here's the drill today, Cal. The omegas are nervous and they can tell something's off. Probably because we kept everyone inside yesterday, and you know how much they enjoy their time outside in the gardens."

"Yeah," I say. People need to see the sky and the natural world. It's one of the things that's so debilitating about prison, after all. The feral alphas and omegas seem to need nature even more, though. It's like they're nothing but animal instinct, and they are very soothed by trees and grass and stuff. "Well, I can imagine they're very off-kilter today."

"They are," she said. "You're so good at soothing them, though, so if you can work your magic, that would be amazing."

It's not magic. It's my alpha scent. But yeah, noted, I can do that, even though I don't

even know why I'm at work. I was pretty sure, yesterday, after I helped my mate steal Acker out of this place, that I would quit forever.

But then, last night happened, and here I am instead, back to the grind. We simply aren't sure whether my having access to this place is going to be helpful for us, so we decided not to cut ourselves off from Cedar Falls.

We don't know what our goals are, though.

Basically, at this point, all we're trying to do is survive.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

“Law enforcement may be here,” says Tammy. “If they want to talk to you about anything you might know about Acker or the hound that took her, you’ll cooperate, obviously.”

“Oh, obviously,” I say.

“If you need anyone to cover you while you’re talking to the police, just send me a text?” She lifts her phone. “I’ll sort it out.”

“Sure thing, Tammy,” I say.

“I’m really glad you’re feeling better today, Cal,” she says.

“Yeah,” I say. “Me too.”

lotus

I’M IN THE middle of duct-taping Dr. Acker’s mouth shut. There’s duct tape down here in the basement of this place. I’ve tried to do it three times already, and she keeps managing to somehow move her jaw enough that she can talk around it. Or maybe she’s using saliva to weaken the tape. I don’t even know.

I can’t believe I’m this person, actually.

I can’t believe I’m the person who’s trying to figure out how to keep someone’s mouth taped shut.

That's not me.

I should feel ill about it. I really should. I recognize that I should. But I don't. I feel only a dull anger that I'm not capable of having that kind of moral center anymore.

It's really this woman's fault.

I never saw her while I was imprisoned against my will at Cedar Falls. But she did personally fuck with the heads of my mates. And she is part of the system there. So, she holds responsibility for what has been done to me.

Right now, Dr. Acker is tied to a pole in the middle of a basement. It's a load-bearing pole, and her arms are tied behind her back. I have put duct tape all over her face and her chin, leaving only her nostrils free. I'm not trying to kill her. Well, not yet, anyway.

Why does Dr. Acker need her mouth taped shut?

After all, when we first got her here, I did not try to attempt to keep her from speaking. She was tied up down here, and I figured that was good enough.

And then, she started talking.

So, we had to do this.

"Lotus," comes the rumble of a deep voice.

I recognize it as belonging to one of my alphas, Striker. I don't even turn to look at him. "Get back upstairs," I say to him. "I don't want her affecting you." Again.

"This can't go on like this," he says. "Knight says—"

“I know what Knight says, and I’m not willing to give up on it quite so quickly yet.” I do turn to look at him now.

“Yes, but—”

“Besides,” I say. “Knight couldn’t do it before.”

Striker nods. “I know. But he thinks he’d find a way around it now. He is the first one of us who figured out how to get around her mind control to get an erection, after all.”

“No,” I say. “None of you figured out how to get around it. You all had to use it.”

And it’s true. She did some weird association brainwashing technique with them, made it so they could only get hard if they associated it with violence. And they all had to do violence to get hard to service me. They didn’t do any permanent damage to me, and they claim they couldn’t, but we all know we’re just playing with fire out here.

This woman broke them.

This woman can fix them.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

I glare at her.

She glares back, looking at me with a kind of hatred and superiority that makes me livid.

I slap another strip of duct tape over her mouth.

She makes a noise through it.

We stare each other down for several moments.

“Go back up,” I say to Striker. “I’ll be right behind you.”

striker

I WAIT FOR Lotus upstairs, wondering what happens next.

I already gave Knight a piece of my mind for going and bringing this woman here.

He didn’t fight with me about it, either, just bowed his head and rubbed the back of his neck and said he didn’t think it through.

Yesterday, we came here.

I don’t know what this place is, not exactly. It’s one of the Polloi compounds, and the woman who runs the place, the Vasilissa, I guess they’re called, she’s Calix’s great-grandmother or something? Great aunt? I don’t know.

The Polloi are all of our ancestors, I suppose. Everyone with a designation can trace themselves back to the Polloi in some way or the other. But the Polloi have been treated badly over the past several hundred years. Chased out of their homelands, forced to always be on the run, persecuted and feared, all that sort of thing. I guess it's a typical story if you look at human history. We humans, we have as vast a capacity for cruelty as we do for altruism.

Anyway, yesterday, we came here, and we were given this house, and Dr. Acker was tied up in the basement.

Lotus went and talked to the Vasilissa woman, and right after that, she was gung-ho to get bites.

We've all gone back and forth on the bites, whether they're a good idea or not. At one point, I wanted us to do them yesterday, and at another, I started to get worried that the inherent, uh, bloodiness off them—we have to break her skin with our teeth—would trigger us.

We don't really know what triggers us, but the triggering does happen.

And when we get triggered, we're out of control.

Thus far, after being triggered, we haven't done any permanent damage to Lotus, but last night...

Well, it was Dr. Acker's fault.

We were all gathered up here, in what is meant to be a nest, I suppose, whatever a nest even is. It's a room with a bunch of mattresses and pillows, and Lotus has been talking about a nest since we first found her. Hell, it was practically one of her first words.

That sounds fucked, like we had the brain capacity of toddlers or something. But we were all like that, when we got out of the facility, all of us barely able to think or form words, and we needed each other. We healed each other. And the sex was part of it, as weird as that sounds.

I don't think we took advantage of her, not in that way. We were all on the same level when that happened.

Maybe we took advantage of her by being violent and out of control, though. Maybe I did. I remember the first time I had sex with her, that I was holding her face down, against the rug, and later, she had an abrasion on her face, and I...

Anyway, I say that guilt is a message, and you take the message and change, and I want to do that.

But if I can't stop myself, if I'm triggered by Dr. Acker, then how can I get the message from guilt or my shame?

Acker's voice floated up the stairs, while we were all half-naked, all of us getting ready to stick our very hard cocks into Lotus and each other. And then I whited out.

Next thing I knew, I was on my knees, whining, because Lotus was ordering me to do that, and I was obeying her.

We obey our omega, apparently, all of us.

But we hurt her, because of whatever Dr. Acker said.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

Right after that, Knight tore down the stairs. He tried to kill Dr. Acker, but she stopped him, used her strangely velvet, awful, wheedling voice on him, and he couldn't do it.

So, that was when Lotus decided to tape her mouth shut.

We were all too worried and freaked out for bites or even sex after that.

Lotus was hurt. We had hurt her. Again.

I can't live like this. I cannot keep putting marks and bruises on the skin of the woman I love. I need that to stop.

Maybe she does need to die, Dr. Acker.

In my former life, I was a priest. I would never have countenanced violence against anyone, nor would I have said that anyone deserved to have their lives ended. But I love Lotus.

I will not protect Dr. Acker if it means putting my omega in danger.

Some things are more important than right and wrong.

Lotus's safety is one of them.

On the other hand, we've been triggered by other things besides Dr. Acker's voice. So, if we kill her, it doesn't really solve the problem.

Lotus thinks only Dr. Acker could solve the problem.

She's determined to make the woman do it.

Funny thing, though, how a person who knows she's about to be killed isn't particularly forthcoming. Dr. Acker has no reason to help us.

I have no idea what we're going to do.

2

knight

I'M ON THE porch of this little shack of a house. It's autumn, and the changing leaves are beautiful in this part of New York. In the distance, there's nothing much but trees, though there are little houses and trailers and campers dotted in between the foliage if I look out off the porch.

I pace, though, not focusing on beauty or this compound.

"You're making me nervous," says Arrow. He's leaning over the railing of the porch, facing outward.

I ignore him and pace more.

Striker comes to the door and I veer towards him, head down. "Look, did you tell her—"

But Lotus is there, behind Striker.

So, I break off what I was saying, all of the breath in my lungs going out in a whoosh.

“Knight,” says Lotus, “he did tell me you want to try again.”

“I can do it this time,” I say. “She got to me before, but she won’t get to me now. I can kill her. I’ve been fantasizing about killing her for a long time now. I know I can do it. I killed before she ever messed with my head, you know, so I’m beyond her control.”

Lotus pushes open the screen door and comes around Striker. She’s a lot smaller than me, but she has a presence, something that she’s coming into, something that she’s beginning to inhabit. I like it. She smells good, almost regal, and she makes me feel safe in some ephemeral way, like she’s going to protect me. Which is strange, because I also know that I am meant to protect her. That is what an alpha does for his omega, and my purpose in life is to keep this woman safe and happy. Everything I do, I do for her.

That’s also strange.

I never thought I’d ever do anything for anyone besides myself.

But... it’s nice, actually, caring about someone else like that? It’s really nice.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

Lotus puts her hand on my chest. “Knight. I don’t want her dead.”

I back away from her, annoyed, throwing both my hands up above my head. “I kidnapped her for the express purpose of killing her.”

“Yeah,” says Striker, “but then, you know, you didn’t.”

I glare at him.

“Calix says that you were easily talked out of it,” says Striker. “You can’t think that’s not because of her influence over us.”

“I hate that woman,” I seethe.

“We all hate her,” says Arrow. “But she’s in our heads.”

“And that’s what we want her to do,” says Lotus. “Is get out of your heads. She’s the only one who knows how.”

“I don’t think she does,” I say. “I don’t think that’s even possible. Like, if you get a thing associated in your head with sex, it sticks around. You can’t dissociate it.”

“What are you saying?” says Lotus. “Of course you can.”

“How?” I spread my hands. “Okay, you guys remember the thing with the rats?”

“The lemon-scent thing?” says Arrow. “Because I thought that was weird, really,

and—”

“They also did this thing where they got rats to associate sex with the female rats wearing something, and they said this was like lingerie. Like, there’s no reason to be turned on by lingerie, except we have made these associations in our brains—”

“Bullshit,” says Arrow, turning away from the railing. “There’s a reason to be turned on by lingerie, and it’s because the woman is nearly naked.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say. “But before there were clothes, we were all just naked, right? Like rats are?”

“But we are not now,” says Arrow. “Which is why we associate nudity with sex.”

“No, you’re proving the point of the study,” I say. “If we didn’t wear clothes, we would not associate nudity with sex, because everyone would be naked all the fucking time, and we’d just see naked people constantly, and we wouldn’t even think about sex, because we’d be used to nudity. But because we almost never see people naked, and because people are naked when we have sex, we associate nudity with sex.”

“Okay,” said Lotus. “Okay, but I’m still not understanding why it is you can’t dissociate this? Because, like, this one time, I went skinny dipping with a group of friends. It was in college. We were drunk. I think, at first, the nudity was kind of a novelty, but after a couple hours, it had totally worn off, and I wasn’t even turned on by it. I was just used to it.”

I blink at her. She’s not wrong, I guess. I know what she means, how you can become desensitized to a thing, to a trigger like that. How if seeing uncovered skin is commonplace, it doesn’t affect you as intensely. But I don’t know how to use that.



“So, anyway,” she said, “I think you can dissociate.”

“Yeah?” says Arrow. “You pretty much not turned on by naked men now?”

Her lips part. “Oh,” she says in a different voice. “I guess it was kind of temporary, the dissociation, wasn’t it?”

I chuckle.

Arrow grins too. “Hey, you are turned on by naked men, right?”

She smiles. “As if turning me on is an issue, Arrow.”

We have real names. These names, these were given to us in Cedar Falls. It’s strange that we don’t adopt our old names, but they simply don’t seem right anymore.

“The thing is,” I say, “whatever things you have that you associate with sex, those are the things that turn you on. You don’t usually want to make them not turn you on.”

“Well, what if you were turned on by something that you didn’t want to be turned on by?” says Lotus.

“I mean, we’ve tried to undo those sorts of things,” I say. “As a species. But it’s mostly turned out bad, like aversion therapy if you were gay or something.”

“Oh,” says Lotus, nodding. “Right.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

It's quiet.

I start pacing again. "I think once you've got an association with it, it's locked in."

"It's not the same thing," says Arrow. "Being homosexual is something internal, not something you associate."

"We really don't know," I say.

"Oh, God, are we still doing this weird homophobia thing with you?" says Arrow. "You know, I didn't know I was attracted to men either, but it's been this way ever since we saw each other in the facility. Really, the way it feels to me is that, like, when that side of me woke up, the one with the memories, I remember being straight, but now I'm bi. The straight part feels like the weird part to me."

"Agreed," says Striker, "although I was just kind of all around repressed back then. I thought I was asexual." He laughs quietly.

"It's not a homophobia thing," I say, still pacing. "I'm totally accepting of my own bisexuality, I swear, it's fine. I'm just saying, we don't know why people are homosexual. It's not really natural."

"Oh, myGod," says Arrow, laughing in disbelief.

"No, I'm not saying it like that." I stop pacing to glare at him. "It's very natural for animals of all kinds to engage in homosexual behavior. Every species does it. But it's weird to specialize. Like, most creatures are bisexual. Or, uh, opportunistic, I guess."

I shake my head and start pacing again. “This doesn’t matter. We’re getting off topic.”

“Maybe we should get back on topic so that you can stop being a bigoted dick,” says Arrow.

“I’m not being bigoted,” I say. “Whatever it is that humans do with sex, we do it in this different way than animals do.”

“Okay,” says Lotus. “So, then maybe rat studies are not the best place to be getting information on how to handle this.”

She’s right. I groan, hanging my head, still pacing.

“Here’s what I think,” says Striker. “I think there are two components here. An instinctive one and something else, something learned or associated or whatever. That part, we could alter, but the instinctive part we can’t.”

“Sure,” says Lotus. “So, you guys aren’t instinctively trying to kill me.”

“No,” says Striker, “which is why we haven’t.”

“And you won’t,” says Lotus. “If I could just... believe that. I don’t know why I’m worried—”

“We’re all worried,” says Striker. “We don’t want to risk you, Lotus. You’re our omega.”

I’m still pacing. “The violent part is instinctive for me,” I say. I used to be a mafia hitman. I’ve always liked killing things. I’ve always been good at it. I self-diagnosed myself as fitting a psychopath profile when I was a teenager, but I’ve never told

anyone that.

When I figured it out, at first I felt really relieved and a little bit smug, like I was hot shit and really superior to everyone else. It was like, for the first time, I made sense.

But later, thinking about it just made me sad.

It was like I didn't actually want to be superior to everyone, because the thing about being superior is that it's the same as being inferior. It means you're different, "other," and you don't belong. And, uh, I knew I was never going to belong, but some part of me still kind of wanted to.

Not so much that I would not be what I was, but...

Anyway. I don't like to think about that.

And it's different now, different now that I'm in this pack, because, well, I do belong, and, uh, it's nice.

"Is the violence instinctive for you, really, though?" says Lotus. "Because of the three of you, Knight, you're the one who seems the most sure you won't kill me."

I stop pacing and look at her and then at Striker and Arrow. She's right. They seem warier than I do. I draw in a breath, folding my arms over my chest.

"Are you not sure?" she says. "Are you just pretending to be sure?"

"No, I'm sure," I say. "I guess it's because, um, something about the way I feel about you overrides that other part of me. It's an instinct, and it's strong, but my alpha instincts are stronger, and they won't let me hurt you."

“Well, that’s probably true for all of you, then,” says Lotus, looking to Striker.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

He won't meet her gaze.

"Yeah, I think so," I say. "Hasn't Calix said that a couple of times, that we can't kill you, because you're our scent match?"

"It's only that, it's not just killing that's the problem here," says Arrow. "I'll never kill Lotus. I know that. But we've all hurt her when we've been triggered. Hell, I forced myself on her. She had to use a stun gun on me to stop me."

"You couldn't help that," says Lotus quickly.

"Well, look at it this way," says Arrow. "If any other woman I cared about, my sister or my mother or one of my friends, were to say to me that they were in a relationship with a man who can't help himself, who goes out of control and hurts her?" He draws a finger across his throat. "I'd tell her to leave that asshole."

Lotus swallows heavily.

"It's not the same," I say in a gravelly voice.

"But to some degree, it doesn't matter," says Striker, "because Lotus is still in the same amount of danger no matter what."

No one says anything after that.

His words settle heavily into all of us.

arrow

AFTER THE HEAVY conversation on the porch, I want to lighten things for Lotus in some way, so I show her what I found in the house.

It's just a little closet, but it's full of quilts and pillows and things, soft things, and when she sees them, all folded up in there, threadbare and old though they may be, her scent changes.

"Oh," she says, reaching out to run her fingers over the fabric. "You know, when I was in Cedar Falls, I was always trying to find things for my nest. I didn't know the word, but it's all I wanted."

"Yeah, well, we can work on making the room in there better," I say. "More soft things?"

A smile overtakes her features, and her scent surges in a way that makes me know I've done the right thing. "More soft things," she says.

"Tell me what to bring in," I say. "I'll carry everything."

She begins ordering me around. I carry blankets, quilts, and pillows into the room with the mattresses. There are some pillows and blankets in here already, but Lotus has different ideas about how she wants them organized. We work together to tuck and fluff and create spaces here and there for lounging and comfort.

At some point, Knight comes in. He stands in the doorway, just watching, until Lotus tells him to get in here and help out.

I half-expect him to resist, but he doesn't. It's kind of fun, watching Knight fluff pillows and tuck in quilts under mattresses, how he's real careful with everything that Lotus likes. I love Knight, the way I love all my mates. I think he needs this, this softness. We all do.

I tackle them, both of them, and we all go down into the fluffy wondrousness of the new nest. Lotus giggles and writhes and I tickle her. She looks like she wants tickled.

It turns into an all-out wriggle and tickle war, the three of us rolling around, pouncing on each other, tickling and shrieking and gasping and laughing.

Before long, we're kissing, the softness of Lotus's mouth like sweet, ripe fruit on a warm day in the summer, the firmness of Knight's body like an antidote to her sweetness. I go back and forth, kissing each of them, both of them lying on their backs on the mattresses in the nest as I lay first on top of her and then on top of him.

Knight takes me by the back of the neck and pushes me down between them. I groan, turning my face sideways to find Lotus. She kisses me as Knight squeezes a handful of my ass cheek. It feels good, and I groan again, giving him a look.

He's panting, excited, alight. "Can I?" he asks me.

I want it, yes, I want it, but I... "I've never..."

"Well, me either," he says, out of breath.

Lotus grins. "Ooh, can I watch?"

"I want..." I touch her face. "Between you both? Please?"



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

Her smile widens. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Knight’s reaching around to undo my pants and pull them down. My cock is hard and getting harder. I wonder about that, how the prospect of this only seems like a filthy kind of excitement, not like something I’m frightened of.

His finger finds me, finds my asshole, and he probes it.

I gasp. “I need fucking lube, Knight.”

“Yeah, of course,” he says and gets up, leaving the bed.

Lotus sits up. She’s taking off all of her clothes.

I put my face into the blankets. My heart is pounding.

“You too,” she tells me. “You take your clothes off, too.”

I start doing that, obeying her, and it feels good.

“Where’s Striker?” she calls after him.

“He’ll just tell us to stop,” says Knight, who’s voice sounds far away.

“Yeah, but I taped her fucking mouth shut,” says Lotus. “So, she can’t say things to take control of you, of my alphas. And we can’t just let her run our lives.”

Knight's voice is closer. "Let me take Arrow's anal virginity, and then I'll go fucking kill her."

I look back at him, my heart thudding out of rhythm. He's naked now, too. "What the fuck did you just say?"

"I mean, I am going to be the first in your sweet, untouched little asshole, aren't I?" He grins at me as he settles onto the bed with five tubes of various kinds of lubrication.

"Wow, that's... this place is stocked with that, huh?"

"Guess it comes with the territory when you fuck as much as the Polloi does," he says. "Don't you trust me to give me your anal virginity, Arrow?" His voice has gotten singsongy, and I huff. He makes a soothing noise. "Shh, I'm going to be so, so gentle with you, baby."

I shudder. "Are we doing that? Calling each other... that?"

He touches me again, but his finger has lube on it now, and he slips inside me.

I moan.

"I like it," says Lotus, her voice quiet. "I like 'baby.'"

"You're mine, Arrow," says Knight, his voice deep and soothing. "Let me have you. I'll be good to you. Trust me."

It's weird. He shouldn't even be trustworthy, but I feel like Jell-o as his voice rolls through me. Maybe it's because he's pushing his thick forefinger inside me at the same time, and that feels, uh, nicer than I thought it would. It's an intrusion, sure, and

a little uncomfortable and strange, but also, wow,nice. I let out a breathy sound.

“Yeah?” he says.

I moan in response and his finger has got to be really deep in me now.

“You’re ready for another finger, Arrow,” he informs me, and it’s not a question.

“Fuck,” I say.

“That’s hot,” says Lotus. She settles down next to me and kisses me. “I like watching him stretch you.” A pause. “Baby.”

I touch her face. “I like you here, baby. I like you watching. I, uh, like getting stretched.” My voice is a little scratchy on the last bit.

“You’re very tight,” says Knight. His voice is scratchy too. “You’re going to give me this tight, unfucked little asshole, aren’t you? Give it right to me. To your alpha. Isn’t that what you’re going to do?”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

“Yes, alpha,” I breathe, submitting to him easily, even naturally. I like it. “Yes, please, alpha.”

He sucks audible air through his nose and suddenly, the stretch on me is more intense.

I cry out.

“Just another finger, baby,” he tells me in a soft voice. “You can take it. You’re taking it just fine. You’re almost ready for me. You want my cock inside you, don’t you?”

Fuck, yes, I want that more than I ever would have thought possible. “So much,” I moan.

“Good,” he says, and there’s suddenly nothing in me at all.

I gasp again, turning to look at him.

“You’re ready for me, baby,” he tells me, and there’s that huge knotted up alpha cock of his. I look down at him, and he strokes himself, and I feel the first hint of worry at the sight of his girth. Fuck, am I ready for him?

Lotus is touching me, fisting my cock with her sweet omega fingers.

I arch, shutting my eyes, letting out a cry as she squeezes me.

And then, she's moving herself under me, guiding my cock to slip into her wet, sweet pussy as I feel Knight rubbing more lube against me.

God, I want this. I've never wanted anything more than this. I want to be pressed between them, buried in my omega with an alpha at my back, buried inside me. I want to claim and be claimed. I want it and I feel as if I might burst as I sink into Lotus's wet heat. "I want to knot you," I whisper in her ear. "Can I knot you, baby girl?"

"Please, please," she breathes, tracing patterns on my chest.

There's a bit of resistance, but not much, and my knot presses through it and settles right there inside her, deep and sweet and good. Ah, perfection. I belong inside her.

But before I can get my equilibrium, Knight's cock is breaching me.

I cry out.

"Shh, it's okay, baby," he says. "I'm going to fit just fine."

I wasn't worried.

"I know your virgin asshole is really tight," he breathes in my ear, pressing further into me, "and I know my alpha cock is very, very fucking big, but you can take this."

Lotus's hand on my chest, soothing. "Are you okay, Arrow? This is really hot for me, but if you don't like it—"

"I fucking love it, omega," I assure her. "Ram my ass, Knight, fill me up."

He pushes in. "Your virgin ass?"

“My... virgin ass,” I moan as he does just what I asked and fills me up. It’s overwhelming, almost unpleasant at first, but I do have my knot deep inside Lotus’s wet, perfect pussy, and nothing can really be unpleasant while that’s happening.

“Yeah, give me this asshole,” he groans into my neck.

“It’s yours, alpha,” I breathe, and it feels fucking amazing.

He strokes into me and I stroke into her and we find a rhythm, where I’m fucking her and fucking myself on his fat cock, and every stroke I make and every stroke he makes feels very good. My balls are all tight and high, and I feel seconds away from coming. Seconds away. Except I don’t come. Except everything just gets better, and better, and better.

“Oh, God, Arrow,” wheezes Lotus, “your cock is so fucking hard. It’s huge.”

“Is it?” I can hardly breathe, let alone speak, but it does feel like I’m crazy hard, actually. “You like that?”

“Yes,” she moans, reaching between us to play with her own pussy. “Make me come, Arrow. Knight, make him make me come.”

“Yes, omega,” says Knight, and he kisses the nape of my neck. “You feel... fucking wonderful, Arrow. You’re so fucking tight.”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

“You want to knot me?” I say. I must be insane.

“Oh, shit,” he mutters. “I won’t fit, baby. You’re too tight.” But I feel his knot pushing insistently at my opening. “Fuck, Arrow, I want...”

“Knot him,” orders Lotus. I look down at her, and she’s flushed and pretty, her beautiful breasts high on her chest, and I want to kiss those pretty nipples of hers. “Knot him, Knight, and make us both come.”

I nuzzle down to put my mouth on her breasts. “Knot me, baby,” I confirm.

Knight’s rubbing more lube between us—on his knot, on me, and I’m sucking on Lotus’s tits, and she’s mewling and writhing against me, like a kitten.

“God, Arrow, your cock is so hard,” she breathes. “God, it feels good in me.”

Fuck, she’s crazy wet, and my knot is slippery as I move inside her, and everything feels like utter bliss. I can’t catch my breath, and I swear I’m going to come right now, right—

Knight’s knot pushes against the ring of my asshole, and it burns.

I gasp, the pain colliding with the pleasure and intensity of the moment. I don’t move for a moment, frozen in place.

He seizes me by the hips, holding me in place, and he knots me.

I scream.

It...

Oh, shit, I'm coming now, coming like crazy, fuck, I feel like my entire body is spasming, and the pleasure is molten, like I'm riding a wave of fire, like I'm exploding, like fire is coming out of my pores.

I make some kind of noise, too high, too loud, almost a screech.

Then I feel Lotus's orgasm, her pretty, slick pussy clenching like mad on me, and this sends me off into another stratosphere of goodness, like the wave of fire overtakes the sky and burns away the horizon.

Knight lets out a string of swear words behind me, hits his peak, and then wraps his arms around me and begins kissing my neck and ear murmuring nonsense words into my skin even as Lotus flings out her arms and gazes up at us in utter adoration.

"Love you," says Knight into my neck. "Love you both."

"My beautiful boys," breathes Lotus, shutting her eyes and basking in it.

I lean back to kiss Knight, tangling our tongues and then my lips find Lotus's. She doesn't open her eyes, just kisses me back eagerly, letting out these sweet, perfect little sighs.

As I'm kissing her, I become aware of something a little strange.

Teeth.

Well, this has never happened before, but my canines have, uh, expanded in my



mouth, and they're sharp and big and there, and it should be weird, but it's not, maybe because I'm riding the best orgasm of my damned life or maybe because I'm kissing my omega and nothing could be bad while I'm kissing her.

But mostly because it's just right, and I know it is.

I kiss away from her lips, dragging the tips of my newly sharpened teeth over her skin, scraping gently over her jaw.

Her eyes open and she lets out a deeply pleased noise.

"Good omega," I murmur. "Time for you to be properly claimed, my sweet girl."

"Yes," she sighs, a rush of happy surrender. "Bite now, alpha."

"Yes, baby girl, yes," I say, and I fit my teeth to a little spot, right above her clavicle. I don't know how I know this is the right spot, but I do. I hone in on it like the way I track. Everything falls away and it's perfect, like the sun breaking free through the clouds after a dark storm. It's all bright and clear now.

"Bite," she moans, writhing into me. "Bite, please, alpha."

I lick her there, preparing her, and I pull back, ready to strike her, like a snake or something, and my canines seem to expand even more, growing longer and more pointed, and I can feel the edges of them, how sensitive they are, almost like twin cocks in my mouth, and I know that when I bury my teeth in her, it'll feel better than any sex has ever felt in my life. I know that I'll taste her blood, and I—

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

Remember the taste and the smell of omega blood.

Remember flashes.

Omegas, eyes wide in pain and fear, bleeding.

I remember the omegas we've killed together, and I remember how that feels, and I...

Don't bite her.

I wrap my hands around her neck instead and start squeezing.

Hervoice is in my head now. That's my good boy, Arrow, that's exactly right. You know just what to do with omegas. You kill them. Alphas are drawn to omegas to do exactly that. You're the best tracker, aren't you, Arrow?

I have my cock inside Lotus, but somehow now, it's her hand on my cock, stroking me as she coos to me, calls me the best tracker and the best hound and her own little killer.

I'll kill this omega for Dr. Acker, because that's what I do, that's what I'm trained to do, and that will be exactly right.

Abruptly, Knight's arms are prying my hands from Lotus's neck, and he's pulling my back against his chest.

I thrash against him, confused.

Why is he stopping me?

This is what we do.

We kill omegas.

I get my arms free and snarl at him.

He snarls back, and his teeth are all long and fanglike too. He cocks back his head, nostrils flaring, and he strikes me. He sinks his teeth into my neck.

I come again. My cock spurts inside Lotus, and my whole body jerks, and then I'm limp, leaning back against Knight, gasping for air, my eyes rolling back in my head.

4

lotus

I'M SHAKING. I'M rubbing my neck, shaking, and I'm stuck on his knot and I can't get away.

I can't talk. I can hardly breathe.

I'm still just shaking.

It was so quick, and they haven't done anything quite that vicious in a long time, and I feel like a really stupid person.

Why did you let him fuck you?

After the thing happened last night, we've all been wary, and Striker said we should

be careful about sex. We just had that conversation on the porch, all that back and forth. And yet, when I came in here and we all started rolling around together in my new nest, all of that went out of my head, and I let this happen.

Arrow has his head back, leaning on Knight's shoulder. His lips are parted and his eyes are half-lidded. He looks blissed out as Knight laps hungrily at the little wound he made on Arrow's neck.

What the hell just happened?

Striker appears in the doorway. "What's going in here?" He stalks across the room and crawls onto the nest. He sees me rubbing my neck, and he touches my skin, his expression alarmed.

"Who did this to her? She's bruising up." Striker's voice is terrible and it runs through all of us like a rumble of an earthquake. He's the lead alpha, whatever that even means (It's something Calix said), and he has an influence over all of us, even me.

Knight continues lapping at the little holes his teeth made on Arrow's neck, his movements languid. His voice is lazy. "It's all right. I stopped him. He's mine now. He won't do that again."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:35 am*

Arrow lets out a little, bemused laugh, and he's pleased. "I am, yeah. Yours."

Knight's hand rubs up and down Arrow's chest. "Yeah, baby," he says, licking him vigorously. "You did so well. Took my cock in your ass and my teeth in your neck. Mine." There's a hint of a growl in his voice, and it's possessive.

I blink up at them, still rubbing my neck, still shaking, and I feel a jolt of jealousy at the two of them like that, so connected.

It bubbles up in me and I can't stop myself. I'm saying it before I can even think. "Bite now, then? Knight, let Arrow bite me." My voice is piteous and needy.

Knight focuses on me and pauses his lick. "Well, okay, sure, omega. Arrow, baby—"

"No." Striker's voice halts all of us.

I shiver in the wake of it. I turn to Striker, and my voice is still piteous. "Where were you?" I accuse him.

He lets out a noise, almost a whine. His hands are on me, stroking my face, my shoulders, my arms, and he rains kisses over my forehead and nose and my cheeks, words tumbling out of his mouth. "Fuck, sweet omega, I'm so sorry. I was walking around the house, trying to clear my head. I... I'm so sorry, my pretty Lotus. I shouldn't have— you needed me."

I reach up and thread my hand into his hair and hold onto him. I'm still shaking.

Striker groans. His face is close to mine, and he gazes into my eyes, but he's talking to all of us. "What happened?"

"We... got worked up," I say in a tiny voice. "Arrow showed me things for the nest, and we started making it nice and then we started kissing and then they had knots and they smelled good, and Knight wanted to fuck Arrow, and I wanted to watch that." I can't even describe how hot that made me, the two of them going at each other. "So..."

"We got our teeth," says Knight. "Like, really got them. I felt it before a couple times, but never quite like this—"

"What teeth?" says Striker, annoyed. He disentangles himself from me, first giving me a gentle kiss in the middle of my forehead and then sitting up to face Knight.

Knight shows Striker his teeth, but they're just normal now. Knight furrows his brow, running his tongue over his canines. "Well, I guess they went down. It's, like, uh, it's like an erection, only two of them, in your mouth, and they're so damned sensitive, and you just want to bite."

"I wanted to bite her before," says Striker. "I didn't have... teeth." He thinks about it, scratching the back of his head. He surveys me.

"I think you did," I say in a tiny voice, because I remember it. After the first time all four of us were together, Striker and I woke up first, and we had a solo session, just him inside me as the others slept, and I remember seeing him, a couple times, his head rearing back like I just saw both of my other alphas did, their long fang-like teeth glittering as if they were about to strike me like a cobra.

"Oh," says Striker. He touches his canines, looking concerned.

“It’s okay,” said Knight. “It’s good. Bites are good. You want them, Lotus.”

“I do,” I say. “The Vasilissa here, Penelope, she says I need to get them, that it’ll help.”

“Never mind the teeth,” says Striker, shaking his head as if to clear it. “What happened to her neck?”

It’s quiet.

I rub myself there again, feeling small and afraid.

Arrow’s eyes open. He shoves at Knight’s forehead, dislodging him from his licks.

“Hey, I need to do that,” says Knight, reaching for him.

But Arrow holds him off and focuses on me. “Oh, shit, Lotus.”

“You tried to kill her,” says Striker.

“I was going to bite her,” says Arrow. “She was begging me for it, and I had this feeling, like it was right and it was now, and there was this spot on her body, and I knew that was my spot, that was where my teeth fit into her, and I was...” His expression twists. “Oh, God, and then I tried to kill her.”

It’s quiet again.

Arrow’s fingers brush over my neck. He reaches down, between us, to find his cock. He tries to tug himself free, but he’s knotted in, and that just hurts.

“Ow, no, you can’t do that!” I cry out, panicked.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

Arrow stops. He turns to Striker. “Can you bark me free?”

Striker shrugs. “I don’t know. Sometimes, I can.”

“I tried to kill her,” says Arrow. “I can’t sit here in the afterglow, feeling her perfect pussy gripping me and—” He looks at Knight. “And you.”

Knight puts his mouth back on Arrow’s neck. “Shush.” He starts to lick again.

“So, the bite made you try to kill her?” says Striker.

“Bark,” says Arrow.

Striker huffs and then he nods. “Deflate,” he says.

Nothing happens.

Arrow groans. “Oh, fuck, Lotus, I—”

“It’s not the first time,” I snap at him. “Anyway, I know it’s not your fault.”

“So, who’s fault is it?”

“Hers,” I snarl, and that ripples through all of us the same way Striker’s voice did, and all three of them turn in the direction of the door to the basement, heads up, eyes focused, looking like dangerous birds of prey ready to fly off and do my bidding, rip Dr. Acker to goddamned shreds.



I want it, and I feel I could send them down after her, that they would obey me.

We all are charged with it for several minutes and then I let out a breath, and the air in the room changes, like the passing of a storm.

They all come for me, leaning in and kissing me wherever they can kiss, and I reach up and stroke their faces and their hair, soothing them. My chest vibrates, and I purr, and they purr back, and that goes on for several long moments.

Part of me is a little freaked out when we get like this. Animal. Designation. Instinct.

But the purring is soothing, and we all relax.

Arrow submits to Knight's tongue again, sighing. Knight licks long stripes up Arrow's neck, still purring. Arrow speaks, his voice subdued. "It was blood."

"What was?" says Striker, who's voice is different now, also subdued.

"I thought that I was going to sink my teeth in her and that I would taste her blood."

In spite of myself, I purr at that. Want him to taste me, I think.

"I remembered the way it tastes, omega blood," says Arrow. "And then, it was like she was in my head. Acker was. Like I wasn't even here, like I was back in Cedar Falls, and she was calling me her good boy and petting me like a dog, and I just—" He grimaces.

"The way omega blood tastes," says Striker in a guttural voice, and a shudder goes through him.

I put my hand on his forearm, steadying him.

He turns to me. "I'm all right."

I give him a nod.

Knight speaks up. "When I was getting lube to take Arrow's cherry, I saw that there's some stuff in the bathroom, salve and things. Get that to rub into her neck, Striker."

Striker crawls out of the nest. "Arrow's cherry, huh?"

Arrow blushes and his scent rises, but it smells rich and sweet and good.

"Yeah, so you bit Arrow?" Striker leaves the room, going into the bathroom, but his voice carries. "I remember that Calix said we could bite each other and that it would scar up like an alpha bite, but this seems like more than a scar."

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“Yeah,” says Arrow reverently. “I feel you, baby.”

“Mmm,” says Knight, still licking. “Yeah, me too.”

“What do you mean, you feel him?” I say.

“It’s like, uh, he’s in me,” says Arrow. “All in me, not just stretching my ass, but in me all over.”

I don’t understand that, but they’re kissing now, Knight and Arrow, and Knight’s running his hands up and down Arrow’s chest, clutching him close as their mouths move against each other. I like the way they look when they kiss, I have to say. I let out a little sigh.

Striker’s back with a little tin. He settles in next to me and begins to gently apply it to my neck. He does this carefully, speaking to Knight. “And now you think you can control him? Arrow, can he control you?”

“I don’t know,” says Arrow.

“It’s not like I can control him,” says Knight. “It’s like, uh, I can help him. If he started going off the rails, I could pull him back.”

“That sounds like control,” says Striker.

“Well, whatever,” says Knight. “You can control us. You do that bark thing on us.”

Striker pauses, making a face at my neck. “Okay, good point.”

Knight goes back to licking the bite mark on Arrow’s neck, which actually looks like it’s healing. It’s making two big scar marks on his neck, raised bits of pink, shiny skin.

“But I can’t always,” Striker says, returning to rubbing ointment into my bruised neck. “Sometimes I can force things and other times I can’t. So, I don’t know if that means anything is really safe. Furthermore, when I think about blood, I...” He gives me a helpless look. “I just don’t trust myself around you, baby girl. I don’t trust any of us.”

calix

IT’S LATE WHEN I get home from work, because I have to drive two hours from Cedar Falls to the compound upstate. I feel as if it was a wasted day, too. I didn’t really get any information that’s useful. Even though Tammy said that law enforcement might be there, I didn’t actually see anyone. Mostly, it was business as usual, weird as that sounds.

The omegas were really antsy and clingy, and I had to alpha them a lot to get them to calm down. I always feel weird about doing that, but it’s worse now, because I see Lotus in all of them. There is some person in there, trapped and cut off from their memories, and I want badly to save all of them.

If they don’t have scent matches, does that mean their amnesia can’t be reversed? Are they permanently damaged? Isn’t there anything we can do for them?

When I get into the cabin where we’re staying, it’s dark outside. I come into the house and find them all in the nest room, asleep in a big pile. They’re all in various states of undress except Striker, and it looks like Knight has fallen asleep with his

dick inside Arrow. Arrow may have fallen asleep inside Lotus, too, from the look of their bodies, but she's rolled free of him and is curled up against Striker's chest.

I'm hungry.

But I'm also exhausted. The nest has more pillows and quilts, and it looks inviting. It reminds me of my mother's nest when I was a little boy. Sometimes, when I was too afraid to sleep in my bed, I'd come and climb into it, worming my way in between my dads' bodies to find a nice comfortable spot to sleep in.

It seems just good. Safety. Home. Family.

I crawl in with them, unable to stop myself from rubbing my face against Lotus's thigh, just wanting to get her scent on me.

Lotus stirs. She smiles at me, stretching. "Calix," she says, so happy to see me.

Wow. My chest feels tight. I love this woman. I'm home. I smile up at her.

She sits up. "Need to go to the bathroom," she says, climbing out of the nest, over the sprawled out limbs of our mates.

I flop back down into the nest, sighing.

I hear her out there. I hear the toilet flush. Then I hear her out in the kitchen, opening cabinets, looking in the refrigerator. I could stay here, but...

I get up, too, and I wander out there.

She's a sight for sore eyes, totally nude, peering into the open refrigerator, her curves on display, her lovely shapely legs, her round ass. She straightens, shutting the door,

and there are her breasts.

I sidle over to her and get a handful of one.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

She likes that, winding her arms around my neck.

We kiss, a long, slow, soft kiss, and I run my other hand over her bare back and down to cup her ass.

She tilts her head back.

Oh, man, my dick is perking up.

She feels it, giggles, and reaches down, rubbing me through my scrubs.

I gasp, kissing her again, harder, and then something else happens. My mouth—my teeth—I pull back, startled. I stop touching her to reach into my mouth and touch them. I have... fangs?

“Oh,” she says. “You have them too.”

“Too,” I echo, confused.

“Alpha teeth,” she says.

“No, these aren’t...” I touch the end of one of the fangs. Shit. It’s sensitive, like cock sensitive. I knot up right away, and my pants are suddenly way too tight.

Then, it’s sort of hazy. I know that I should be freaked out about the fact that I’ve suddenly turned into Dracula, but I’m not, because I’m wicked turned on and my instinct and my arousal take over.

My naked omega is here, in my arms, and she's perfect and smooth and pretty and very fuckable, very bitable, veryeverything.

I nudge her backwards, careful, gentle, moving us until we hit one of the counters in the kitchen. I turn her so that she's facing away from me, and I press into her from behind, running my hand down the notches of her spine.

"You're the most perfect little omega I've ever seen," I tell her.

She perfumes, rubbing her ass into my crotch.

I sigh, putting my teeth against the nape of her neck. I don't penetrate her with them. Yet. I rub the smooth part of them over her skin, and it sends ripples of pleasure through me that wrest guttural sounds from my chest.

I push my pants out of the way, not even all the way down, just enough to get my cock out, and my hard cock nestles itself into the crease of her ass, like it has a mind of its own.

We both sigh.

"Spread your legs for your alpha, sweet omega," I murmur.

She does, arching, clutching the counter, presenting her pussy to me. It's dripping wet.

"Such a good girl," I breathe. "Such a perfect, good, slick, little omega. Take your alpha's cock, okay?"

"Please," she sighs.



I slide easily into her, and she is snug and yet slippery, and I easily push my knot into her, sealing us together.

She cries out.

I reach around and take her whole mound in my hand. I squeeze that as I begin to stroke in her.

“Ah, shit, Calix, that’s going to make me come,” she says in a strained voice.

“Not yet, omega,” I soothe her, gently kneading her mound as I fuck her. “You’ll come when you get your bite, baby girl.”

“Oh, please, alpha, bite me,” she says in a rush, her voice stretching out like a song.

“I will,” I assure her. “Get used to my knot first.”

“I’m used to it,” she protests. “It’s perfect. It feels fantastic, and I want to come, and I want your bite. Please.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“You are not used to it,” I tut, working myself into her a little deeper. “I will tell you when you’re used to it.”

She feels it and cries out.

“There we are,” I huff. “Now, you’re ready.”

She whines. “I’m so close, Calix, I’m so close.”

“I got you, sweetheart,” I say, licking the back of her neck, brushing her hair out of the way, getting her ready for me. “I’m here. It’s okay. I’ll give you a very nice orgasm. Just let your alpha take care of you. Surrender, omega. Give yourself to your alpha.”

“I’m yours,” she wheezes. “Please, alpha, please, I’m yours.”

My head rears back, and my teeth get even longer and even more sensitive, and I hone in on that spot, right there, on the back of her neck, my spot.

Then, I strike.

My teeth slide into her skin, all the way deep into her, and I’m rooted here, at her neck, and rooted there in her pussy. My knot pulses, and my cock stutters. The tips of my fangs are insanely sensitive, and I can taste her.

I become dimly aware of the fact we’re both coming, and she’s clenching hard on my knot, but she’s not making any noise and neither am I.

I feel like I tunnel down into the center of her, right into her core, lights flashing in front of my eyes as I delve deeper and deeper, each one flashing brighter, until they aren't white but prismatic, like a rainbow, and then there are other colors, colors I've never seen before, and then I anchor into her, hook right in, and when I do that, she rushes back up the tunnel, back through herself and into me. She flows into me, like her blood is flowing into my mouth, and her essence floods me like a crashing ocean wave.

We collapse into the kitchen counter, both gasping for breath.

My teeth retract, as if they'd never even been there. I have to tend.

Oh, shit, this is the tending instinct. Oh, fuck.

I lap at my bite, my hips jerking as I fuck her, and she lets out a prolonged moan.

She's still coming.

I feel it now, but I feel not just her body clenching on me but her essence in me, that ocean that now fills me, crashing into the walls of me. Her orgasm is like the breath of spring and the warmth of summer, like the first pink of the sunrise and the warmth of the dusk, and I thought I loved her before.

But I didn't know what love was.

I tend my bite, banding an arm around her waist, working my knot in her as I nudge her ecstasies through both of us again and again and again.

"Lotus," I rasp. "You're everything."

lotus

EVENTUALLY, CALIX ANDI end up sitting at the kitchen table. I curl up in his lap with his perfect, huge knot snugly settled inside my pussy, and he licks my bite.

Every time he licks me there, I feel it in my clit and my nipples, little tingles. I had an orgasm that seemed like it lasted for hours. But it couldn't have.

I don't know how long we've been out here like this, though.

I just know I'm bitten and he's mine, really mine, and everything's wonderful now.

I'm not coming now, not anymore, except it almost feels like I'm living in an orgasm, like that crest of goodness is just roaring through me all the time, and it's overwhelmingly pleasant.

Occasionally, one of his big, strong alpha hands will roam over my body, possessive and warm and comforting. He'll rub a hand over my hip or my thigh or my waist. Sometimes he settles a hand over one of my breasts.

During this, we don't talk, just make little humming noises to each other.

I have this odd sensation, like we have one body. Like his body is mine and my body is his and we're just part of each other now.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

Sometimes, he communicates with me without talking, but it's not words, and it's not images or anything. It's a rush of a feeling. He'll nudge it into me, and I feel it wash through me. It's his love for me, and it is also wonderful. I can nudge him back, push my love into him.

Every time we do that, we both hum again, in time together.

It's perfect.

Until I hear someone on the steps.

We both go on high alert, sitting up straight, as we make sense of that together, and we both know what that means.

There is only one person in the basement.

We get up, together, but he's taller than me, and I can't stand up with him knotted in me, so I have to bend over. It's awkward.

He tries to pull me upright, but it just doesn't work, and then the basement door opens and she staggers out, peeling duct tape off of her mouth.

Dr. Acker's wrists are bleeding, and the places where the tape was on her face are red and angry. She tears it entirely free and she balls it up in one hand and bares her teeth as she glares at us.

calix

“KNIGHT!” I YELL, summoning him out of instinct, even though he was useless against her last night. Some part of me is sure he’s better than Striker or Arrow, however.

Frustratingly, my tending instinct won’t let up, and I nudge my mouth down to lick at Lotus’s neck, trying like all hell to get my body to understand that I need my knot to go down sothat I can extricate myself from my omega’s body and solve this problem.

Dr. Acker looks us up and down. Lotus is naked. My pants are around my ankles. We’re stuck together. She sneers and turns away, going for the door to the cabin.

Lotus and I move together, of one mind, to stop this woman, and if she weren’t so much shorter than me, I feel as if it would work.

But we trip over Lotus’s legs—or my pants—or I don’t know. We go down on the floor, a tangle of limbs and then we struggle to stand back up again. Why won’t my stupid knot godown?

Luckily, Knight is coming out of the bedroom, but he’s entirely naked. He sees Dr. Acker and stops in startled surprise.

She makes a break for the door.

He runs after her, seizing her by the back of the neck and yanking her back.

She lets out a cry of frustration.

“How did she get untied?” says Knight.

“I think she wriggled free,” says Lotus. “Her wrists look rubbed raw.”

Knight turns, pulling Dr. Acker with him, and takes the two of us in. “You guys, uh, yeah.”

“Just... tie her back up,” says Lotus.

“No,” says Dr. Acker. Desperately, she thrusts out a hand and grabs Knight’s penis. She rubs it, and her voice goes soft. “No, no, Knight, my good boy, my good hound, you don’t want to tie me up.”

Knight’s eyes go cloudy for a minute.

“Fight it,” cries Lotus.

Dr. Acker starts jacking off Knight in earnest, and he gets an erection almost immediately. “That’s right,” she whispers to him. “That’s just right, isn’t it, Knight? You know if you’re a very good boy, you get a reward.”

Knight wrenches her hand off of him, but he also lets go of her.

She stumbles backward, sprawling out on the floor on her backside.

Knight advances on her, hard cock first. He kicks her.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

She squeals, but she manages to speak in that soft, seductive voice anyway. “Shh, it’s okay, my big boy. It’s okay.”

And Knight falters, just like when he tried to kill her last night, just like when she stopped him before.

Dr. Acker scrambles to her feet, brushing at herself, wide-eyed. She licks her lips and her gaze goes elsewhere.

I realize that Striker and Arrow are coming out of the bedroom. Arrow’s naked too, and I notice he’s got a bite mark on his neck. When did that happen? Who did that?

“Stay, boys,” says Dr. Acker. “Stay.” She starts for the door again.

They are all rooted to the spot.

“Knight!” I scream.

He looks at me.

“There’s an omega,” breathes Dr. Acker, pointing at Lotus. “You know what you’re supposed to do when you scent out an omega, don’t you, my good boys? You know exactly what to do.”

And all three of them lunge at us.

I panic, turning my back, wrapping my arms around Lotus, protecting her with my



girth and my body, and our three mates tackle us.

Distantly, I hear the door open. Dr. Acker is free.

I do my best to protect Lotus from the impact as we all go down under the weight of the other three alphas, who are growling and making dog-like noises as they try to tear through my body to get to Lotus.

I don't know what to do, and I just curl around her, wanting to keep her safe as they try to wrench me off her.

Lotus and I move, like we are one person. We crawl together, and I know what she's going for. It's in the bedroom, with the few meager possessions my mates brought with them, not that they'd managed to gather much when they went on the run from the facility. They have clothes, and some stacks of cash that they got from various places that Knight had stashed his ill-gotten gains from being a mafia hitman, and...

The stun gun.

As we crawl, our mates pummel and scratch and howl at us.

But we make it, and she gets the stun gun and she puts it into Arrow, and this knocks out him and Knight, who both fall backwards. Then I take it from her and stun Striker, who shrieks and retreats.

My knot goes down.

I pull free of her, stand up and glower down at them holding the stun gun.

They grunt and gaze up at us.

lotus

I'M YANKING ON my clothes, shouting at Striker and Knight. "You cannot go after her, because she'll trigger you again!"

"But what are you two going to do against her?" growls Knight.

Calix is already dressed, but he just had to pull up his scrubs.

"I don't know, stun her, I guess," I say, checking to see if Calix still has it.

He brandishes it, his expression grim.

I stalk to the open door and go out into the night. This woman could not have gotten far.

Calix and I don't have to talk about which way to go, we just decide together. We walk over the yard, down to the dirt road and look this way and that way.

There's no sign of her, just the outlines of the trailers and shacks that make up the compound.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“She would remember being brought here,” Calix says. “She’d go for the main road.”

“Right,” I say and we take off together in that direction.

We run, and Calix has longer legs than me, and he gets ahead of me, and I can feel him wanting to slow down and wait and I yell, “Just go. Just find her. Catch her.”

So, he speeds up and leaves me behind, and I run behind him until the darkness swallows him up.

Soon enough, I come to the main house, which was where we met the Vasilissa of this extended pack, Penelope. There are lights on there, and I see figures in the front lawn.

I hurry in that direction to find Penelope with a shot gun.

Dr. Acker is on her knees in front of the woman, tears streaming down her face, as Penelope points the barrel at the back of the doctor’s head.

Calix stands to one side, his head bowed, saying and doing nothing.

I skid to a stop.

“You haven’t been here a full two days and we’re having issues, omega,” says Penelope to me.

“I’m...” I’m out of breath. I pant, bending over and trying to speak. “Sorry.” Another

long pause, and then I remember the term of respect I'm supposed to use for her. "Kyra."

Penelope chuckles wryly. "You said you were going to kill her."

"We are," I say. "But..." I'm still wheezing.

Penelope chuckles again. "Catch your breath." She shakes her head at me. "You're the sorriest excuse for an omega I've ever seen in my life, do you know that?"

Out here, in the Polloi, omegas are in charge, I guess. She told me before that I was too demure or something. I'm annoyed. But mostly, I'm grateful that she stopped Dr. Acker. If the doctor had gotten away, gotten to the authorities, everything could have gone wrong.

Time passes as I struggle to get my breathing under control.

Penelope just eyes me.

Dr. Acker is sobbing, quietly, but now and again, I can hear her breath hitching. I have to admit, as much as I don't like this woman, that doesn't make it easy. I wish she wasn't crying.

"Better?" says Penelope.

I'm still a little out of breath, but I nod. "Yeah, I'm better now." I lick my lips. "We were distracted. Trying to get bites. We weren't keeping as close an eye on her as we should and she got free."

"Got past all four of your alphas, huh?" says Penelope. "Now, I am of the opinion that an alpha is only as good as the omega who he obeys, but alphas should

instinctively protect, at least you, omega. I thought you were ascent match.”

“She has ways of getting to them,” I say. “Psychological triggers. She brainwashed them. It’s... never mind.” I nod at Calix. “He’s not affected, but the others are, and we were... distracted.” I finger the bite mark on the back of my neck.

Calix sucks in a sharp breath as I touch it, and I know he feels me the way I feel him.

“Is this woman a danger?” says Penelope. “If she gets free again, will she hurt my pack?”

I hesitate several moments.

And Dr. Acker takes the opportunity to speak. “Do I look like a danger?” she says, her voice thick. “I don’t have a weapon, and I’m not strong enough to hurt anyone.”

“If she gets free, and she reports our location to the Cedar Falls facility, it could be very bad for everyone,” I say. “She could bring the authorities here, too.”

“And you do want her dead,” says Penelope.

“Not yet,” I say. “I want her to fix whatever it was she did to my mates.” However, I can’t be sure that she isn’t simply a liability at this point.

“I can shoot her right now,” says Penelope to me, with a little shrug. “Would you like me to do that for you, little omeglet?”

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

Omeglet? What is that? Is it an insult? Should I be affronted?

God, I'm exhausted. I shove my hair away from my forehead, because I'm sweaty, and it's pasted there. "I don't want her dead yet, so no."

Penelope laughs. "There's a little fire to you sometimes, omega. Just a little bit. I'm not sure if it's going to be enough, but it's something."

I sigh. "I know you're going to want a guarantee that she won't get free again, though, so—"

Penelope shifts the gun and pulls the trigger.

I rush forward, letting out a high-pitched noise. I just said that I didn't want her dead, didn't I?

But then I hear Dr. Acker screaming. She's clutching at her foot, curling up around herself as she holds her ankle, which is wounded.

Penelope shot Dr. Acker in the foot.

"That should keep her from going much of anywhere," says Penelope, putting the shotgun over her shoulder. She looks pretty pleased with herself.

"That's definitely one way to handle the problem," I say.

Penelope shrugs at us.

I look at Calix. What are we supposed to do now? “Okay, you think we can carry her together?”

Penelope makes a noise in the back of her throat. “Oh, omega, that’s not how you talk to your alpha.”

Calix looked up at her, his nostrils flaring.

Penelope glares at him. “None of that, boy.” She rounds on me. “Do they explain nothing to you in that world? Don’t you see that the very nature of things is for an alpha to serve his omega, to do her bidding? Pleasing you is what pleases them. They can’t be happy unless you are happy. So, you need to clearly communicate to your alphas what you need and how they can serve you. That’s the path to a happy pack. That’s what they want from you.”

“What’s what they want from me?” I say. “To be ordered around?”

“Yes,” says Penelope, as if I’m a total idiot.

“Well,” I say, annoyed, “maybe I’m going to treat Calix like he’s a human being with his own will and right to decide.”

Penelope lets out a disbelieving laugh. “Goddess help us,” she says. “Do whatever you want. Just get this woman off my front lawn. She’s very noisy. There are babies trying to sleep around here.”

Dr. Acker lets out a wail.

Penelope walks off.

Calix steps close. “Maybe get the others to help me.”

“But she’ll—”

“No, she won’t,” says Calix pointedly to Dr. Acker. “Because if she tries to trigger them, I will put my finger inside the wound on her ankle.”

Dr. Acker whimpers.

striker

WE BIND DR. Acker’s wound with gauze and medical supplies in the bathroom in the cabin where we’re staying. Then we tie her back up in the basement and duct tape her mouth shut. We duct tape her to the pole down there in addition to tying her up.

She’s hurt but she’s bound too well to get free anyway this time.

She cries the whole time, but she doesn’t try to use that voice on us, or to make us do her bidding, or to get us to attack Lotus again. She’s afraid of the pain that Calix has threatened her with, I guess. She’s probably in a lot of pain. The shotgun did a good bit of damage to her.

After, we get upstairs and Lotus sits down on Calix’s lap in one of the chairs and he licks the back of her neck, and I stand there, the only one without a bite of any kind, and I remember being jealous before, when I was the only one who couldn’t get an erection for her, when I was the only one who couldn’t fuck her.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

They say I'm the lead alpha, that I'm in charge, but I feel like I'm just the alpha left out most of the time.

"I don't like this," I decide to tell them. "I don't have any defense of Dr. Acker here, but I don't know if I can participate in murder."

"Is it because of God?" says Lotus.

When I think about the man I was in my past life as a priest, it feels like remembering someone else's existence. Killing is wrong, though, and I know that. It's only that I've already got so much blood on my hands that I can't rightly distance myself from the activity anymore. "No, not because of God," I say. "But I don't know what's left of me if I do this."

Knight speaks up. He has his arm around Arrow and Arrow is leaning his head on his shoulder. Knight says, "This was never supposed to be you, Striker. This was supposed to be me. I never expected she'd have that kind of power over me still."

I'm a little annoyed. "Look, it's not that I can't handle it—"

"I wanted to get rid of her," says Knight. "I wanted to make things better for you." He says this directly to me.

And I remember when I broke down, remembering what it was we all did when we were brainwashed by Dr. Acker, the women we killed, the way we were trained to behave that way. I remember how he held me and he soothed me. I was grateful, even though Knight is frankly dangerous and unhinged. He loves me, though, and that...

well, it's good to have someone like Knight on our side.

"I wanted to make it better for all of us," says Knight, turning to include everyone in this statement. "But the truth is, I only made it worse. If she wasn't here, everything would be different."

"She'll cooperate now," says Lotus. "If she does, maybe we don't have to kill her."

Calix stops tending her bite for a minute. "Come on, sweetheart, how do you figure that?"

Lotus turns to look at him. "Well... I don't know."

"We can't let her go," says Arrow darkly.

She sighs, her shoulders slumping. "Yeah, I guess I know that. If she gets free, we're in danger."

Everyone's quiet, and the silence stretches on and on.

"So, Calix bit you," I say finally.

Calix pulls off from tending again. "Yeah, we have so many things to talk about, like, what's going on with our teeth?"

"Oh, is that abnormal?" I say.

"And what's with Knight and Arrow?" says Calix. "Now that I'm scenting that, it's... what the fuck?"

"That's abnormal, too?" I say.

Calix groans and goes back to licking Lotus's neck.

I look at Knight. "You couldn't stop Arrow from attacking our omega, I noticed. You couldn't stop yourself either."

Knight sighs. He shoves the hand that's not wrapped around Arrow into his pocket.

"But you said that biting him meant that you'd be able to—"

"I know what I said," mutters Knight.

I throw up my hands. "You know what? I'm hungry. Anyone else hungry?"

"Starving," says Calix.

I go into the kitchen and open up the refrigerator. It's basically empty except some condiments on the shelf. I open the freezer. Well, then. This is more like it. There's meat up there, frozen meat. I sort through it, but it's not exactly labeled. I don't really know what it is.

I take out some ground something-or-other. Might be beef. It's probably beef, but it's sort of freezer burned and it's hard to tell what the actual color is. "I think there was Hamburger Helper." I open up a cabinet, and yup, sure enough, two boxes. I take those out and start looking for a skillet to cook this in.

Knight wanders into the kitchen and picks up one of the boxes. "They eat this kind of stuff in the Polloi?"

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“Oh, yeah,” says Calix.

“I thought it was like, clean food, farms, stuff like that?”

Calix snorts. “Okay, well, there’s Polloi and there’s Polloi, so you got to get that straight, first.”

“What’s that mean?” I say, and I’ve found a skillet. I put it on the stove. It’s a gas range, so I turn on the flame and then adjust it before I put the skillet down. Then I empty the bag of frozen meat into the skillet. It lands with a plunk and sits there, sizzling, ice crystals melting. Yeah, this is definitely ground beef.

“I’m trying to tend my bite here,” says Calix.

“Is it complicated?”

“You were a priest. You have to understand that there’s the rules of a religion and there’s how people in the religion actually live,” Calix says.

I guess I understand that.

Lotus strokes his hair. “Well, I’m curious, too. Because I’ve heard that the reason Polloi go into heat and ruts on schedules and we don’t is because of impurities in modern culture and diet, like if we stopped drinking alcohol and eating McDonald’s and stuff, we’d be better off.”

“Right,” says Calix, “and the doctrine of the Polloi is no alcohol and to eat fresh food

from farms and things, but the doctrine of the Polloi is asking too much of most of the members of the Polloi. We don't all have farms, for one thing, and not all groups believe in the alcohol prohibition."

"Oh," says Lotus, nodding.

"Yeah, it's up to the Vasilissa, a lot of the time," says Calix. "Penelope's old school. No booze out here. But where I grew up, it was much laxer on that. Neither this pack or my old pack had farmland or anything like that. Everyone was supposed to go out and work, but the closer you were to the Vasilissa in terms of bloodline, the more likely you were to actually sit on your ass. The money all got turned over to the Vasilissa, though. She was supposed to divide it evenly amongst everyone for food and things? But, uh, she kept more of it than she gave out. We ate cheap. A lot. Ramen. Rice. Beans. Hamburger Helper." He goes back to tending Lotus's bite.

I speak up. "So, you're saying that the ideals of the Polloi might be noble, but the execution of them is often corrupt?"

He shrugs.

Lotus bites down on her lower lip. "Why'd you bring us here, Calix?"

He doesn't answer. He just tends.

6

lotus

IN THE DARKNESS, my stomach full of beef and powdered cheese and noodles, I can hear Dr. Acker in the basement. Even though she has her mouth taped shut, she is whimpering in pain, and I can hear that.

I am pinned against Calix, who fell asleep with his mouth to my neck, and Striker is in front of me. Knight and Arrow are on the other side of him, all twined up. I don't know what happened regarding that bite of theirs, to be honest, and I don't know what it means for us that Calix and I are the only ones bonded.

I can feel him now, and when he talks about the Polloi, I feel his pain splashing through me, dark red, so dark it's almost black. He hated it here. I can't imagine why he brought us here at all, and he doesn't seem to know either.

All I want is to be safe.

I want to be bonded to my mates. I want them not to be triggered into killing machines at the drop of a hat. I want somewhere we can live where there's no threat of law enforcement or Cedar Falls coming after us. I want a nest. A real nest.

All I want...

Maybe it's actually a lot.

Maybe I'll never have any of it.

Why won't that woman stop making noise?

I wriggle out of Calix's arms, and I climb out of the makeshift nest we've made here. I am only wearing a nightshirt, so I put on a pair of leggings and then I go downstairs into the basement.

Acker sees me when I pull the chain on the hanging light down there, bathing the place in yellow-ish light, and she cringes from me in fear.

I go to her and yank all the tape off of her mouth.

She lets out a loud sob.

I roll my eyes. “Cry me a river, lady.” I sit down on the floor, facing her, crossing my legs.

She shakes her head at me. “Please.”

“Stop,” I say. “Stop trying to make me feel sorry for you.”

“Let me go,” she says. “I don’t know how to turn off whatever it is that triggers them, okay? I don’t know. If you let me go, I’ll never tell anyone where you are. I promise. I’ll—”

“Stop,” I say again.

She collapses in fresh sobs. “You’re going to k-kill me no matter what I do, aren’t you? There’s n-no way to save myself?”

“What were you thinking when you decided to train human beings with amnesia like animals?” I say.

She snorts, looking up at the ceiling. “Oh, please.”

“What were you thinking when you started using their sexual arousal to control them, when you started stimulating them sexually? Did that excite you or—”

“I was trying to make them useful,” she says. “After the reaction to the injections

would affect certain alphas a certain way, there was nothing to do with them. They were worthless. I made them useful.”

“Useful to kill omegas?” I say. “Who even needs omegas killed?”

“That was never the intent,” she says. “I thought they’d eventually be able to find kidnapping victims or runaway children, that sort of thing. I started with omegas because it was easier for them to track them.”

“Kidnapping victims?” Does this woman believe that or is she blowing smoke up my ass? “What if they killed the kidnapping victims?”

“I would have trained them not to do that,” says Acker. “I was getting closer and closer. It wouldn’t have been long until I would have been ready to move to the next level. Digger was going to take some convincing, because he worried about the fallout from anyone discovering the way we’d been experimenting on human beings. But I knew that—” She grimaces, cutting herself off quickly.

“What did you know?” I say. “What were you about to say? That alphas weren’t really human?”

“No,” she says.

I should kill this woman now.

“I don’t think that,” she says. “But I don’t think it would be hard to convince people that our hounds weren’t really human anymore. Their capacity for thought had been diminished so much—”

“You’re disgusting,” I say to her.



“Maybe,” she says. “But sometimes you have to cross moral lines in the pursuit of knowledge. I needed to know what would happen. I had to discover it. If there were sacrifices made in the discovery, it was worth it.”

I gape at her, horrified.

“Sometimes, that has to be done,” she says. “It’s for science. It’s for knowledge, and that knowledge helps the whole of the human race.”

I stand up, glaring down at her. “You better think of some way you can help my mates,” I say to her. “Because if you don’t, I am going to kill you, and it will be slow and painful. I will cut things off you, you bitch.” I pick up the duct tape and brandish it.

“So vicious,” she says to me. “I was always surprised how much the omegas fought, how willing they were to hurt us. Maybe the truth is that you aren’t human, omegas and alphas. Maybe you really are just wild animals.”

I tape her mouth shut again, grim.

When I get back to the nest, Calix is sitting up in bed. “Where were you?”

“Nowhere,” I say. “I was nowhere, doing nothing. I feel like that’s all that keeps happening. I feel like, whatever I do, even if it seems like I’m going to get somewhere, I’m stuck getting absolutely nowhere.”

He pulls me into his arms. “We’ll figure this out. We will.”

I want to believe he’s right.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

But everything feels hopeless right now.

knight

CALIX'S ALARM GOES off early and he gets up to go in to work at Cedar Falls. I get up, too, because I smell coffee brewing.

Calix points at me when I come into the kitchen. "Not taking you to work with me today, not like last time, okay?"

I smile sheepishly. "Yeah, I wasn't going to ask."

He's doctoring up his coffee, and I see there's some in the pot, so I pour it into a mug for myself. "Hey, I thought you said it was a thing we could do to each other, bite each other. I distinctly remember you saying it was about something in our saliva that would make the bites scar."

"You're talking about you and Arrow," he says.

"Yeah, you said something about the scent."

"It scents... I've never scented anything like that," he says. "When I said that we could bite each other, I was talking about something cosmetic. Sometimes alphas bite betas or other alphas or whatever, but it's just for show. It's a mark on their body, that's it. There's more to it with you and Arrow, isn't there? It's a bond."

I nod. "It is, yeah."

“Well, I don’t know how that’s possible,” he says. “As far as I know, that’s not something alphas can do to each other.”

“But maybe it’s because of the scent match?”

“Maybe,” he says. “And maybe the weird teeth shit is because of that, too.” He pauses, thinking about something, then lifts a finger. “Hey, you know who might know something about this?”

“I obviously don’t,” I say.

“Okay, so, one thing about this pack that’s weird is that some of Penelope’s sisters are still here, omega sisters. She has two, who could have gone off and started their own packs. They could have been Vasilissas in their own right. They were subservient to their mother, but once she was gone, there was no reason to accept Penelope as their ruler. But they did. One of them is an elderly woman named Kyvelki. She’s an omega, and she’s a little eccentric—okay, a lot eccentric. She’s a teller.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s like a cleric, essentially. A revered and religious position. She knows a lot about Polloi lore. She trained, when she was a girl, in the Polloi tradition, and she had to memorize a lot of the ancient tales and wisdom. Anyway, if anyone knows about scent matches, it would be her.”

“So, okay,” I say. “I could go talk to her?”

“No, definitely don’t,” I say. “That would be very disrespectful. You can’t just go visit an omega, if you’re an alpha. Maybe Lotus could go, but we need to get Penelope’s permission first, probably.”

“Why can’t I go visit her?”

“You’re an alpha,” he says. “She’s an omega. Not only that, you’re an unclaimed alpha. She might ask you to fuck her or something. She’s so highly ranked, she could do that.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“What’s that look on your face?” he says. “You can’t go fuck this omega. I mean, she’s old, anyway, like really old.”

“So, how likely is it she actually does want sex?” I say. “I could flirt with her.”

“How would Lotus feel about that?”

“Well, considering that Lotus is currently fucking all of us, I would think—”

“You know how jealousy goes outside of the pack,” he says. “You saw how she got about Arrow’s wife.”

That’s true.

“Besides, you’re just not getting this,” he says. “You could go to that omega, and she could be so offended that a lowly alpha like yourself would dare to approach her that she could have you executed.”

I shift on my feet, furrowing my brow. “What kind of place is this, Calix?”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

He sighs. “Yeah, okay, I didn’t think things through before we came here. I think partly I had forgotten how bad it is here.”

“They hate alphas?” I say.

“No, not if we keep to our place,” he says.

“Which is to be subservient?” I say.

He shrugs.

“That just doesn’t make sense,” I say. “If we’re supposed to be so subservient, why is the sex the way it is? Why do omegas submit to alphas in bed?”

“If we’re not subservient, why do omegas need more than one of us?” he counters.

I lift my chin, thinking about that.

“Look, I don’t know what I think, exactly,” he says. “I don’t think that either designation is subservient to the other. But we both have the capacity to control the other in various situations, and that’s undeniable.”

“Maybe,” I say.

“Look, I have to go to work today,” he says. “But the next time I have a day off, I’ll go and talk to one of Kyvelki’s alphas, see if he can find out any information for us about the teeth or the bites with you and Arrow, or anything else we need to know

about a scent match.”

“So, you think that’s the best way?” I say. “Talking to one of her alphas instead of going straight to her?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Definitely.”

Which is why, after he leaves, I finish my coffee and get myself dressed and go wandering around the grounds.

After our conversation, I’m careful not to speak to anyone who scents like an omega. But I do chance a conversation with a beta woman who’s standing outside on her back porch hanging up wet sheets.

“Hi,” I say.

She looks me over. “You must be one of those weird alphas who’s staying in the punishment house.”

“That’s me all right,” I say. “Name’s Knight.” I offer her my hand.

“Oh, right, you’re one of the secular alphas. Introducing yourself and everything.” She snickers.

“That’s, uh, not done here.” I close my hand into a fist and pull it in against my body.

She laughs a little. “No, it’s fine. You stopped to talk to me for a reason. Is there something I can help you with?”

“I wanted to know about Kyvelki’s mates,” I said. “Who are her alphas? Where could I find one of them if I wanted to try to talk to them?”

“Wow,” she says, raising her eyebrows. “You think they’ll talk to you?”

“Am I being crazy to think that?” I say.

She tilts her head to one side. “What do you need to talk to them for?”

I’m thinking about how to explain.

“Got to be because you’re a scent match,” she says. “I heard that. That’s true, then?”

“It’s true,” I say. “We just don’t know anything about it. We don’t know what to expect.”

“And you think Kyvelki might.” She nods. “Yeah, it’d be worth a shot.” She clips the last clothespin in place and runs her palm over the hanging, wet sheet. “You play chess at all?”

“A little,” I say.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“Theodorus, he’s one of her mates. He likes chess. If you were to challenge him to a game, he’d like that.”

“Good to know,” I say.

“He hangs out around mid-morning down by the pond,” she says. “Good luck.”

“Thanks for your help,” I say.

7

striker

“SHOULD I BE worried about Knight having disappeared?” Lotus is saying as she comes up the stairs from the basement.

“He’s fine,” says Arrow. “I can feel him in the bond. He doesn’t want us to interfere.”

“Oh, does that mean we shouldn’t interfere, though?” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “This is Knight we’re talking about.”

Lotus taps her lower lip. “Good point. Arrow, can you take us to where he is?”

“All of us?” I say. “We can’t leave Acker here entirely alone.”

Lotus makes a face. “Right,” she says.



“Arrow, go and bring him back here,” I say. “Whatever he’s trying to do, he can tell us about it before he does it, right?” I turn to Lotus for backup.

She shrugs. “That makes sense to me. Arrow, bring him back.”

Arrow spreads his hands. “And what if he doesn’t come?”

“Well, he has to,” I snap.

Arrow draws back. “You’re in a mood, man.”

Lotus puts a hand on my shoulder. “You need to calm down, don’t you? When was the last time you emptied your balls?”

I turn to her, mouth dropping open. “You didn’t just say that?”

“Well, it’s not fair,” she says. “We all had sex recently, but you didn’t. You and I will go to the nest. Arrow will go get Knight. And—”

“I want to talk to you,” I say.

“Okay,” she says. “We can talk and fuck.”

I think that through and decide I can find absolutely nothing wrong with her logic, actually. It sounds like a relief, if I’m honest. Am I in a bad mood because I haven’t gotten off lately?

Lotus tugs me into the room, pushes me down on the mattresses, and climbs on top of me. She helps me remove my shirt, runs her hands over my chest, and then unbuttons my pants.

I shut my eyes and sigh, feeling even more relaxed.

She takes me out, fists me as my knot begins to expand, and begins to gently jerk my erection. “There you are, Striker,” she breathes. “Look at your big, beautiful cock.”

I grunt. “Uh, about talking, though...”

She continues to jerk me. “What did you want to talk about?”

“I just... I think...” Oh, yeah, this is going to be really hard to concentrate. I’m going to have to choose between my erection and communicating about this. I decide I can make it quick. I’ll just explain myself to her really fast, and then she can get me hard again. So, I concentrate on what I wanted to say, not on my pleasure. “It’s about Acker.”

“Acker?” She’s still playing with me.

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

Okay, I'm still hard. "Yeah, I don't think we should kill her," I say.

"I don't want to kill her," she says, rubbing her thumb over the sensitive part of my cock, right behind the head.

"I don't either," I say, my voice growing thick. "Which is why I think we should do something else."

"Like..."

"I don't know exactly," I say, "but I think the biggest problem is if she would tell anyone about us, right? So, what if we could make it so she couldn't do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure, exactly," I say. "But it would be poetic if she was stripped of her personality. If we returned her intact, but—you know—brain damaged."

She considers. "That is poetic."

"But I don't know how to do that to someone," I say.

"I wonder if Calix has access to anything at Cedar Falls that would work," she says. "We should ask him."

"That's a good idea," I say, grinning. Okay, well, this problem seems entirely solved. Also, the way she's touching me is amazing. I shut my eyes.

She giggles. "You smell so good right now, Striker."

I chuckle. "You were right about needing a little release, I think. I could be close."

"Where do you want to come?" she says in a little coquettish voice. "You want to be inside me? Or in my mouth? Or come all over me?"

"I don't even care," I say. "What about you, sweet thing? Should take care of you first."

"No, you first," she says, stroking me. "This is about you."

"Well, then, at least, you decide where you want me to come," I say, sighing in happiness. "I'm just lucky that you're touching my dick, beautiful."

She giggles. "I want to taste you, Striker."

I groan. Fuck, how did this even happen to me? How did I ever get this woman? She's so amazing. I'm a very lucky man. "That's so hot, you know that?"

She's rearranging herself so that she can get me in her mouth. "I love the way you taste, Striker," she says as she licks around the head of me.

I gasp.

"All of my alphas taste a little different, but all of your tastes are ones I want to savor," she says. "I want you to spill yourself all over my tongue, baby, all over my throat. Can you do that for me?"

"Uh, fuck," I pant.

She sucks the head of me and then comes off. “Answer me, alpha, can you paint my throat with your come, baby?”

“I can,” I whisper. I really, really want to.

She takes me into her mouth again.

Oh, hell, I’m not going to last very long at all. She takes me all the way into her mouth, practically swallowing the head of me, and then she eases up just to lick the head of me, and then she goes back down again, lips to my knot.

I come with a shout, unable to stop myself. She feels too fucking good.

She takes her time swallowing me as I pump into her mouth.

She licks me over, getting every last drop of me.

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

Then she crawls up to snuggle with me and I kiss her, tasting myself on her tongue. She's mine. My omega.

arrow

I FIND KNIGHTcrouching in the woods near a little pond. He's watching some old guy set up a chess board on a table overlooking the pond.

"Lotus wants you to come back," I say to him.

He doesn't look at me. "I know."

"You know?"

"I could feel it from you," he says. "It's weird, because it's not like I can read your thoughts, right? Just that I get this sense when you have a strong motivation of some kind or other. Are you getting the same thing from me?"

"Yeah," I say. "I am. I knew you were doing something and you didn't want to be dissuaded from it."

"This thing with us, it's, uh..." He blows out a noisy huff of air. "Anyway, that's why I'm going to talk to this guy. To hopefully find something out."

"So, what? You're just ignoring the fact that our omega wants you to come home?"

"I am," he says. "But it's for a good reason."

“Can you even do that?” I say. “How can you do that?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “It’s not like we have to do what the others order us to do, at least not always. This is why we need more information. I’m going to go play chess with that guy.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“You don’t have to do anything,” he says, and then he gets up and walks away from where I’m crouched in the woods.

I consider going after him, trying to argue with him, but I get a sense through the bond that he’s not going to bend on this, and I sense it would be futile.

So, I just stay where I am, and I watch.

I finger the bite mark on my neck and I watch him shiver as I do it.

I don’t even know what I think about it. There hasn’t been time to think, not since we left the facility, really, but since we left my family’s house in New Jersey, things have been moving really quickly. Having Acker in our basement is a big problem. Having her be able to make us attack Lotus—twice—is horrifying.

Knowing that I almost attacked her on my own, just because I started thinking about her blood makes me feel entirely unstable.

I had thought that Knight’s bite would steady me, but it didn’t do a damned thing when Acker triggered us last night.

Now, I wonder why I’m thinking about this instead of watching Knight with this guy. I wonder why I didn’t ask who the hell this guy even was or why he’s playing chess

or what Knight is doing here.

The hell of it is, I used to be a police detective.

I was good with details.

What's going on with me?

More and more, it feels like that life belonged to someone else and that I'm not even that guy anymore.

Which begs the question, who the hell am I, then?

The old man is seated at a small table still rooting around in a wooden box to set up the chess pieces on the table. He is working on the black pieces first, though he has already put the white queen in place. He catches sight of Knight and he looks up at him, his expression curious.

Knight raises a hand. "Hey there. I hear you're the man to find if someone wants to play chess. Theodorus?"

The old man chuckles. "That's me, all right. You must be one of those alphas that Penelope let in, hmm? I've never seen you before."



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“That’s right,” says Knight. “Name’s Knight.”

“Unclaimed,” says the old man, sniffing the air. “That doesn’t seem too wise on the part of your omega.”

“We’re, uh, working on it,” says Knight. “We don’t know anything about any of it, you know? We didn’t grow up learning about it. Out there, in our world, everyone just wants to suppress everything about us that makes us different.”

“Sure,” says Theodorus. “That’s what I’ve heard.”

“So, can I play?”

“You any good?”

Knight shrugs. “You know, to be honest, I barely remember how to play. But it’s boring here. No TV, no cell phones, nothing like that. It’s, uh, I’ll get better if you give me a chance.”

Theodorus laughs. “Fine, boy. You’re lucky I’m hard-up for chess partners. Sit down.”

Knight sits down.

Theodorus begins handing him white pieces.

Knight sets them up and only makes a few mistakes, which Theodorus corrects.

“So, why haven’t you bitten your omega?” he says to Knight.

“Well, we have some issues,” he says. “We keep getting violent every time we get close. She’s got one bite, but the other three of us are having trouble with it.”

“Violent?” says Theodorus. “Truly? Against each other, you mean?”

“No, against her,” says Knight.

“Against your omega?” Theodorus is aghast.

“I told you... issues,” mutters Knight.

“But you smell...” Theodorus tilts his head. “I heard it was a scent match.”

“That’s what they tell us,” says Knight. “I don’t know anything about scent matches. Other weird things are happening. I bit one of my mates, one of the other alphas, and we, uh, we’re kind of connected now. Also, our alpha teeth... I don’t really know what’s up with that. All Calix said was that it wasn’t normal.”

“Alpha teeth?” says Theodorus.

“Yeah, like when your teeth expand in your mouth before you—”

“What?” says Theodorus, looking him over. “I suppose it feels like an expansion, I guess, sort of, but I don’t think anyone’s teeth actually grow. What do you mean?”

“Uh...”

I feel a sudden tug through the bond, and my own teeth start to expand in my mouth, just like they did before I almost bit Lotus. I gasp at the sensation.

Across the way, Knight's teeth are expanded, too. Somehow, it affected me through the bond when he did it—or he needed me to be affected before he could do it to himself? Whatever the case, Theodorus is shocked.

He gets up from the table and starts sweeping the chess pieces into the wooden box he brought along. “You, boy, need to come with me.”

“Come with you where?”

“We should talk to my omega,” says Theodorus. “She’ll want to see this.”

lotus

AFTER I SUCKStriker, he goes down on me. We get into a little bit of a cause-and-effect issue, where we get the other off which turns one of us on, so that turns the other person on, and we can't end the sex. It just goes on and on.

Which... not exactly a problem, per se, I have to admit.

Eventually, I tell him to knot me, though, and he does, and fucks me nice and deep and toys with my clit and we both come like crazy, and then, locked together, we kiss and kiss for a while.

I notice he has his teeth, probably because we're kissing, but I don't say anything to him about them.

I'm not sure why I'm able to control myself like that, why I'm not begging for his bite. I wish I could say it was predictable, when I get lost to the pleasure that way, and when I don't. But it's not. Sometimes, I feel like I have my wits about me. Other times, I feel like I'm out of my head.

I break the kiss and reach up to touch one of his teeth. "You thinking about biting me, alpha?" I breathe.

He pulls back, shocked. "Oh, shit, they did that again, huh?"

I giggle. "You don't seem to be able to tell when this happens."

He sits back, still knotted into me, and examines his canines, furrowing his brow as he runs his finger over the tip of them.

I feel his cock jerk as he does it.

I giggle. "That feel good?"

He laughs, embarrassed. “They’re very sensitive, yeah.” He turns his attention back to me, running his tongue over them. “I would, uh, love to bite you, Lotus,” he breathes, his voice reverent and turned on.

I like it. I writhe a little, stuck here on his knot, spread out beneath him. “I don’t know if we should, though.”

“We shouldn’t,” he says, firm. He drags a hand over my body, between my breasts, down my belly. “No one else is here, and I don’t want to lose my shit like Arrow did. You and I are knotted together—” He groans. “Fuck, we shouldn’t have done this. We’re alone. Why wasn’t I thinking?”

I throw an arm over my face. “Okay,” I say in a defeated, quiet voice, “I can’t live like this.”

“Like what?”

“You know like what,” I say. “Like I have to be thinking all the time that each and every one of my mates is a threat to me.”

“I will never hurt you, Lotus,” he says in that same firm voice.

“Not on purpose,” I say wryly. “Not if you’re in control of yourself. But how often are we not in control of ourselves, Striker? How often are our instincts taking over us? And how do we ever trust each other?”

“These aren’t instincts, sweet omega,” he says, gently pulling my arm away from my face. “These are unnatural tendencies put there by a mad scientist who high-jacked our instincts for her own purposes. We already fight them.”

I look into his eyes. “It’s just that it feels like I barely have time to breathe before

everything gets turned on its side. And Calix tended my bite last night until it scarred and then just left. And I can feel him, in the bond, and it's like, it's waves... now and again... I really feel him and then... I forget we're even bonded because it ebbs out..." I blow out an annoyed huff of air. "Nothing is predictable. Everything's strange and intense and new and I don't understand any of the rules."

He nods. "Yeah, I see what you're saying." He tilts his head. "That's interesting, about the bond, how it varies in intensity. That's actually a good thing. I think it might drive us all crazy if we have each other chattering away in our brains all the time."

"It's not like I can hear his thoughts," I say.

"No?"

"No," I say, "but if he's got a strongly held conviction, it comes through. Like earlier, he was insistent that some omega needed to be taken outside to calm her down, and I got that really clear. Not in words, though, just... I knew it."

"You think he felt us?" Striker's grinning.

I gasp, hand over my mouth. "The sex, you mean? Fuck, I didn't even think of that."

"That's going to be incredibly inconvenient," Striker says, but he looks delighted. "You think he feels it when you come?"

"Well, when we were... right after the bite," I say, "yeah, we could feel each other."

"Shit, that's going to make sex pretty awesome," he says, shaking his head.

I reach out to brush my fingers over his belly. All of my mates are very perfectly

shaped, though I imagine this has a lot to do with the way they were treated in the facility, with nothing much to do except lift weights and do strength training, but they are all muscular and I like feeling his warm firmness jump under my touch. “Maybe you should bite me, sweetheart.”

He sighs, carefully lowering himself over me.

We kiss again.

He kisses my jaw and then runs his teeth over my ear lobe and settles in a spot just beneath my ear. He licks that spot and grazes me there. “This is my spot,” he tells me in a husky voice. “I just know that.”

“You do?” I gasp.

“Yeah.” He kisses it. “But I don’t want to hurt you, baby girl. I’m in control of myself right now, and I think I might lose it if I bite you. I’d rather do it when our mates are around, or when we’re sure that Dr. Acker isn’t a worry anymore.”

Suddenly, I’m stabbed by a rush of want for his bite so intense that I’m right on the edge of begging.

And Calix is there, surging in me, smothering it, keeping the words from forming. He won’t let me beg for the bite.

Because we’re bonded, I know this isn’t out of jealousy or anything like that. No, he sensed within me what I desired and he is acting out of service to me, protecting me from myself.

In that moment, my love and gratefulness to Calix overflows, spilling out like gleaming bright golden liquid rushing out of a fountain. I gasp and sigh at the sensation of it.



I clutch Striker against me and he rocks into me, moving his knot against me, and that feels good, really good, and I whisper that I love him, Striker, but I send through the bond to Calix how much I love him, and he feels it.

Also, I feel him react to the idea I discussed with Striker, the poeticness of taking away Dr. Acker's memories.

How did I communicate that to him? I didn't mean to.

I'm not sure if I want my mates to know every little thought that flits across my brain. Some things I think aren't for anyone else to hear. Some of my thoughts are just momentary worries. They don't matter.

Calix is retreating from me, though, the sensation of him drifting out, leaving me here, with Striker, present. We are kissing again.

8

knight

ARROW WANTS TO follow me, but I communicate with him through the bond not to. It's weird, this kind of communication, because it's not thoughts or words exactly. It's just that I let him know that we don't spook this guy and he gets that and changes his mind and decides to hang back.

Theodorus tucks his little wooden box full of chess pieces under his arm. The table out here is a chess board, so he doesn't need to bring a chess board. He wanders up the bank, away from the pond and I follow him.

I don't look at Arrow as I go past him, but I can feel him.

I've never been in love before, so this feeling I have with him, it's weird. I like it, but it's weird. And I kind of don't like the fact that I like it, if that makes any sense. It makes me feel a little bit out of my depth.

Theodorus walks between the trees and then onto a little worn footpath which winds between the shacks and trailers that are all set up haphazardly out here. Eventually, we come to a house that has a front porch with four mismatched rocking chairs sitting on it. The house has two stories and the siding was painted tan at one point, but it's peeling, so I can see that someone painted it mint green before that, because that color is beneath. The house also looks sort of lopsided, in a way I can't quite explain, as if it's just not quite sturdy.

But as we go in the front door, it feels sturdy. It feels like a well-built little house, which is more than I can quite say for all of the houses out here.

"Kyvie!" calls Theodorus as we step inside. "Kyvie, I want to show you something."

Inside the house, we enter a small area with a staircase to the left and a doorway to the right. The doorway leads to a living room. There's no one in there but I catch sight of a couch with a big shaggy dog lying on it. It lifts its face, curious.

Theodorus walks past the staircase and the dog comes out of the living room to nose its way out. It lets out a half-hearted scold of a bark at me. Who am I and what am I doing here?

"Shut it, Bowser," says Theodorus.

Past the staircase, we emerge in a kitchen. A woman is sitting at the kitchen table while two men are standing at the sink. One's washing dishes and the other is drying.

The woman smiles as we enter. "That was a quick chess game, Theo."

“No chess this morning, Kyvie,” says Theodorus. He seizes me and shoves me forward. “Show her the teeth.”

The men at the sink have stopped what they’re doing to look at me.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“This one of the secular alphas?” says one of them.

“Yeah, the ones Penelope let in,” says Theodorus. “Go on, show her,” he says to me.

I lost my expanded teeth during the walk over, and I have to think about biting to get them back. I remember how it felt to sink them into Arrow, the way it lit up this bright line of connection between us, and it makes me react. I open my mouth.

“Well!” The woman, who I think must be Kyvelki, gets up from the table and comes over to me. Her hair is long and gray, and I think about how often I’ve seen women who don’t color or style their gray hair, but she doesn’t really look old, or... there’s something about the way she carries herself, maybe, something that’s different from the way old women carry themselves. This womanknowsshe’s important. She expects everyone to defer to her.

I realize that old women usually aren’t that way.

Huh.

Anyway, she’s got her fingers in my mouth now, touching my teeth, making little exclamatory noises. “This is like the stories.”

“Exactly, folklore, about the first alphas,” says Theodorus.

“Yes, but that’s foolish,” she says. “Or I always thought...” She nods for me to sit down at the kitchen table.

I do that. I want to say something, to ask her questions, but I remember how Calix was about this place, and I decide that being quiet until spoken to might be the best way to navigate things.

“You two, back to washing,” says Kyvelki to the men, who are probably her mates? And she’s telling them what to do?

They go back to the sink, silent and obedient. I feel that in two ways. One, I don’t like it because I don’t like anyone telling me what to do, and I’m personally affronted by any attempt to control me. Two, I think of being made to be subservient because all men or all alphas or all... anything are supposed to be subservient, and I don’t like it.

The urge to say something, to rebel, grows stronger.

And I feel Arrow suddenly. He’s not telling me what to do. Arrow senses, somehow, that would make me react in the opposite way. Instead, he’s just there, strong and quiet, and inhabiting me, and somehow, his presence makes it easier to choose my pack over my independence. I want to protect them more than I want anything else, after all. We need this information. I will get it. Even if it means being demeaned and watching demeaning things happening.

Arrow himself has described my masculinity as toxic, but...

It’s not like I think that the natural way of things is for men to rule over women or something, so I’m horrified by this inversion here for that reason.

I mean... I don’t think that’s why.

I think I’d be horrified the other way, too. I’m pretty sure I would.

This place... whatever it is about this place... I don’t know if it’s a good place.

Kyvelki eyes me. “You wouldn’t know the stories about the origins of alphas and omegas would you?”

“Uh...” I furrow my brow, because it’s not as if the Polloi folklore is entirely unknown by us. “Something about wolves, right? Like, weren’t we raised by wolves?”

““We,”” she echoes.

“I mean, not us, but don’t you believe that’s where the alphas came from?” I say, cringing, thinking about being stoned to death. How much literal stoning to death do the Polloi do these days, anyway? I seem to remember some civil liberties case where they said that the Polloi were not allowed to do their ritual stoning-to-death thing when an alpha decided he didn’t want to die with his omega. However, I understand it’s pretty common for alphas in an omega’s pack to shoot themselves right after she dies. They just do it.

It’s not like they can stay, anyway.

Supposedly, it’s illegal for them to be forced to commit suicide, but the Polloi basically say, ‘Kill yourself or get out.’ And most of these guys are in their eighties by this time. Where are they going to go?

Kyvelki is talking. “Yes, there’s a component of wolves in the story. What happens is that a king... he has different names in different stories, but he marries a young and beautiful woman who already has twin boys, brothers, who also have various names in various versions of the tale. The king does not wish his new wife to have children except his own, so he contrives to take the children away from her. He intends to kill them, but at the last moment, he can’t do this unspeakable act, so he simply leaves them in the wilderness to die. But the Goddess sees, and she takes pity on the boys, and she causes a she-wolf to come and to allow the boys to nurse along with her litter

of pups. When the boys grow up, she gives them teeth, teeth by which they can claim. And the boys come back to the kingdom, where the king had cast them out, and the king has new wives in addition to their mother. The twin boys use their teeth to bite the king's other wives and they become the first omegas, transformed by the bites. Is that the story you heard?"

"Something like that," I say. "But I also thought that the first omega was like... Snow White or something? Like she gets thrown out of her kingdom by a wicked stepmother—"

"Step-parents tend to be evil in these tales," says Kyvelki. "It's odd, really, I've always thought, especially since in our culture, there is often no real clear way to know paternity of children. It's like a relic of some older culture that has seeped into our folklore, these stories about step-parents." She laughs. "Of course, not all of our stories are that way, but the origin stories, they seem to build on the culture outside of alpha and omega interaction."

I just nod. I don't know what to say, and I don't want to say the wrong thing.

She looks me over. "You scent as if you're afraid of me."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“No,” I say, too quickly, as much because I never admit to being afraid of anything as because I think she’s going to think that’s rude.

“Someone warned you off me?” she says.

I shake my head. “No. Just... omegas in general, I guess. I got laughed at today by a beta for daring to introduce myself.”

Kyvelki smiles very widely. “Ah, I see. I’ve often wondered about secular alphas, what they’d be like. If they’d be fun to break.”

I do my best not to react to that. I remember thinking about flirting with this woman for information, doing more than flirting... Calix could have been right that I should have left this to him. I wonder if this was a bad idea. Am I out of my depth here?

Kyvelki laughs. “Oh, your scent, little secular alpha!”

Guess I’m doing a terrible job at not reacting. I clear my throat. “Sorry about that. Look, we... no one else has teeth like this?”

“No,” she says. “No one does.”

“So, how do you do bites, then?” I say. “Just with regular human teeth?”

She shrugs, pulling down the collar of her shirt so that I can see the bite marks there. I realize they don’t look like our bite marks. They look like a full set of teeth coming down. They’re lumpy and half-moon shaped, with indentations for each of the teeth.



Ours are two twin teardrop shapes, fang marks.

“What?” she says. “Your expression?”

“Only that our bite marks look different,” I say.

“But you haven’t bitten anyone,” she says. “I can scent you’re unclaimed.”

“I did bite another alpha,” I say. “And... we leave behind fang marks, not teeth marks. It’s different.”

“Yes, your teeth don’t seem like wolf teeth,” she says. “They seem almost... snake-like.”

I nod. “We’ve thought that.”

“There is another story,” she says. “Another origin story, in fact. You’re right, the one that is commonly told is the one similar to your Snow White story, Bella and the Six Hunters. In this story, a woman wishes to be the king’s only wife, and she sends one hunter after the other to go and kill her rival, the beautiful Bella, or whatever she is called in the stories, and each of them end up being unable to kill her and pledging to protect her instead. There are different versions of this story. Stories like this are often obsessed with cannibalism. It’s present in a lot of early stories. Anyway, the wicked wife is often serving her husband organs she thinks belong to Bella, but it turns out the hunter will have just killed some animal and brought back its liver or heart or lungs or whatever. You’ve heard stories like that before?”

I admit I have.

“Anyway, in that origin story, Bella is the first omega and the hunters become the first alphas. It’s different than the wolf origin story, wherein the alphas turn the

omegas. In this case, the omega turns the alphas. It's the one that is most commonly used in our religious traditions. Bella is considered a type of the Goddess herself, in other words, she is not the goddess, but she is a representative of the goddess in that story, a sort of Goddess stand-in. You're aware we worship a goddess, aren't you?"

"I am," I say.

"And you? You worship a God?"

"I..." I lift my shoulders. "Not real religious, really."

"Yes, a secular alpha," she says with a laugh. "We see all of your culture as lacking divinity."

She's not exactly wrong, I guess. But I don't know if that's really a weakness? Maybe in some ways, it is. I don't think their way of being is superior, however. I don't want to move in here with the Polloi permanently, I have to admit.

"But the origin story I'm thinking of, it's perhaps a variant of Bella and the Six Hunters," she says. "There are similarities, anyway. In this story, there is a step-parent, not a rival wife. The wicked stepmother casts the girl out because she is a competitor with the girl's father for his affections. The girl goes out into the desert where she passes three days and three nights in prayer to the Goddess, begging for safety. The Goddess takes pity on the girl and sends to her protectors in the form of cobras, who fight off the predators that come to hurt the girl. But then, the cobras see the girl herself and they come for her."

"They bite her?" I say.

"They do. The girl does not try to protect herself but instead prays to the Goddess for protection and surrenders to the cobras as they descend upon her. And the Goddess

rewards the girl by changing the cobras into men, her lovers, even as their fangs are stuck inside her skin. Then, together with her cobra men, the girl creates an oasis in the desert where she rules along with the Goddess's favor and she is rewarded with riches in harvests and many children and all of those sorts of things. According to this tradition, the Polloi are all descended from her."

"Right," I say. "So, which of these is the real story?"

"They are all the real story," says Kyvelki.

I raise my eyebrows, but I don't argue. I don't know what to say to something so preposterous. Obviously, though, all of those stories are made up. None of them actually happened.

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“If you mean, of course, which of them is a piece of historical fact, the answer is none of them,” says Kyvelki.

I swallow, confused.

She laughs. “Let me ask you, something, secular alpha. Why do we tell stories like this?”

“I...” I shake my head.

She sits back in her chair, though, and waits.

It’s quiet, and the silence stretches on, and it becomes clear I’m going to have to answer this question.

So, eventually, I say, “Uh, to know what happened.”

“To know what happened,” she says. “But why do we care what happened?”

“It’s good to know,” I say. “I guess because...” I’m struggling here. “Well, if something similar happens, we’ll know, or if there’s something about what happened that gives us more information about what we know now, or that kind of thing, maybe?”

“So, we are interested in the past only to the extent that it affects the present,” she says.

“I mean... I guess.” But not only, right?

“So, these stories, they are about the present, not the past.”

“Uh, okay,” I say.

“We can learn things from stories,” she says. “We interpret them to mean what we wish to know about ourselves.”

I don't say anything.

“You disagree?” she says.

“I just... I think, when we're trying to find things out, what we really want is not an interpretation, but the truth.”

She laughs again. “Well, what is truth, though? Truth is in the eye of the beholder, isn't it?”

“No,” I say. “No, truth is truth.”

“These stories, about the first alphas and omegas, we tell them amongst our people to affirm our story over and over again. It is always thus with us. We are persecuted. Someone, usually a jealous someone, wishes to hurt us, to hurt our people, and we must run and take shelter. We are saved by the Goddess herself, who has given us the gifts we need to triumph through our own designations. This is our truth, you see, and this is what our stories tell us.”

I see what she's saying, but... it's not very scientific, is it?

“You, secular alpha, what story did you want to hear? One in which you and your

pack were different than every other pack because of your sharp, fang teeth? Perhaps you thought there would be a story about some chosen pack, one that was here to free us all from some oppressive scourge, and the fang-like teeth would be the sign that you were here to save us all. Were you thinking that?"

I wasn't thinking that, not at all. But I understand why she says it, because what else could it have meant? The idea that we're a scent match, that our teeth are different, all of that, it seems to denote us as some kind of pack of superheroes. I guess maybe I did wonder if there was some prophecy we were supposed to fulfill.

I would have scoffed at it. Not very scientific, after all.

But maybe I did think...

I give her a sheepish look. "So, uh, nothing like that, huh?"

"Of course there's something like that," she says. "Why would I have mentioned it otherwise?"

I sit up straight.

"Yes, at the end of the story with the cobra-men, sometimes, there's a coda to it. It says that once all alphas had snake-teeth, but that it was slowly bred out of us, and that if it is activated again, it is a sign that a new age of purity has begun and the Goddess will lead us all to crush our enemies under our heels."

I furrow my brow.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“But,” she says with a shrug, “there are all sorts of vague promises about how the Polloi are going to rise up and crush our enemies under our heels. However, you see, all our stories are about being under the yoke of oppression. So, I wouldn’t take it to mean anything, not really. We have these vague promises in order to keep us together, so that we won’t give up hope, and so that we’ll have the will to persevere. But our lot in life, as members of the Polloi, is to be under constant oppression.”

“What?” I say. “You think it’s inevitable?”

“I don’t know,” she says, shifting in her seat. “I suppose it’s not inevitable. You could, I suppose, leave, become secular, as you have. But if I wish to be Polloi, there is no way to be Polloi and to be anything other than oppressed. That’s part of the definition of what we are.”

I swallow.

“And,” she says, “if one leaves, one must stop being Polloi to achieve freedom from oppression. Perhaps it is inevitable.”

“Well...” I clear my throat. “Just because your people have always been treated really badly by every major country and all mainstream governments doesn’t mean... you know... that it’ll always be that way.”

She laughs.

“I mean, I know how that sounds, but—”

“You’re correct,” she says.

“I also don’t think you’re going to crush your enemies under your heels,” I say. “I mean, some kind of insurrection, it just wouldn’t work.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” she says. “That’s why our options are to exist under tyranny or to erase ourselves.”

I shift uncomfortably in my chair.

“Was this helpful, secular alpha? Why did you come? What story did you want to hear?”

“I wanted to know...” I think about it. “If we’re all right. If we’re going to hurt her. Our omega, I mean. If we have a way out, where we can be together and be happy. And, um, I guess I was hoping you wouldn’t tell us that we were something different. I was hoping you’d tell us that we were normal.”

“Ah,” she says, nodding. “Well, here’s what I have for you, then. Listen closely and look right here, secular alpha.” She gestures for me to look in her eyes.

I obey. It feels right to obey her, I have to admit.

“Once, there was an omega who lived many, many years ago in a country by the seaside. When she was a small girl, she visited an oracle, who told her that she would be killed by her alphas, if and when she ever bonded them. The omega vowed she would never bond any alphas at all, but time passed, and she went into heat, and she could not help but beg for the relief she could find in an alpha’s caress. She wished for an alpha’s knot, for an alpha’s bite. She could not stop herself, then. She submitted to not one but two alphas, and in the course of the heat, out of her mind, she begged for their bites.



“Now, she was bound to alphas,” continued Kyvelki, “though she had sworn she would never allow such a thing to happen. She was determined that she would not allow these alphas to kill her, however, so she locked them up in a dungeon, and she only let these alphas out when her heat came upon her. At first, the alphas begged those who tended them in the dungeon to intercede on their behalf with their omega, to ask her to be merciful and release them. But the guards came back with word that the omega would not be moved to let them free. It became clear that the only way these alphas would ever be free of the dungeon was to escape. And because they were bonded to the omega, the only way they could get free of her would be to break that bond. And because the bond was a life bond...” Kyvelki shrugs. “I suppose you can guess how that turned out.”

I can, but I don’t know what to say.

Is that supposed to mean something?

How does it answer any of the questions I asked?

“Off with you, secular alpha,” says Kyvelki. “I’m tired after so much talk.” She gets up from the table and walks out of the room.

The other alphas, the ones who I realize have finished washing the dishes quite some time ago, follow her out without even looking at me.

Theodorus shrugs at me. “You better go,” he says.

I get up from the table. “Right. I’ll go.”

Well, that was a big, fat waste of time.

calix

TODAY HAS BEENa bit of a trial.

First of all, I did not want to leave my omega. It seemedwrong. In the Polloi tradition, it wouldn't be considered ideal, but it might have happened, I suppose. It would have depended.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

If I had been of a bloodline close to the Vasilissa, if my pack had been important, then I would have either not had a job at all or I would have taken time off for the job. But if I'd been way down the line, near the bottom, then my pack wouldn't have mattered. I can see there being pressure, even in the wake of bonding an omega, to say that alphas of that caliber should leave the nest and go make money for the pack.

I was taught that taking money from the outside world was noble. Sucking on that massive organism like a parasite, bleeding it dry. Anything we could do to benefit ourselves, whether it was taking jobs from them or charging them outrageous prices for our homemade jam, we did it.

But if things had been different, I would never have left her.

Of course, if things had been different, she would have bites from all of us, and we all would have been in that nest with her, naked, and we would have spent the day knotting her.

So, leaving her at all this morning, it wasn't easy, but I did it.

I actually had an idea that what I was going to do today was to look into getting some drugs that could knock Acker out. Because if we're worried about her getting free, the best thing we could do would be to sedate her.

I've been stealing rut-suppression drugs from Cedar Falls since I first got this job. I originally got the job as a janitor to have access to the places in the facility where those kinds of drugs were kept. Due to my alpha abilities meaning I was good at soothing omegas, I ended up working with them.

Anyway, I can get to the drugs. That's not a problem.

So, I had plans of doing that today, and that was a big reason why I went in to work.

I don't know why I'm keeping this job exactly, only that it's a means to income—which none of us have—and that I feel we're tied to Cedar Falls in some way. Whatever that way is, it hasn't come to closure yet.

None of us are really in a position to make big decisions right now. Things are in flux, and we're just hanging on, really.

The second reason the day has been trying has been the new bond.

I had some idea what this would be like, to have bitten an omega. People say that bonds mean you're aware of each other, and that you feel each other, that you feel as if you're sort of inside each other.

But I'd also heard that a scent-match bond was a lot more intense, and I had braced for that.

Now, I don't know if this is more intense, but I know it's inconsistent. Sometimes, I feel nearly at one with Lotus, as if we are not separate people at all but just entirely connected. Other times, I don't really feel her at all. When we sync up, though, it tends to be, uh, jarring.

It was jarring when she was just worried about Knight's whereabouts. That cut into me, and it made me panic. Did I need to go back? Was something wrong? Had Knight been kidnapped or hurt or worse? I knew he had mob connections. Maybe they had come for him, and—

But then, no, it all wiped out, because Arrow knew he was fine.

And she was just gone.

The effect of that? To be trying to do your job and overtaken by someone else's panic, to feel the panic as your own, to add to the panic as it permeates you...

And then have it turn off?

Well, it makes me feel insane.

And that was before the sex part started, which, uh... well, then.

Having your omega's second-hand orgasm wash through you while you are pretending that you're not wicked turned on and trying to do your job? It's, um, yeah, not entirely comfortable.

Clearly, this can't go on. There's got to be some way we can protect ourselves from unwanted bond leakage—for lack of a better term.

However, the good thing about this leakage is that I get another idea, which is that I can look for some kind of drug to give Acker that can completely take her out as a problem. If we could give her amnesia—if we could give her the same kind of brain damage she's given the alphas and omegas in the facility?

Well, I can't think of a better solution to this entire problem.

Of course, by the time I get into the room where the drugs are all kept, it's late, and I'm tired, and I realize I don't entirely know how to do that.

So, the way that my mates were damaged was an accident. No one knows why some people react badly to the drugs and other people don't, or else, obviously, they would have fixed it so that it wouldn't happen anymore.

I sit with that thought for a moment before I have another thought.

Would they have fixed it?

## Page 37

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

Would someone like Acker have had a vested interest in making sure she got her little lab rats even if she knew she could have solved the entire problem?

Huh.

That's something that requires further research. But if she did know, well, maybe that's a clue to the way we could fixallof the omegas and alphas in this facility.

I steal some sedatives and then I let myself out of the room.

As I'm walking down the hall, a security guard is coming down the opposite way. I give him a wave and a smile.

He looks me over, not smiling back.

So, I become even more relaxed, projecting as much of an air that I'm supposed to be here as I can.

"You're here late," he says.

"Am I?" I take out my phone to check the time. "Well, headed home now. You have a good night." During all of this, I have not stopped moving, because I'm projecting that everything's fine, just fine. I cross him, heading for the elevator.

"You too," he calls after me.

As I climb into the elevator, I know that's probably not a good sign. That guy is

suspicious. He wasn't suspicious enough to stop me this time, but he'll remember if he sees me out of place in the future.

Damn it.

lotus

I WANT TO be on Calix's lap. I missed him. I realize I am drawing strength from this between us, this bond we have. He lets me sit on his lap, eager to be close to me, eager to give me whatever I need.

But I feel something else from him, a strain.

He is not meant to be the only alpha bonded to me. He is meant to share that bond. He needs me to get my other bites.

We are in the kitchen of the punishment house, and Striker is the only one there, because Arrow is out collecting Knight.

Arrow came back at one point, to tell us that Knight had gone off with some alpha to find out information from an omega here on the compound. We thought he'd come home after he'd gotten whatever he could out of her, but he never came back. Arrow said he was doing a lot of thinking.

Finally, when Calix got home from work, I told Arrow to get Knight back here.

Calix sets a plastic bag on the table. I can see the syringe, complete with needle, and the drug that will be injected, in it.

"It's a sedative," Calix says. "We can knock her out. If there was a clear sort of drug there that caused longterm amnesia, I would have taken it. But if there is, I don't



know what it is.”

“No, of course you don’t,” I say, snuggling in to him.

He absently rubs at his bite mark on the back of my neck.

It makes me purr.

He purrs back.

“Okay,” speaks up Striker. “Well, so we think the idea is a nonstarter?” I told him that I’d communicated it to Calix somehow.

“No, not saying that,” says Calix. “I think it requires more research. We need to understand why it affected you guys the way it did. Was that a freak accident or was it something preventable? I was thinking that if they knew what the variable was, they wouldn’t have given it to people with that variable.”

“But she might have,” I say. “Because she said this thing to me about how you sometimes have to make moral sacrifices in the search of scientific truth. And if she thought she could learn things, she’d do anything. Anything at all. How many omegas did she have you guys kill, anyway?”

Striker flinches. “Too many. But you’re right. That’s exactly who she is.”

“Yes,” says Calix. “Believe me, I’m right there with you. So, I thought, okay, well what if she did know, and what if we can find that data somewhere. I got into the network and I have access to all the files.”

“You did?” I say. “When?”

“Well, when I was trying to find you guys, I called a friend of mine who has access to this sort of thing,” says Calix. “So, anyway, I’m going to do a deep dive into that. Or if we could get a laptop, I could go in to work, and you guys could be logged in here.” He makes a face. “Okay, no, because there’s no internet here. Maybe if we had a mobile hotspot...” He shakes his head. “Not the point. What I’m trying to say is that if we can get in, we can possibly find out more than how give Acker amnesia. Maybe we could figure out how to save all the omegas and alphas who are locked up down there.”

I turn to look at him. “Yes,” I say.

Striker nods. “If we can do that—”

But the door’s opening.

I get up off Calix’s lap to look as Arrow and Knight are coming inside.

“Hey,” I say. “There you are. Where have you been? What’d you find out?”

“Nothing,” says Knight, looking very frustrated. “Absolutely nothing. It seemed like I was getting somewhere, but no matter what I do, I’m stuck getting nowhere.”

It’s exactly what I said the other night. I go to him and wrap my arms around his body.

He folds his arms around me.

“Where were you, though?” says Calix.

Knight sighs, letting go of me. “You’re going to be annoyed.”

“Oh, you did not go to Kyvelki!” says Calix.

Knight scratches the back of his head, sheepish.

“That’s fantastic,” says Calix, sarcastically. “Did you piss her off?”

“She seemed to mostly find me amusing,” says Knight, his voice dull.

“Thank Goddess for small favors,” mutters Calix.

“She just told me a bunch of stories,” says Knight. “The last one... I don’t even know. She made me think it was going to give me answers, but it had absolutely nothing to do with our situation.”

“Stories about the teeth?” says Calix. “What’d she say?”

“Uh, it’s a lot,” says Knight.

Calix gestures for everyone to sit down at the table. “Tell us what she said, Knight.”

Everyone sits down.

Knight starts talking. He tells us about going to play chess with Theodorus and about how Theodorus took him to Kyvelki.

Calix concedes this was not a terrible way to go to see her, but that Knight shouldn't have gone on his own.

Then Knight starts relating all the stories about the origins of alphas and omegas, none of which I've heard before, but they all do sound like folklore stories, I have to admit. He tells us how Kyvelki said that the stories are told to confirm that the Polloi have only two choices—endure tyranny or erase themselves.

Calix snorts. “Well, how about option three, which is to stop the tyranny within the goddess-damned religion, Kyvelki?” He gestures at the ceiling, shaking his head in disgust.

“Yeah,” says Knight, nodding. “Good point.”

Calix holds up his finger, as if he's seconds away from launching into a diatribe of some kind. His nostrils flare. And then he lowers his finger, shaking his head. “Go on. What else did she say?”

Knight massages the bridge of his nose, searching for his train of thought.

The final thing he tells is the story about the omega who brought about her own destruction by actively trying to thwart it. It reminds me of other stories like that, tragic stories, like Oedipus Rex or something.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

So, when he's done, I say, "The point of stories like that is always that everything's fated, and you can't stop it, no matter what you do."

"Oh, is that the point?" says Knight. "I've been trying to figure it out, and maybe I've been too specific. I was wondering if it she was trying to say that you were making us violent by expecting violence from us."

"No," says Striker, dismissing this. "We can't risk her. We need to be careful, that's all."

"Well," I say, "if we can sedate Dr. Acker, so we can be sure she's not a problem, and if we have other alphas standing by in case someone gets out of control—you know, I'm thinking that Arrow should have just bit me that day, Knight. After you'd bitten him."

"It's risky," says Striker.

"But I think it's a little too much on Calix's shoulders right now," I say. "I think he needs not to be the only one bonded to me."

"Hey, I'm all right, omega," Calix assures me.

I lean back and kiss him on the lips. "I know you'll do everything you can for me, baby, but it's our job to look out for each other. We're pack. I can feel your strain."

The ends of Calix's lips turn downward, but he doesn't say anything.

“Anyway,” I say, “we should do it one at a time. First, we knock out Acker, then, I get another bite. The question is who it should be.”

“You decide,” says Arrow.

“I don’t know if I should,” I say.

“Then Striker,” says Arrow. “Because he’s got no bond at all.”

“Okay,” I say, turning to look at Striker. “That good with you?”

Striker takes us all in, looking into everyone’s eyes, and then he nods.

“About that story, though,” I say, furrowing my brow.

“It’s bullshit,” says Knight. “The truth is, no one here knows anything about anything. They don’t know why we have the snake teeth. They don’t know if we’re anything special. They sure as hell don’t know how to turn off the brainwashing that Acker did. We are on our own here. We’re just wading out into the void. The only way we’re going to find things out is by trying things out and seeing what happens.”

“Yeah, but that’s a risk,” says Striker. “It’s a risk to our omega.”

“We have to believe we won’t hurt her,” says Knight. “She’s...” He looks at me. “You’re the center of everything, and you know that, and we all know that. We feel it.”

striker

CALIX AND LOTUS go down to administer the sedative to Acker.

The rest of us stay upstairs, milling around, worried.

We all know it's better we don't see that woman, but none of us like that she has so much power over us.

I'm nervous.

I get to bite her, after all, and it's a big deal.

When I was sixteen, I had never done anything with a girl. Or a guy, for that matter, not that homosexuality was particularly encouraged in my upbringing. I grew up in a pretty Catholic family. When I went to study to become a priest, I was exposed to a lot of different ideas, and I learned that Catholicism was a very big umbrella, big enough to encompass a lot of different ideas.

And that was when I began to understand that if God was really omnipotent and omnipresent, he had to be big, too. Big enough to hold contradictory ideas, even, to embody one thing and also embody the opposite. If God created everything, God would know about everything, and God wouldn't eschew anything.

But back then, it didn't seem like that.

There was a girl.

She liked me a lot. This was communicated to me by another girl, who came up to me in the lunch line one day to ask me what I thought about the first girl. Her name was Natalie.

## Page 40

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

I had never thought anything about Natalie one way or the other, was the truth of it.

But it was a novel idea, being wanted like that.

So, I asked her on a date.

She said yes.

We went out.

It was fine.

I even kissed her, I remember, but it was...

I got this feeling when I was out with her, this feeling of a power differential, because I could tell that she liked me more than I liked her, and it seemed sort of wrong for me to continue to string her along when I could tell my feelings for her weren't nearly that intense.

So, I politely ended it.

And then I spent years looking for the intensity within myself and never finding it.

At some point, I decided I never would. I'd be a priest and devote myself to God. I wouldn't need a romantic relationship, because I would be a servant to all God's children. I would feel love in that way, and in some ways, it would be better than a romantic connection, I thought.



For so long, I thought I'd never experience anything like that.

Now, I'm going to bite Lotus.

I am going to create a life bond with my omega, and I am going to tie myself forever, to this, with these other four people. The five of us will be a pack, and we'll be inextricably intertwined.

I'm nervous.

I can't wait.

I never wanted anything the way I want this.

What if something goes wrong?

Eventually, Lotus and Calix come back up.

Then, it's awkward.

Calix says that we could have some privacy, if we want.

I shut this down. "No, if something goes wrong, I want to be sure that I can't hurt her. I want you guys there to stop me if I lose it."

"Well, what are the odds that we all lose it?" says Arrow in a subdued voice. He looks at Knight. "I was hoping our bond could stop it, but it couldn't."

"That was with Acker there, though," says Knight. "She's asleep, right?"

"Right," says Lotus.

“We’ll be fine,” says Knight.

“You always say that,” I mutter at him.

“And we’re always fine,” says Knight. “Aren’t we? She’s alive, isn’t she? She’s not permanently damaged. She’s—”

“Here’s what I think,” I say. “I think I should just do the bite.”

“That’s what we’re doing,” says Lotus, confused. “What do you mean?”

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“I mean, no sex,” I say. “Just... bite.”

“You think that matters?” she says.

“I think that Dr. Acker got us to associate blood and erections, blood and sex, blood and claiming. She... there is blood.”

Arrow sucks in a sharp, noisy breath. “There is blood,” he says.

“Okay, you guys,” says Knight. “The bite is completely different—”

“And that’s how she did it,” I say. “She used the bite. That’s why it’s locked in. So, we decouple the bite from sex.”

“Yes,” breathes Arrow, nodding in relief.

Lotus shrugs. “I guess it’s fine.”

“It seems... a little sad,” says Calix. “That sex, the bite sex, it was phenomenal.”

Lotus nods. “Yeah, but we’ll have a bond afterwards, Striker. We’ll have phenomenal.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’d rather be your bitten and bonded alpha and sacrifice the bite sex.”

She brushes her hair away from her ear, remembering where my spot is. “Well, go ahead, then,” she whispers, her voice going flirtatious and eager.

I step forward and brush her skin, right there,myspot.

And then, nothing happens, because I don't have my teeth. I even open my mouth and touch my normal canines.

“Little performance anxiety there?” says Lotus, teasing me, smiling widely. “Can't get your teeth up?”

“Uh... it just occurs to me that the only time they show up is when I'm also aroused.”

“Is that safe?” she says.

I sigh. “I don't know.”

“We can do the teeth without arousal,” says Arrow to Knight. “Right? You did it to me earlier today. Like twice.”

“Yeah, I can do it,” says Knight, and opens his mouth, and there are the teeth, and Arrow makes a little pleasure noise, and then he's got them too.

“But that's... like, because of your bond,” I say quietly.

The two exchange a glance and shrug at the same time before turning back to me.

“So, how are you doing it?” I say to Knight.

“Uh, I just think about biting,” says Knight.

I turn back to Lotus, and I think about sinking my teeth into her flesh, think about her skin parting underneath the sensitive sharp tips of my teeth—which are expanding, but so is my cock, and I'm getting a knot—and then I'm suddenly awash in the idea

of blood.

Lotus's blood.

Omega blood.

But then I'm right back in the lab, Acker behind me as she forces me to stare at a slideshow of broken and bloody female bodies, some of them just gore and others sexual in the way they're rendered—there are drawings of men fucking wounds, biting cartoon hearts, fucked up things—and she's talking in that Acker voice of hers.

Such a good boy, Striker.

Kill her for me.

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

Kill her for Dr. Acker.

Make me proud.

And before I can stop myself, I've tackled Lotus to the floor, and I have pressure on her skull, holding her head down as I grit my teeth together, thinking about tearing her apart.

10

knight

ARROW WANTS TO lose it, but I stop him. I push through our bond and hold him in place.

Calix is yelling.

I put up a hand and tell him to stay right there, no sudden moves. "He could snap her neck, okay," I pant. "He could do it. Just stay still."

"This is your fucking fault," Calix says to me. "You said—"

"I know, I know," I say. Carefully, I ease my way down onto the floor, right behind Striker. "Good boy, Striker," I say, my voice higher, like hers.

If she came up the steps right now, God only knows what would happen, but she's sedated down there. I'm okay. I know I'm okay.

I need to be okay.

I have my teeth, and I scrape them against Striker's neck.

He stiffens.

"It's okay, Striker," I say. "Good boy. Take your alpha's teeth."

Striker turns on me. "I'm lead," he says in a low and certain voice.

But I notice he's lifted his hands from where he was holding Lotus down, so that's good.

"You submit to me," he tells me.

"We're going to see about that," I say, and then I bite him.

It's different than when I bit Arrow. He submitted to me right away, and it just felt right between us, like we were meant to fit together that way.

This is... not like that.

Striker is incredibly dominant, and part of me knows that. Part of me naturally wants to submit to him, so the bite, it feels wrong.

He's fighting, not outwardly, but inside.

When I bit Arrow, I just rushed into him, like a flood of liquid light, and I filled him up and he liked it.

This... Striker won't let me in.

I push anyway.

He pushes back. When he pushes back, it feels good. My balls get tight, and my cock feels like it's going to burst out of my pants. I groan, clamping my teeth down harder, scrabbling to cup his crotch.

He tips his head back when I touch his hard cock, which makes my teeth tear at his skin.

He cries out.

I lap at his blood.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

He thrusts his crotch into my palm.

I squeeze him, still pushing, my teeth buried deep inside him. Take me, I think. Give yourself to me.

He groans. “No, I can’t. I can’t, do you get that, Knight? I want to, but—”

You can, I insist, clamping down on my bite. For her. Give it up to me for our omega.

“Show me your cock,” he gasps.

I’m still latched on to his neck, my teeth deep in him, but I obey him immediately. It’s a relief to let the air kiss my erection, which is practically painful at this point.

“Good,” he says, glancing down our bodies. I’m behind him, but I tip my pelvis forward so that he can see me. “That’s good, Knight.” He reaches back and takes it in one hand, my dick. He begins to stroke me.

I moan, into the wound I’ve made at his neck.

“This is mine,” he informs me. “I give in, but you give me this.”

Yes, I think. My cock belongs to you.

And the resistance inside him just crumbles as I rush into him like an unleashed dam. I slide into every crevice, and I’m coming, fuck I’m coming, and he’s purring like crazy, his eyes rolled back in his head, and I can’t stop licking this mark I made on

his neck, and...

Fuck.

arrow

I'M CONFUSED.

STRIKER tries to explain, but he's blissed out.

He and Knight take off all their clothes and retreat to the nest.

We all kind of get it, we think.

Our connection to blood was made the bites trigger us. Knight was always turned on by blood, so that was never connected to Acker for him. She connected to him in other ways, but not that way.

So, if he bites in on me and Striker, he can stop us from losing our shit when we bite the omega.

Theoretically, anyway.

Lotus is shaken up, and Striker hurt her, and she's tired and worried and sick of not being sure if she can trust the men she's falling in love with.

Me, Calix, and Lotus stand in the doorway of the room, watching Striker and Knight take turns sucking each other and try to negotiate who's going to take the other in whose ass. I want to see it the minute Knight agrees to let his virgin ass get filled, I have to admit.

But also...

Lotus.

I show her my teeth. I have them right now. They haven't gone down.

"I can do it," I say. "You say Calix is strained, and you seem strained, too."

She touches my chest. "But if it goes bad again..."

"I don't have to bite my spot," I say. "Let's do it somewhere safe, okay?"

"But you want your spot!" she says. "Don't you?"

"I'll bite you there some other time," I say.

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

She makes a little noise. “Oh, shit, I’m going to be fucking covered in bite marks, aren’t I?” She is very turned on by this.

“We don’t have to make it scar,” I say. I know this instinctively. There’s no choice with the first bite, but after that, there’s more control.

“Huh,” she says, blinking at me.

“Anyway, we’ll all three go out to to the kitchen table. You sit in Calix’s lap, and you have a weapon of some kind. I’ll bite your hand or your ankle or something, and you use the weapon and run if I lose my shit.”

Knight speaks up, coming off Striker’s cock, which he’s in the middle of sucking. “I’ll stop him, omega, don’t worry.”

She looks at Calix, and they communicate wordlessly for a minute. Then, they both nod.

We end up in the kitchen with her on his lap. She offers me her hand, palm up.

I kiss the center of her palm and then just... do it. I rear back my head, letting my teeth swell, and then strike. I bite the fleshy part of her palm, just below her thumb.

It’s swift and intense, like an explosion of confetti behind my eyes, like being dowsed in glitter. Shit.

It’s exactly like the way it felt when Knight bit me and absolutely nothing the same.

She's so sweet, our omega, so sweet and wonderful and I fit in her perfectly, like there are all these little nooks and crannies that are me shaped, and as I settle into them, we both feel how good that feels, like she's been waiting for me to settle into them for all this time, and I've been waiting to get lodged in her here, like I've been waiting to come home for so long.

I'm here.

I'm home.

I tend my mark, eyes closed, feeling like a set of balloons that have gotten free from their strings and are rising up into the horizon, set free inside my omega. Everything's good. Everything's perfect.

She crawls into my lap, holding onto Calix.

Oh, shit. Calix.

I just bumped into Calix as I'm making myself at home in her, but the bump, it was like, a merge. I feel Calix, through her, and Calix... wow, I like Calix.

She kisses my temple. "Your spot, Arrow. Now."

I lap at her, shaking my head.

"He can't, sweet thing," says Calix, scooting over to the chair next to mine. He rubs her back. "He'll tend this mark, okay? But don't worry. This is good." He smiles at me.

I smile back as I lick the sweetness of my omega's essence. Fuck, yes. This is very fucking good.

lotus

I LEAN AGAINST Arrow's chest. He has my hand against his mouth, licking his mark. I can't see him from this angle, but I know exactly the kind of insouciant, proud-of-himself look that's on his face.

Calix is on my other side with his arm around me.

We're all looking at Knight and Striker on the bed.

Knight's lying on his back with his legs spread and Striker is, you know, inside him.

"What?" says Knight. "It's less gay if you bite him first."

Arrow licks a long stripe up the middle of my palm, which sends delicious shivers through me. "I really wanted to watch this, I have to say, you losing your ass virginity."

"Do we have to call it that?" says Knight, but he's grinning. He looks very happy.

"I'm knotting him," Striker tells us, glancing at us over his shoulder.

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

I walk into the room, leading my bonded alphas behind me, and I climb onto the bed. “You guys look scrumptious and smell even better.”

Knight winks at me. “So do you guys.”

Striker catches me and kisses me. “Hey,” he says, looking into my eyes. “I fucked up.”

I swallow, holding his gaze. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Regardless,” he says, “I don’t want to hurt you, omega. I almost hurt you badly. And it’s not the first time.”

“Yeah, but come on, it’s all fixed now,” says Knight, patting the pillow next to him in the nest. “Lotus, sweet pretty thing, I got them both on a leash now, and he’ll bite you and then I’ll bite you, and then we’ll all have crazy good sex for, like, days, and it’s going to be great.”

I giggle, settling in next to him.

Arrow settles too, still tending.

Calix is standing over all of us, arms crossed over his chest.

“I’m not on a leash,” says Striker, rotating his hips, thrusting his knot into Knight.

Knight groans, shutting his eyes, his scent going bright. He liked that. “Fuck you, yes,

youare.”

Striker looks at me. “But, yeah, I think it’ll help.”

“But we can’t do it tonight,” says Knight, beckoning with one hand to Striker, who moves in and gives him access to the mark on his neck. Knight licks him lazily. “We’re distracted.”

“Fuck yes, we are,” says Arrow.

One bite at a time seems like a good pace. They’re very intense, the bites. With Calix, I felt like we merged into one being, and with Arrow I feel like he filled in all these missing spots within me, made me whole in ways I hadn’t even quite realized I was empty. Arrow is steady and sweet and devoted to me. I’m devoted to him, too, but it’s different than with Calix.

I shut my eyes and bask in the feeling as Arrow licks his mark.

“I’m not sure I should leave you guys alone with her,” says Calix.

I open my eyes. “Wait, what?”

Calix sighs. “This almost went really bad, Lotus. I don’t know if you have any idea how bad it almost went. He needed to just move his hand and he would have snapped your neck.”

I seem to remember someone saying that, but whatever it was that Striker was doing to me in that moment didn’t even really hurt that much. It was just firm. I couldn’t move. He had me pinned. I actually kind of liked it, because I like it when my alphas hold me down and take me over.



Striker moves so that he's looking at Calix but Knight still has access to lick his neck. "Yeah, but it won't happen like that again, because Knight and me—"

"Yeah, Knight said he could stop Arrow, and then you all went off the chain when Acker got free," says Calix. "I'm not going to Cedar Falls tomorrow. I'm calling off work. I may have to quit."

"Wait," I say. "Arrow and I have a bond now. He's not going to hurt me."

"We don't know that," says Calix. "The bond with Knight and Arrow did jack. Trying to bite you tonight made Striker go ballistic—"

"Yeah, but Arrow was fine this time," I say. "And it's because of the bond with Knight." I have a sense of it through Arrow. I'm not exactly connected to Knight, but I feel Arrow connected to Knight. "Anyway, I thought we were going to try to figure out how to save all the omegas and alphas in Cedar Falls."

"Yes," says Knight as he tends. "Because we are the cobra-men superhero scent-match pack who is going to save the damned world."

"The goddess-damned world," I say in agreement. "We're going to fix everything."

Calix scrubs his face with one hand and groans.

I reach for him. "Calix, sweetheart, you're exhausted. Come lie down. You want to knot me? You want me to suck you? You might need that, huh?"

Calix climbs over me. He kisses my mouth and turns to Knight. "Since when did you want to save the world?"

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“I don’t want to,” says Knight. “I want to kill shit. It’s just, you know, fate.”

I snort.

Striker shoves him. “You’re an ass, you know that.”

“Yeah?” says Knight.

Now, they’re kissing, and I look at it and sigh, because it’s so good to see my mates connected. Also, I think I may have some kind of voyeuristic kink for men fucking each other, which... I think that’s going to work outwell, actually.

“I love you,” Striker’s saying against Knight’s lips.

“You’re mine,” Knight says back.

“Just say it back, you dick,” says Striker, thrusting into Knight again.

Knight gasps. “Fuck you, I love you, okay?”

I giggle. I kiss Calix.

He strokes my hair away from my brow, settling between my legs.

“Don’t you want to save the world, Calix?”

“Can we do that, though?” he says.

“Why not?” I say, kissing his chin. “Why the fuck not?”

11

knight

MY PLAN FOR the morning is to bite Lotus.

I think that Striker and I should do it at the same time while we’re both knotting her, one of us in her pussy and one of us in her ass.

I was basically knotted down while I watched Lotus get double penetrated by Calix and Arrow last night. Striker played with me while he knotted my ass, and it felt great, and it was hot as all hell, but it’s only a preamble, and I know that everything is better once we’re all bitten in.

We need to be claimed by our omega.

But early in the morning, earlier than Calix’s alarm even goes off (assuming it is going off, because he said last night he wasn’t going to work, and it’s a long drive to Connecticut and back every day) I wake up and someone is tapping on the window.

I get up, pulling a stray quilt around my waist, and I see it’s Theodorus out there.

He gestures with his head for me to come with him.

I get dressed and go out of the house to meet him.

It’s chilly outside, the autumn air making me hunch into the sweatshirt I’ve put on.

He’s wearing an old-man cardigan, but he seems pretty spry for an old guy. I don’t

even know how old he is. I wonder.

“Walk with me?” he says.

“Sure,” I say and fall into step with him.

We go walking out in the direction of the pond where I found Theodorus yesterday, but we veer off before we get there, and we end up walking through a little foot path in a strip of woods.

It's not until we've been walking for long enough that we're out of sight of any of the houses that Theodorus speaks. “Kyvelki went to talk to Penelope after you left yesterday,” he says, looking around as if he's worried someone's listening.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

I look around, too, feeling his paranoia infect me a little bit. “You’re making me think that’s a bad thing.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure,” he says. “So, I got her to bring me along. They talk over us all the time, you know, talk over us like we aren’t even here. They expect us to do all the work when they make the decisions, because we’re the muscle, but they don’t ask us what we think. They just expect us to do whatever they ask.”

“Who does?” I say.

“Women,” he says, looking at me like I’m crazy.

“Right,” I say.

He laughs. “Yeah, it’s not like that out there, is it? I hear women serve men, not the other way around.”

“It’s... sometimes, maybe,” I say. “But it’s more equal than not, or people try to make it equal.” I square my shoulders. “I don’t know if it really can be equal. We’re not the same, you know?”

He nods. “I do know. And they need us to be their enforcers. They can’t beat their alphas into submission themselves. They need another alpha to do that.”

“Is there a lot of that out here?”

“What?”

“Beating people?” I don’t really care, I guess. A part of me is even intrigued, a little bit, like... if I hadn’t found this pack, and I wasn’t in love with them, maybe I’d have been interested in the idea of being able to beat people into submission. Of course, what do you do with them once they submit to you?

“More when you’re your age,” he says with a little laugh. “The blood’s hotter back then.”

“So, yeah,” I say. “This place is... why do you stay here? I don’t think this is a good place.”

He raises his eyebrows at me. “You’re here too.”

“Yeah, but we were on the run from people trying to kill us and they have law enforcement on their side, and they’ll at least arrest us, if not shoot us on sight, so we needed somewhere to hide out.”

“So, you’re telling me it’s better somewhere else?” He shrugs at me. “For people like us? For alphas?”

“It’s...” I hesitate. “I mean, better is maybe a relative term, because I’m thinking that there are things that balance everything. Like, you don’t get beaten into submission out there, but they don’t want you to ever touch an omega, and they encourage you to be sedated every time you go into a rut, and you’re sort of... suppressed all the time. So, I don’t know. This isn’t a good place, but out there isn’t good either.”

He nods. “Right.”

I sigh, shoving my hands into my pockets.

“I couldn’t leave my omega,” he says. “You get that, right?”

“Even if she orders your mates to beat you?”

“Well, Kyvelki’s never been that way,” he says with a shrug. He considers. “A little. Only in bed. Which can be exciting.”

“Okay, I don’t need to know about that,” I decide.

“Yes, we’re getting off topic.”

“You overheard what they said? Kyvelki and Penelope?”

“She’s bringing the omega who was Calix’s arranged mate here.”

“Wait, Calix had another omega?”

“He ran before he ever met her,” says Theodorus. “And honestly, I might have done the same in his position. She’s not like the omegas here, that one. She already has ten mates.”

“Ten,” I say.

“Some omegas get greedy, even though they don’t have the time or the energy to pay attention to nearly that many alphas,” he says. “They just want more. And this omega is that way. Penelope’s made some snap judgment about your omega, says she’s a weakling, unworthy of her alphas, unworthy of a scent match. Meanwhile, taking an intact scent-match group of alphas, it’d be quite a feather in Selene’s cap.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“Taking?” I say. “What do you mean? You said she has ten mates already.”

“She’d be happy to have fourteen,” he says with a shrug.

My lips part. “We would never...”

“You’re still not claimed,” he says.

“But some of us are,” I say. “We’re working on it. It’s complicated.”

“It’s not complicated, boy,” he says, chuckling. “You just bite.”

“Okay, regardless,” I say, holding up both of my hands. “This Selene person, she can’t force me to bite her, anyway—”

“Sure about that?”

“Yes.”

“They find ways,” he says, letting out a breath and looking off into the distance. “It’s not always about the threat of physical pain. They find people you care about. They threaten them. They find things you want and they dangle them in front of you. They find ways to make you do things.”

That sounds like hell to me. “I take it back. It’s better out there,” I say firmly. “You should get the fuck out of this place, Theodorus.”



He shakes his head. "I love my omega. I live for my omega."

"Well, I live for my omega," I say. "Which is why I would never bite another one."

He shrugs again. "Maybe not. Maybe so."

"Calix has already bitten her," I say. "So this Selene person couldn't have him."

"Not unless your omega was dead," he says.

I draw back, confusion rippling through me. "They're going to kill Lotus?"

"Selene will challenge her, most likely," says Theodorus. "It's an ancient ritual that is almost never practiced anymore. The omegas face off in a series of tournaments to prove physical prowess and skill. It's ridiculous because most omegas these days aren't what you'd call skilled or even physically in shape. But I think it's fair to say that Selene might have a bit of an edge on your omega. I understand she's slight and weak and very submissive, like a beta woman."

"No," I say, very defensive.

He laughs again.

"But you just said she would be killed," I say. "So, what? This tournament is to the death?"

"Not necessarily," says Theodorus. "But if she's gotten bites, it will need to be. If she loses, her bonds will be severed, and death is the only way to sever a life bond. It will be deemed that she is not worthy of alphas, that she is not omega enough to deserve all of you."

“Fuck,” I whisper.

“Yes,” he says. “I thought you should know.”

“Thank you,” I say.

He reaches out and touches my arm, giving my wrist a little squeeze. “Goddess protect you, boy, and your pack.”

calix

I GET UPwhen my alarm goes off, and I notice Knight isn’t in the nest.

I find him in the kitchen, sitting at the table, gazing glumly into a coffee cup. He looks up when I come into the room. “Morning. I was wondering if you were going to work or not.”

I cross the room to see if there’s coffee in the pot, already made. There is, enough for at least one cup. I pour it out into a mug for myself and start another pot brewing. I like a lot of coffee in the morning. “I don’t even know if I am,” I say.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“I think you should stay home,” he says. “Well, actually, I think we need to run.”

“Run?” I’m still working on the new pot of coffee. “What are you talking about?”

“Apparently, Selene isn’t giving up on you easily.”

I stiffen, and I can’t breathe for a second. Finally, I can talk, but my voice is all strangled. “What do you know about that?”

“Theodorus says he overheard Kyvelki and Penelope talking and that Penelope called in Selene to challenge Lotus, because Penelope doesn’t think Lotus deserves us. Theodorus says all of us would be given to this Selene person. Which... not happening, obviously, but—”

“Challenge?” I interrupt. “They don’t do that anymore. The last time they did that, it brought a lot of negative attention to the Polloi, and people went to goddess-damned jail. No one does those omega challenges anymore.”

“You know what it is?”

I bring my coffee over and sit down opposite him. “It’s barbaric and stupid.”

“Theodorus says that if she doesn’t win, they kill her,” he says. “Because that’s the only way to sever a life bond.”

I take a gulp of coffee. “Yeah, could happen. But seriously, the last time anyone did challenges like this was probably in the 1950s. It’s been a long time. It’s bad press for

the Polloi.”

“Well,” he says, eyeing me. “Maybe they’ve been doing it all along, but just quietly.”

I lean back in my chair, contemplating my coffee. “You could be right.”

“This is why you ran?” he says. “This Selene person? She was supposed to be your omega?”

“It was arranged,” I say. “She already had a bunch of mates, way too many. I was visiting my sister, who was a beta but got knocked up by some alpha in a Texas pack. Shit like that happens, in packs like that, where omegas have too many men to keep track of? They’ll mate to like twelve or sixteen men, and they fuck them for a while and then just get bored of them, and those guys will end up with sidepieces, which their omegas will tolerate, because it’s easier than admitting they can’t satisfy twenty alphas, right? So, anyway, I just went to see my baby niece. And Selene—she’s the heir apparent Vasilissa at that pack—saw me, and I guess she wanted me, I don’t know. Two weeks later, it’s all set up. I have to go down there and join that pack and I...” I set down my coffee. “I was never happy in the Polloi, not once in my whole life, you get that? But the prospect of that being the rest of my life, being the plaything of some woman who would eventually get bored with me and who never had enough toys?”

“I would have left, too,” says Knight. “I would have left way before that.”

“No, you don’t get it,” I say. “Leave how? This is all I ever knew. When I left, I left my entire family and I had nothing. I went out into the world with the clothes on my back, no money, no food, no marketable fucking skills...” I scoot down in the chair and gaze up at the ceiling. “It still kind of amazes me I did that.”

“I do get it,” says Knight. “I just have never felt any real connection to people like

that, not until..." He eyes me. "It still kind of amazes me that I care about all of you as much as I do."

I'm a little disturbed by that, but the funny thing is that it doesn't change anything. He's my mate. He kind of scares me, but I trust him. I pick the coffee up again. "We can't leave. What are we going to do with Acker? She's going to wake up here in..." I check my phone. "Half hour, maybe. I was going to dose her again with another sedative, but we want her to wake up and have water or she's just going to die."

He shrugs. "Fuck Acker. Just fuck her. She doesn't matter. Lotus's safety matters. Lotus's life matters."

"Yeah, but if we just leave her here, she either dies—which is better, I guess—or she gets free somehow, and that's not good for us."

"No, true," he mutters.

"Where are we going to go?" I say. "We have nowhere to go. That's why we came here."

"Yeah, but we weren't going to stay here forever, were we?"

"No," I say immediately, even though I suppose, when I first conceived of this idea, I didn't think it through. My first thought was that this would be a place to hide Lotus, who—at the time—was so damaged she could not speak. I thought she might be taken care of here, because she was an omega, and all omegas are given a sense of reverence in the Polloi. So, I figured she'd be safe here.

But then the situation changed, and I don't know what I thought. It was like I had forgotten what it's like to be here, where being an alpha means you're a second-class citizen. We can't stay here. We have to leave.

“I guess,” I say, “I wanted us to have the bites first, before we go.”

“Well, we’ll just do that now,” he says. “And then me and Striker sit in the back seat with her and tend while you drive.”

“Drive us where, though?” I say. “And what the fuck about Acker?” I get up, taking my coffee with me.

“Where are you going?”

“To wake Lotus up,” I say. “It’s her call.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“Why is it her call?” he says, getting up from the table. “You think like them, don’t you? That omegas are in charge?”

I hesitate, because I don’t know if he’s right. “Well, we can’t make the decision for everyone.”

“The fuck we can’t,” he mutters.

I eye him. Yeah, that’s his modus operandi, isn’t it? Knight just acts. That’s the reason Acker is here with us at all.

But that’s also the reason we know this information, about Selene. If Knight hadn’t taken it upon himself to go and make contact with Theodorus, we’d have been blindsided.

“How would that work?” I say. “You think you’ll just bark everyone into submission?”

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “If Lotus were to die, I would...” His face twists, and his lower lip trembles. He looks away, overcome. “I never felt like this in my life.”

“No, I know,” I say, because I do, and because I’ve bitten her, and it’s all more crazy intense now than it was before.

She’s awake now. I feel it through the bond. I may have woken her with my intention to go and wake her up. I feel her soft, sweet presence inhabiting me in the way she can do through the bond, and it’s intoxicating. I can’t help but smile.

She's up and entering the room in moments. "Why do you guys think I can't take this Selene person?"

12

arrow

I WAKE UP to the sound of voices.

"You got all that through the bond, huh?" comes Calix's voice. "Even her name?"

I feel my omega in our bond, and it's wonderful.

"You're projecting it pretty intensely," comes Lotus's voice. "So, yeah."

I need to go to her, because I can't tell what's being projected, but I can tell she's reacting to alarm. I'm not dressed, so I pull on some clothes and join the others in the kitchen.

No one acknowledges me. They're all just talking amongst themselves.

Lotus is insisting she can win some tournament, and Knight and Calix are saying they can't risk that.

I amble over to pour myself some coffee.

"We need to leave," says Knight. "I don't care what you think. This isn't up for debate. We are going."

I turn around in the middle of putting creamer in my coffee. "Hold up, what's going on?"



“We can’t leave,” says Lotus. “We will not all fit in one car, not with Acker to deal with.”

“Shoot her in the head,” says Knight. “While she’s passed out.”

“Well, to do that, we would need a gun,” says Lotus, glaring at him.

I finish doctoring up my coffee and go over to put my arm around Lotus. “Whatever you think,” I say to her. “But I’m really confused right now.”

“Besides,” says Lotus, “I don’t want her dead. I want her to fix you.”

“Not necessary,” says Knight. “I bit them, and that solved the entire problem.”

“We don’t know that,” says Lotus.

“We don’t,” says Calix quietly.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

Striker appears in the doorway to the kitchen, only wearing a pair of boxers. He's kind of delectable that way, hair still mussed from sleep, body on display. I feel a wave of pure lust go through me at the sight of him.

"Arrow, focus," says Knight.

I smirk at him, wondering if that was my lust or his. He did get nailed by Striker last night and seemed to really enjoy it.

"Where's the fire?" says Striker, scratching his flat stomach.

"Look," says Lotus, "can't you guys, like, train me or something?" She turns to Knight. "When is this Selene person coming?"

"I didn't get that," says Knight. "Maybe I can go and talk to Theodorus while he's playing chess this morning or something. I don't know if he does that every morning."

"Who's Selene?" I say.

No one answers me.

Striker yawns. "There's coffee?"

No one answers him either.

"Anyway, I can do it," says Lotus. "When I was in Cedar Falls, I got restrained by

three big, burly guys on a regular basis. I'm stronger than you think I am." Her voice lowers to a growl.

"We are not putting you in danger," says Knight. "Not for the privilege of staying in this place. We don't even want to be here."

"It's true," says Calix. "Being here is not a great option. You really need a real nest, Lotus."

I feel Lotus react in longing to the idea of a nest in the bond. I tighten my grip on her.

She looks up at me, smiling.

I smile back.

She turns to Calix and Knight. "Regardless, neither of you guys think I can do it."

"Do what?" says Striker.

"Compete in a tournament with some other omega. Winner takes the other omega's alphas," says Calix.

"Shit," I say.

"Would I get her alphas?" says Lotus. "Would she die?"

"We're not doing it," says Calix.

"But what I'm getting from you through the bond is that she's practically abusive," says Lotus. She looks at Knight. "You seem to feel like they're all abusive."

Knight shrugs. “Just things Theodorus said were not cool, is all.”

“So, I could do some good.” She looks up at me. “We’re the superhero cobra-teeth scent-match pack who’s going to fix the world, I thought. Now, we’re running with our tails between our legs at the first sign of trouble.”

“We can’t fix the fucking world, Lotus,” snaps Knight. “The world is huge and there are five of us.”

“You’re the one who said it,” she says, glaring at him.

“Yeah, I was post-orgasmic, post-bite, blissed out,” he says. “I would have said anything.”

striker

CALIX ENDS UP calling in to work, because we sit around arguing about this for hours and he misses the window when he could leave and drive there to get in on time. He says that he doesn’t know what that means. He doesn’t have saved up sick leave, so he thinks they could fire him. He hopes that everything is too volatile right then, in the wake of Dr. Acker leaving, for that to happen, but he doesn’t know.

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

He and Lotus go down to check on Acker.

They don't sedate her again.

No one has come to a decision about what we're going to do with her.

I try to take charge a few times, but Knight pushes back against me, and I feel this thing between us, something that's happened because I let him bite me, where we've done something to disrupt the natural way this pack is organized.

I'm supposed to be the dominant one and everyone's supposed to listen to me.

We're all supposed to listen to Lotus.

But none of these things are happening.

I find myself trying to explain to people, in a measured and even voice, that we can't get anything done if we're all just arguing amongst ourselves. We're not going to come to a consensus by arguing, and that's why someone has to be in charge.

I know this from working in the church.

You'd think that people who were all getting together to help others and do charitable work and to volunteer their time would be good at getting along and making decisions, but nothing could be further from the truth.

People, it seems, would much rather talk in circles than do anything. If allowed, they'll

discuss a thing to death. I think people just like to come up with objections to hear themselves speak. They're like, "Oh, no one has mentioned this very unlikely eventuality, I bet I should say something."

Anyway, I learned quickly that it was best to put rules down on everything. I'd say that we'd discuss for twenty minutes and then we'd put things to a vote. (Weirdly, once I did this, there was no discussion, which worried me that I'd made people think that I didn't want to hear their voices and I was impatient. Except. I guess I was.)

I have to admit, in this situation, I agree with Knight, anyway. Not just because he's bitten me and he has the tightest, sweetest little asshole either. But he's right, we should probably leave.

Lotus can't compete in some tournament against another omega.

Regardless of whether she could win or not, it's barbarism.

So, even though I'm in favor of someone being in charge, if she's going to decide she's competing, I don't know if I can agree with that.

How does this even work? How can five adult humans be in one romantic relationship together? Admittedly, this is a pretty heated discussion we're in the middle of, with very high stakes, so maybe it'll be easier when we're trying to figure out things like who does the laundry or how often to vacuum the house, I don't know.

But I have to say I'm not looking forward to the rest of our lives together if this is how it works between us.

Someone needs to be in charge.

And I'm not just saying that because I'm the one who should be in charge.

I swear I'm not.

But hours drag on, and we're not even getting close to any kind of agreement. We're not even really on sides.

Lotus thinks we should stay and that she should fight in the tournament. Arrow is basically backing her up, but he's also voiced agreement for just killing Acker.

Knight thinks we need to leave and we need to kill Acker.

I'm fine with leaving, but I don't want to kill Acker, partly for reasons of my conscience, and partly because I think we might have a shot at getting some useful information out of her at some point.

Calix thinks we should leave, but he's going back and forth on killing Acker.

One thing we've gotten nowhere with is where we would even go.

We still have some cash that we got from raiding Knight's stash of ill-gotten gains from back when he was a mafia hitman, but it's not enough for a longterm plan. We talk a little about contacting our families and loved ones, but no one wants to put them in danger.

Eventually, we're all shouting at each other.

I bark at everyone, shutting down the discussion. "We will all go to separate places and calm the fuck down right now," I inform everyone.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

They all listen to me, sulkily, but they do it.

I go out on the porch, unsure of what to do or think.

Knight joins me. “You’ve got to do that and get us into a car,” he says to me. “I’ll take care of Acker.”

“You couldn’t take care of Acker before,” I say to him.

“It’s different now,” he says.

“It isn’t,” I say to him.

“It is,” he says. “I bit—”

“But no one bit you,” I point out.

He growls at me.

I growl back.

We face off on the porch, and the air feels charged. Are we going to fight, really fight, him and me?

I won’t let that happen. I will use every bit of my alpha power over him to shut down the aggression between us.



He feels that through our bond, feels my resolve and he rears against it, pushing at it through the bond, pushing hard.

I will not give way.

Finally, he pulls back.

I sag into a chair on the porch, panting, exhausted, spiritually depleted. If he pushes again, I don't know if I can hold.

He sits down, too, similarly winded. "Shit, Striker," he breathes.

"We're no good to each other if we're working at odds," I gasp.

"But we have to protect her," he says.

"I know," I say, sighing.

"Where's the line?" he says. "How do we know when to let her have her way and when to stop her?"

"I don't know," I say. "But sometimes, even if you don't agree with something, if you're part of a group, you have to go along with the group."

His eyebrows shoot up. "That's—"

"I know," I say. "I didn't say always go along with the group. I said sometimes."

He considers.

"To keep the peace."

“When it’s not important, maybe,” he says. “But this is important. We need to leave.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say. “But we have nowhere to go.”

He sighs heavily.

We’re both quiet.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

lotus

I END UP in the basement during the forced break that Striker makes us take.

I sit down in front of Acker, who is still groggy from the sedative we gave her. I rip the tape off her mouth, and she turns barely-focused eyes on me and laughs. “I can hear everything you’re saying up there, you know.”

I shrug at her.

“I hear you guys fucking, too,” she says with a sneer. “I hear you all begging each other for knots. I hear it all.”

“You want an apology?” I say. “Sorry that being kept captive is so noisy.”

She laughs again. “I’m touched that you don’t want me dead.”

“I do want you dead,” I tell her. “I do. But I want my mates to be safe and whole more than I want revenge against you.”

“Safe and whole,” she says in a sing-song voice. “What makes you think they weren’t safe and whole back in Cedar Falls? What makes you think you improved anything for my boys, my hounds?”

“Oh, you think that was good for them?” It’s my turn to laugh. “You’re losing your mind down here. What’s your first name, anyway?” I think. I remember I’ve heard it. “Debra, right?”

She grimaces.

“Anyone call you Debbie? You’re losing your mind down here, Debbie.”

“They’re mine,” she says to me in a low voice. “You know it and I know it. And you can all play little games. You can let them bite you, or you can let Knight bite them, or whatever it is you think you can do with all that designation shit, but I am inside them in a way you’ll never be.”

I shouldn’t respond. But I suppose some part of me fears she’s right, and so I do. “You are not inside my mates, my alphas.”

“Mine,” she counters, angry. “My boys. My good boys. My hounds.”

I slap her.

She laughs. “You know it’s true.”

I slap her again. Hard. But when I draw blood, I think it’s less because I’m hitting her real hard and more because she’s had her mouth taped shut for days and nothing to eat and only minimal water and her lips are pretty cracked anyway.

Still.

I make her bleed.

And she just laughs.

It...

Suddenly, something in me switches on. Or off? I don’t know. But I remember being

in that cube, the little space where I was trapped and I couldn't think words, and I was trapped and alone, and just trying to bring home little soft things for my nest and they would take them from me, every night, while I slept.

And I lose it.

Like I used to lose it on the workers who'd try to make me use a fork or something. I just go at this woman.

I hit her, and she's tied up, so she can't do much.

I take her by the shoulders and I began slamming her head into the pole that she's tied to.

At first, she's screaming that it hurts, and then I see that there's blood on the pole, because I'm really slamming her into it.

And then she's not screaming anymore but I'm still doing it, I'm still slamming her stupid, stupid head into that pole over and over again.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

knight

ARROW AND CALIX start whining and Striker and I get up from where we are to go inside. I get something from my bond with Arrow, enough to know that something has happened with Lotus, something important.

I don't get fear, though, just...

I don't know.

We're inside when she comes up the stairs.

Lotus's face is spattered with little droplets of red. Her hands are bloody too, and she's smeared them on her clothes and her hair, and I remember that some part of me would have reacted with some kind of alarm to that in some other reality.

But it seems perfectly normal now.

Bloody Lotus.

My vicious omega.

Yes.

She gestures with one hand and Arrow and Calix go down on their knees, still whining. With her other hand, she beckons to Striker and me.

I go to her. I couldn't stop even if I wanted.

I know what she wants.

But she tells me, anyway, stroking the back of my head, her voice soft and somehow familiar. "Good hounds," she says. "Bite your omega now, that's right."

I've known where my spot was for a while now. It's on the slope of her left breast. I part her bloody clothes to get there. There are spatters of blood on her skin there, next to my spot. I don't care. I don't mind blood.

I rear back, teeth expanding.

"Good boys," she says.

I bite her.

It sears me. She rushes inside me, and she is red.

calix

SHE LAYS ON the bed with her legs spread as we pleasure her.

We are hers, all hers, entirely hers.

Striker and Knight are tending, leaving Arrow and me to take turns licking at her slick. She is a very, very slick little omega with a pretty, plump clitoris that she likes having sucked and nuzzled.

Right now, I have her legs draped over my shoulders as I lap at her wet pussy. I could do this forever. I've never been happier than this, pleasuring my omega. This is

home. This is my purpose in life. I am hers to do with as she likes.

She reaches down and strokes my hair as I lick her. “Such good boys,” she breathes.

I have a little jolt of something almost unpleasant. Did our omega always talk like that? It sounds like someone else, someone who I don’t think we liked.

“Lick me, alpha,” she says, imperious.

Did she feel that through the bond?

I double down on licking her pussy. I’m too turned on to care about any of that anyway. I remember that things were difficult in the past, even a few hours ago. But now, we are a pack, all bonded to our omega, and now she has complete and total control over us, and we are here only to serve her.

Now, everything is perfect.



## Page 56

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

I surrender.

Time begins to unspool in a long and meandering thread.

Lotus comes. A lot. Every time Lotus comes, we all feel it, and it's fantastic.

Lotus feels it when we come, and when she figures that out, she's enchanted and delighted by the notion of it.

So, she sits on the bed with one of us licking her pussy or teasing her tight, pretty, little nipples and she has the other three fuck each other in various ways.

I knot Arrow while Striker knots me.

Knight knots me while I knot Arrow.

Arrow knots me while I knot Striker.

It goes on.

I know we're in a rut, all of us, because our erections don't flag. Our knots will go down enough to disentangle ourselves, but we don't ever get soft. We just keep going.

It gets dark.

We keep fucking.

Lotus wants us to fuck her.

We line up in her holes, Striker and Arrow in her pussy and ass, me knotting Arrow and Knight knotting Striker.

Then, we switch.

And again.

And again.

It's light again.

I register at the edge of my consciousness that I'm sore—too much sex, too much penetration in holes that weren't properly lubed. I'm hungry. I feel lightheaded.

But when I say that, Lotus says I can have a nice breakfast if my mates' come, and then I can't help but be very turned on by sucking each of their cocks in turn, swallowing them down.

It goes on.

But I don't know how long, because I start to get dizzy sometimes, delirious. I notice sometimes that it's dark again.

I think days pass.

Eventually, our cocks are soft.

She lets us sleep.

As I drift, I register there's an awful smell of rot and death coming from the basement.

lotus

I GET DRESSED. It's morning.

My pack is asleep, and I look down at them with a feeling of affectionate sweetness. I ran them ragged, didn't I?

I pull on my clothes and I go outside.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

It's chilly and I realize that winter will be coming sooner than I think. That might be fine, but I don't think I want to weather it here, in this place, this punishment house.

No, we can do better.

I want a proper nest. I've waited long enough.

I touch my bite marks as I walk, feeling each of them as they reach inside me with long fingers to brush my deepest core. With all the bites, I am whole in a way I have never been. I have come into my power, and I am now a force, a storm, an omega. It is time for a reckoning.

I don't knock when I get to the main house. I just go in. I climb up the steps, following the scent of where I know the Vasilissa is.

It surprises me she hasn't scented me, hasn't come to me. But if she were to try to stand up to me, she'd be in for a surprise. She should have come and submitted, offered her entire pack to me, at my disposal.

I burst in on her, opening the door to her nest.

She is there, asleep, her mates curled around her.

They get up, coming to me but I only have to give them each a look before they bow their heads or fall to their knees.

Good.

Penelope wraps herself in quilts and sits up in the midst of the nest. She does not get to her feet.

Smart woman.

I fold my arms over my chest.

She tries to hold my gaze, shudders, and breaks. She bows her head. “What happened?”

“When will Selene be here?” I say.

“That... you heard about that.” She lets out a noisy breath, and then she speaks quickly, pleading with me. “Listen, that was a foolish idea, and I see that now. I can scent—we can all scent—what you are. We would never think to challenge you, and you must accept my sincere apologies for even attempting to—”

“When will she be here?” I interrupt.

“You cannot actually think to go head-to-head with Selene like this. You will crush her.”

I laugh. “Does Selene deserve better?”

Penelope’s lips part. “Please. You have no quarrel with her. I am the one responsible for that even being suggested. It is my error. You would kill that poor girl.”

“Would I.” I survey her. “It is your error, however, Penelope. It’s good you recognize that.”

“You... what happened to you?” Her voice cracks.

“You might wish to make it up to me?” I say.

She nods. “Of course. What could we do?”

“Well, who knows,” I say with a shrug. “After all, I grew up in the secular world, and I don’t really understand insults amongst omegas, do I?” I throw her words back at her. “Although, it does seem to me you should be addressing me with respect, shouldn’t you?”

She cringes. “Yes, kyra. Apologies, kyra.”

“Better,” I say. “Now, how will you make amends for the way you have insulted me?”

“You must not stay in the punishment house anymore,” she says.

“No, I don’t think I must,” I say. I smile at her. “I’ll stay here.”

“But—”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“You will clear out of this house by noon today,” I say. “I am now the Vasilissa of this pack.”

She grimaces.

“You disagree?”

“No, kyra,” she says. “Apologies, kyra.”

“Also,” I say, “there is something that needs burying in the basement there. Have someone see to it.”

14

lotus

FINALLY, I GET someone to tell me that Selene is scheduled to arrive the following evening. I say that the tournament will go on as planned, though I know that no one can possibly stand against me.

It’s hard to explain how I know this, what I am now.

I don’t know what moment it happened.

It’s tempting to think it happened when I killed Dr. Acker.

But it happened before that.

It happened when they separated me, made me two—my omega self and my human self. Now, I've been put back together, but in the right order. Before, my human self was in charge.

And my human self?

Well, Penelope was right about me. Demure, hesitant, wilting, weak.

I am an omega.

I am the life mate of four vicious and strong alphas who would protect me with their lives.

To them, I am the most important person in the universe.

Now, I will behave as if I understand my importance.

I will not make myself lesser for the comfort of others. I will inhabit who and what I am. I will demand what I wish. I will take control.

After Penelope and the rest of the people in the main house clear out, I spend the rest of the day nesting. If I notice that they try to hide the fact they have a phone from me, or that they are typing into it, I don't pay it any mind. I dimly remember that the Polloi have never had landline telephones, and that they eschew smart phones with apps and the internet, but that they have adopted using old cell phones, ones that can only be used to call or text. I remember it from some documentary I watched once. But it doesn't register to me as anything to worry over.

I feel as if I have waited quite a long time for a nest, and I want one with an ache that overtakes me, that explodes in my chest. I have my mates stand guard on the porch of the house while I go looking for nesting materials.



I seize anything and everything that strikes my fancy, going through closets and bedrooms and the living room. I take fur coats and throw pillows. I take quilts and eyelit-lace curtains. I take flowered tablecloths and pink robes.

When I get back down to the front porch to tell my mates that they should go and scent the nest up with their own unique smells so that it smells like ours, Striker has collapsed.

The others have done nothing about this, staring forward, following my orders.

I sense this is not because they wished to do so, but because my control of them is so strong that they could do nothing about Striker.

I kneel down next to him, running my hand over his chest. “What’s wrong?”

“We haven’t eaten, kyra,” says Calix. “You only fed us semen.”

“Oh,” I say, furrowing my brow, wondering at that. “Well, eat then.” I open the door wide and they come inside.

Knight has picked up Striker and is carrying him in.

“Is he going to be all right?” I say.

None of them say anything.

We go into the dining room. I feel that my mates are weak, tired. I have run them ragged, I think again, but I feel a jolt of discomfort at the thought.

No, no, no. This is more weak human thought.

I am an omega. They are my mates. They are my alphas. They have been put on earth for me. They are mine and they serve me.

Except I’m not sure how I feel about that either.

I tell them all to sit down and I go into the kitchen and make them sandwiches. I’m in the midst of an assembly line of turkey and cheddar when Calix appears in the doorway.

“You don’t... serve us,” he says.

“Yes, I do,” I say, annoyed. “Go sit down.”

He looks me over and then obeys. He has to obey. He is my alpha, and I am his omega.

They eat, and I eat, too, because as I am assembling the sandwiches, I realize I am also hungry. The food makes me feel sleepy, and we all crawl into the nest together to

sleep.

We curl around each other and I am safe and happy here, surrounded by my alphas.

Peace overtakes me.

calix

I AWAKE LIKEsurfacing from a long stretch of being underwater. I gasp for air, flailing in the nest where we're all sleeping together. I remember this feeling, but I've only feltlike this once before. And I can't think about it, because I am hearing something that is incongruous, a noise that I shouldn't be hearing here, on a Polloi compound.

Sirens.

They wouldn't have done that. Penelope would never have called the police. The Polloi hate the police more than they hate anything on earth. They distrust them. They think of them as evil, secular and goddess-forsaken, controlled by the enemy—and everyone who is not Polloi is the enemy, of course.

But this feeling, this memory...

I get up from the nest, going to the window to look outside and I see the police car pulling straight up to the house.

All the while, the memory is rushing through me.

I was young, but it was after I had presented. I was thirteen, maybe fourteen. No, thirteen. I remember because Maggie was still on the compound, and she left the following year, when she turned seventeen. Maggie is my beta sister, and I remember

the look on her face as she looked me over when I turned up at the doorway of the trailer we all lived in.

I remember the curtains on the windows in the trailer. They were plaid and a little frayed at the ends, fluttering in the breeze, because the window was open. The breeze was spilling out over the stack of bunk beds in what was meant to be the living room of the two-bedroom trailer we lived in, but there were too many of us kids, so four of us slept in the bunk beds, two to a bed, on the narrow twin mattresses. Those beds were all unmade, which was strange because it was a point of order that we all made our beds first thing in the morning.

Discipline, it was what held our way of life together.

I remember looking down at my hands. My fingers were bloody and the nail on my index finger had gotten torn. There was dark blood under my nails, and it was brownish, the way blood gets when it dries.

It was deer blood.

I remember that, too, ripping into the animal, the group of us alphas, all of us in this vicious frenzy while the drums were still beating in the background and everyone was dancing and whooping around the bonfire.

But it was morning at that point, and the deer was dead, and I was still running around, drunk on the energy of the biting ceremony I'd attended, the one that Maggie must have left sometime much earlier in the night. I would have left them early too, before I presented.

Anyway, this didn't usually happen at a biting ceremony, whatever it was that had happened. I had never experienced anything like it. I had heard stories of being overtaken by the power of a joining, where the Goddess took control of her people

and gave them the power of ten men to fight their enemies. Stories, though, and I had always thought that when people claimed this kind of stuff happened it was just the way that a mob gets overtaken by a frenzy, just what happens when people drink too much cheap wine and drinks made of vodka mixed with Sunny D, that kind of celebratory madness. Not... whatever this had been.

Which frankly frightened me.

I was naked, and my dick was hard, and I had a knot. That was strange. I was just a kid, but there had been... sex. Blood and sex and drums and madness.

## Page 60

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

And Maggie was staring at me in the doorway of the trailer, and I surfaced, like this, like coming up for air and gasping for breath and—

The police car pulls to a stop and two officers get out. I can see them through the window, drawing their guns. They are coming for the door.

Penelope wouldn't have called them.

The bond stirs within me.

I feel it yanking on me. It wants to pull me down underwater again, and I try to push back through it, to find Lotus, and to do what I did to her, across the distance, when she wanted to let Striker bite her. I try to steady her, but...

She's too strong.

We are all mated now, and the others are waking, too, and their alpha presence splashes into the bond, bright colors of alarm that make me feel as if I cannot keep my balance. I clutch the windowsill to stay upright, fighting for some semblance of myself in the midst of the rising flood of instinct and emotion.

Danger.

It's not a word, not exactly, but it is somehow now the unifying force of the pack, who are moving together, like hulking, predatory cats. The others move around Lotus, keeping her in the middle as they surge forward.

The bond pulls me in, too.

Our omega is in danger, and it is our mandate, our Goddess-blessed purpose, to protect her.

A banging on the door. “Police. Open up.” The words are harsh, and I sort of register them somewhere, but the force that is controlling my body does not understand them as anything other than danger.

My mates, my fellow alphas, are trained to deal with danger, and they are lethal. They spring out of the nest with a single-minded movement. I know we are going to rip that danger to shreds, no matter what is in the way.

We surge down the stairs, all our movements fluid and graceful, like panthers tracking prey in the wild. Lotus stays to the rear, but she is moving in the same way, all of us together, and she has a lethality to her that zings through me and makes me feel lit from the inside.

Another knock. “Open up or we come in.”

We’re into the living room now, the front room of the house.

We all crouch, ready.

The door opens.

The police there have their guns out, but pointing at the floor as they move inside, looking around.

One begins to bring his weapon up.

And Striker tackles him.

They go down in a tangle of limbs, and the other officer points his gun at them, but he can't seem to see what's Striker and what's his partner, and he hesitates too long before he brings his gun up to aim at the rest of us.

And we are already on top of him.

In moments, we have their guns.

Knight tucks one into the waist of his pants as Striker stands up with the other officer's gun.

The two police cower, hands up.

Striker takes aim, his face entirely expressionless.

No, says some part of me, some thing deep inside, something that still thinks and reasons. We can't have the death of police officers on our heads.

Striker glances at me.

I'm fighting again, trying to break through to the surface.



## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

The bond inside all of us goes tight and high-pitched, like the shriek of a falcon.

The gun goes off.

15

knight

IT'S LATER.

THERE are bodies downstairs.

We have retreated to the nest, where we huddle together, guns sitting on the floor in front of the mattresses.

Lotus is in the middle of all of us and we have spent the last however long it has been frantically licking at the bite marks on her body, sometimes our own, sometimes our mates' marks. Sometimes, I lick Arrow's and Striker's marks too.

We are frightened.

Someone is at the door to the nest, which is barricaded with a haphazard stack of chairs we took from the kitchen.

Before we did that, before...

There was a moment after shooting the men in the living room, where the blood

short-circuited us somewhere. We turned on her, our omega, all three of us hounds, and we could smell blood on the air, and she was there, omega, and we all remembered, the voice, the other voice.

My good boys know what to do with an omega.

But our omega stopped it, easily, something I realize now she could have done all along.

We feel shame for having tried to hurt her, but we all know it will never happen again. If it does, she has the power to stop us.

The someone at the door is saying my name. “Knight, I know you’re in there. You don’t have to open the door. We can talk this way. I know you can hear me.”

I nuzzle into Lotus, who holds onto me.

I feel us, all of us, through the bond, as if we have one shared heartbeat, and it hasn’t slowed since we woke.

“Knight, it’s Theodorus. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m not going to hurt your omega. Say something.”

Say something.

I turn to look at Lotus, confused, seeking... what? Permission? Assistance?

“There’s backup on the way. The place will be crawling with police in no time. They’ve called someone from that facility you got out of. Colter? Colvin?”

“Coltrain.” It’s Calix, his voice barely audible.

“I hear you,” says Theodorus at the door. “I volunteered to come and try to talk you down. Kyvelki thinks she can help. But we need to go now. You can’t stay here.”

I start to make sense of the words that I’m hearing, and I have a sensation, as if I’m underwater, and I’m looking up and I can see the surface above me, but distorted.

I hesitate for another long moment.

And then I fight my way up, to that surface above, and I break through, feeling sluggish and strange. My head hurts.

But I can think again. I climb out of the nest and go to the door. “Theodorus,” I say.

“Knight,” he says and he sounds relieved. “What happened?”

I don’t know what happened. I have memories of the past few days, but they are all so very strange that I can’t seem to put together anything coherent to even make sense of them, let alone find words to describe them. “We...” What? Went crazy? “Bit our omega.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“Biting frenzy,” Theodorus says with conviction. “Kyvelki thought it was that. Your omega is more powerful than anyone could have imagined. She’s the most dominant thing anyone’s ever felt. Penelope’s frightened, but Kyvelki’s fascinated. Come with me. We can help.”

We can’t trust them. None of them.

And anyway, it’s not up to me. It’s up to Lotus. She’s the omega. She decides.

“You can take me,” says Theodorus. “Tell your omega—well, I imagine she can hear me—that she can hold onto me as hostage. Kyvelki will not risk me.”

I don’t know if I believe that. Kyvelki didn’t seem overly concerned with her mates, and knowing everything I know about the way things work here, I don’t think I trust that.

Lotus feels that through the bond, which goes strange and powerful, and I feel it trying to pull me back down.

Panicked, I stagger at the doorway, trying to hold onto this thread of myself, but the urge to surrender is overwhelming.

“If you stay here, they will take you back to that facility,” says Theodorus. “We’re wasting time.”

Cedar Falls.

The bond is filled with our shared images of that place, its cold institutional reality.

We all recoil from that.

Lotus stands up and everyone stands with her. She comes forward, and we begin pulling the chairs away from the door.

When we open it, Theodorus is standing there in one of his old-man cardigans. “Well, then.” He holds out his hands. “Want to secure me?”

Lotus’s voice is cold. “We will follow you, but we trust no promises made by the omegas here.”

Theodorus considers that, shrugs, and nods as if whatever she said was utterly reasonable. “We’ll go out the back door,” he says.

lotus

MY PACK AND I go with this alpha, Theodorus, winding through a path in the woods as he looks around to make sure no one is following us. He tells us that the extended pack has gathered in a few houses towards the other side of the property, that everyone is frightened of the police presence and of our pack. I am apparently the most terrifying thing that has ever happened here.

We arrive at a house where we are greeted at the front door by two aging alphas. An older woman, Kyvelki, I presume, is sitting in an easy chair in her living room. Her scent is strong and intense, an omega scent. It hits me differently than any other omega scent has. There is a settled regalness to it, unlike Penelope’s scent, which was strong, but somehow erratic.

“Leave your men out in the kitchen,” says Kyvelki.

“No,” I say. “They stay.”

She lifts her chin and surveys me for a long moment before nodding her assent. She gestures for me to sit down on another easy chair.

Instead, I sit down on the couch, and I use the bond to pull my alphas down with me. The couch isn't quit big enough for all five of us. I sit on Striker's lap. He curves a hand around my hip, holding me against him.

I want to calm my mates, but I am not calm, and I don't know how to do it. Their fear and worry is infecting me, however, and—in turn—I am aggravating them with my own fear and worry.

I am beginning to think that I must give the human part of me—the weak part of me—some avenue for control, because I am out of my depth. I don't know what to do. However, I'm not certain how to even find that part of myself. It seems choked, pushed all the way deep down into me somewhere.

“I wonder about your bloodline,” murmurs Kyvelki. “It's amazing that an omega with so much raw power would have been born into the secular world. Do your parents have designations?”

“No,” I say. Does this matter?

She puts her hands together, palm-to-palm, and presses her joined forefingers to her lips. She is quiet for some time before she speaks. “You wouldn't know about biting frenzies, I suppose. They are rare, but with this, the way your whole pack scents, it should have been obvious to me that it would happen.” She tilts her head at Knight. “I should have noticed when you came, I suppose, but I got distracted by the teeth.”

“What's a biting frenzy?” I say.

“About what it sounds,” she says. “In times gone past, whenever one would happen, it was considered a sign of the Goddess’s favor, but I suppose anything that is otherwise inconvenient, frightening, and often dangerous must be described in some positive way or else it’s too much to bear.” She shrugs. “We’re lucky that it was contained. If you had been in a house other than the punishment house, the whole pack might have caught it. And how long has it been going on?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“When did you get your bites?”

“I...” I don’t know how many days it’s been. I curl closer to Striker, and I want his protection, and I wonder if that’s the weak, human part of me again. I shove that away, thinking I’ll even get out of his lap. And then I remember I wanted that part of myself back.

“You need to tell me everything,” says Kyvelki. “That’s the only way we’ll be able to determine anything. What happened directly before the bites?”

I drag my upper teeth over my lower lip. “Well, I had two of them already, but then I...” I think back, trying to piece things together. “We were having an argument. I wanted the pack to allow me to face Selene in the tournament, and they wanted us to run.”

“You knew about the tournament.” Kyvelki smirks. She raises her voice. “This is your doing, Theodorus. Did you tell them about it?”

“I did,” comes Theodorus’s voice. He and the other alphas are not in the room, but they are listening from just outside the doorway.

“Theodorus has a crush on your alpha.” Kyvelki gestures at Knight.

“I absolutely do not,” says Theodorus, firm. “But it wasn’t an honorable move, Kyvelki. I didn’t think it was fair, to claim we were giving this pack sanctuary and then turn on them.”



Kyvelki considers that and sighs. “Perhaps. It was Penelope’s idea, really. I think she wishes to curry favor with our sister, Calix’s grandmother. She’s a beta, and she married into another pack a long time ago. Gave birth to an omega, Calix’s mother, though, which is where all her power lies, with her offspring. It’s not a great deal of power in that pack, but Penelope would like to exploit it. She’s the one who set up the match between Calix and Selene in the first place.”

I feel Calix react in the bond to that, and I reach out to him through our connection to comfort him. He didn’t know he was a bargaining chip. I understand it through him, now, as I feel his emotional reaction to it.

“It was political,” I say.

“Yes, Penelope and the Vasilissa of that pack do not get along. But then, omegas rarely get along.” Kyvelki shrugs again. “I don’t understand that. I’ve never allowed myself to succumb to that kind of petty power play. Anyway, if Penelope could bring Calix back into the fold, return a wayward alpha to the bond of a powerful omega, it would impress that Vasilissa. Perhaps I shouldn’t have given my tacit agreement to all of it. Had I scented you, I don’t think I would have. I would have realized it was a fool’s errand.”

“What do I scent like?” I don’t understand any of this.

“You scent like utter and complete command, my dear,” says Kyvelki. “I have never really submitted to a Vasilissa. I stay here with my sister because she permits my independence. But I would submit to you. I think I’d follow you anywhere. If you wished to lead us, all of the Polloi, into battle? I’d follow you. I’d die for you.”

I’m speechless. My mouth is dry. I just stare at her.

And that’s when my human part claws its way up from wherever it was that I have

smothered it and tries to take control back. Internally, I feel a brief but violent struggle as my omega self vies with it. Inside me, I feel as if a storm rages for a few short, violent moments.

But as each side of me takes the other's measure, they quickly cease their fighting. My human self settles in against my omega self. It is a truce, then. We are both now, equally.

I let out a gasping sort of breath, clutching at my chest.

My mates all reach in to put their hands on me. Striker finds his bite mark and passes his tongue roughly over it.

I groan.

Kyvelki laughs, bemused but somehow delighted. "Yes, I don't quite know how to feel about that either. You must understand, when a woman trains as I did in the tradition of being a teller, it often has, well, perhaps the opposite of the desired effect."

"What do you mean?" I'm not even sure if I care, but I didn't follow that at all.

"Tellers are—were—sort of the clergy of the Polloi," says Kyvelki. "At one point, in the ancient past, a teller would lead a pack as a Vasilissa, but that hasn't been done in hundreds of years. The Polloi have become more and more disillusioned with our beliefs, you see. The traditions promise us some distant triumph, that we will rise up and rule the entire world, but this triumph never seems to happen. After years and years of oppression and disappointment, no one wishes to hear what begins to seem like a pretty lie. Anyway, when I trained to be a teller, it was because I was a very devout girl, starry-eyed in my devotion to the Goddess. I wanted to be one of her holy emissaries. But the more that I learned, the more I myself became disillusioned with

the stories. I began to see the stories as tools, not as holy messages from a deity. They were tools to give us the strength to keep going in the face of heartache, but they were not the means of breaking the chains of our suffering.”

I remember what Knight told us about her, and I think I understand what she means. “So, a teller should be the staunchest believer in a pack, but tellers tend to believe less strongly than everyone else?”

“Yes,” she says. “Too many stories, too many contradictions, too easy to see the seams of the stories, how they are simply meant to impart lessons, not to give any answers. I began immediately to see how our worship of the Goddess was simply a way to control us.” She smiles at me. “But you, omega, you make me want to believe again.”

“Just because of the way I scent?”

“And what you did to Penelope,” says Kyvelki. “When I spoke to her, the sheer terror in that woman’s voice. She said that she tried to resist you, but that you crushed her will like a flower in your fist. She said she wanted, deep down inside, to simply please you. She said—”

“But she called the police,” breaks in Calix. Then he winces. “Apologies, kyra, for speaking without permission.”

“No insult is taken,” says Kyvelki, waving this away.

“Wait, alphas can’t talk unless they get permission?” I say, and I feel my anger filling the room like a powerful drug and everyone wilts against it, Kyvelki included.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

Calix touches my arm, and it recedes, and everyone breathes.

Kyvelki lets out a wild laugh. “Astounding,” she breathes.

I sit up straight. “All right, never mind that. Back to what he said. If Penelope couldn’t resist me, how did she call the police?” I cringe. “Oh, God, we killed them.”

Calix soothes me again. “We weren’t in control,” he says tightly.

Kyvelki gasps, recovering from my cringe, I think. “Your emotions are so intense, kyra,” she marvels. “You are this bright, wild thing, so very powerful.” She takes a breath. “Well, as to Penelope’s ability to disobey your wishes, she said your power faded as she left the circle of your scent.”

I nod. “Okay. Good to know.”

Kyvelki shakes her head, as if to clear it. “We were speaking of what led up to the biting frenzy, however.”

“Oh, yeah,” I say. “Um, I went downstairs to talk to Dr. Acker.”

“Right,” says Kyvelki. “I don’t entirely understand who that woman was.”

“She used brainwashing techniques on my mates,” I say. “She used their alpha instincts against them, made them associate their desire to claim an omega with killing. She turned them into omega killers.”

Kyvelki's lip curls in disgust. "Glad she's dead."

"I didn't mean to..." I feel a rush of confusion and shame and horror. "It happened so fast. I lost control. But that is what they did to us in that place. We were stripped of our identities. It's like the facility split us down the middle, separated our designations from our higher thinking selves. And that's what this whole thing was, not a biting frenzy, it was... going feral. We all went feral."

I look around at the others, feeling the confirmation of this through the bond.

"Well," says Calix quietly, "that's what a biting frenzy is, too, though, isn't it?" He looks to Kyvelki. "It's like the story of Nanna and her alphas, when they are put in captivity and they escape when the Goddess imbues them with a wild and savage strength."

"Yes," says Kyvelki. "There are a number of stories of being filled with the Goddess, which manifests as a kind of barbaric madness." She rubs her forehead. "But what if it isn't something supernatural, what if it is just something that is part of being an alpha or an omega, a connection to the brutal, primeval element of nature. What if the stories are only offering some explanation for a natural phenomena, like so many stories in folklore."

"Like ones that say that thunder is someone bowling in the sky or something?" I say in a tiny voice.

Kyvelki laughs. "I hadn't heard that, but yes. In much of folklore, natural phenomena is personified in a deity or the effects of a deity's emotion."

"If that's the case," says Calix, "what's happened to us, or to my mates, isn't because of bloodlines, it's because of whatever scientific experiments were done on them. Lotus's extreme omega power is because of the effect of having herself split in half

by the side effects of drugs.”

I don’t know if I want to be the Frankenstein’s monster of omegas. “What about the scent match?”

“Could be,” says Kyvelki. “Either the scent match was going to happen anyway, and it intensified the effects or the intense effects cause the scent match.”

“Why would it have affected me if it’s because of the drugs?” says Calix. Then he makes a face. “I’ve been taking the rut suppressants, though. That’s the whole reason I got the goddess-damned job.” He puts his hands on his head.

“I can’t believe it’s all chemical,” says Kyvelki, shaking her head. “No, I refuse to think the hand of the Goddess isn’t present in this. This is her divine will.”

“Oh, there is no fucking Goddess,” says Calix, getting up off the couch. He stalks out of the room and pushes past Kyvelki’s mates to get out.

“You shouldn’t go outside, Calix,” says Kyvelki mildly. “The reinforcements have probably arrived by now. They’ll be searching for you.”

This alarms me. “You don’t think they’ll look here?”

“They’ll eventually search this house, I suppose,” says Kyvelki. “We’ll make sure you aren’t discovered when they do.”

“But if everyone is gathered on the other side of the property, aren’t they going to notice you’re not there, and come directly here?” I say.

“Eventually, perhaps,” says Kyvelki. “There are too many people all gathered together for Penelope to notice our absence right away, I think. But we do need to

look into hiding you, and I suppose we shouldn't dally too long before we find a solution to that problem."

16

arrow

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

THEY PUT US in a small room in the attic of the house. The door is only half the height of a normal door, and it is easily hidden behind a chair.

We go there when one of Kyvelki's alphas, who has been keeping a lookout, notes that a cadre of police officers and security guards from Cedar Falls is walking in the direction of this house, stopping to search houses on their way.

Then, we ascend the steps and climb inside. The room is very small with boxes stacked as best as they can fit under the slope of the roof. We sit close, all touching, arms around each other as we take comfort together through the bond.

I am reeling from all of the revelations and the experience of the past few days. It's overwhelming, but I think that maybe I'm getting used to it, because it's been like this ever since we escaped the facility. It seems we haven't had a chance to breathe or get used to anything since then. Things have changed so quickly, day by day, week by week. Maybe I'm adapting to living like that.

As I sit there, my head resting on Knight's shoulder, who has his arm around me, I think through what I know about police procedure. If I were looking for a group of dangerous fugitives who might be hiding somewhere, how would I go about looking?

The first thing I'd do, with a group as big as the one they have there, is to have people split up so as to cover more ground. I'm not sure why they're all searching together. However, I suppose that with two officers down, everyone is wary.

As much as you accept the danger of your job as a police officer, there is always an element of self-preservation. Dying to save someone's life is one thing. Dying



because the bad guys get the jump on you is something else entirely.

In their mind, we are very dangerous.

We are still armed. We brought the guns with us.

But if it comes down to a confrontation, we don't have a chance. There are too many of them, and if we come out shooting, we will be dead in a matter of moments. I send this through the bond, wanting my mates to understand that fighting back won't work this time.

The only reason it worked last time was because we had the element of surprise and because we outnumbered them. They probably were stunned that we attacked in the way we did and it kept them from reacting the way they probably should have.

Who knows what they'd been told. Calix has communicated through the bond to all of us how the Polloi feel about the police, their inherent distrust. I have to say that it goes both ways. There are nasty stereotypes about the Polloi, that they are shifty and prone to trickery. The Polloi don't tend to call in law enforcement for help in settling their internal disputes, so when the police do come in, it's usually to arrest members of the community, but that usually comes down to relatively minor offenses. Disturbing the peace, domestic disputes, that kind of thing. Usually, it's someone else calling in and reporting on the Polloi.

The officers that came in wouldn't have thought that their lives were in danger. They would have thought it was some fight between Polloi, pack-on-pack violence, maybe, but nothing like what this is.

Now, however, the situation has proved deadly and serious.

And this makes me realize something else, with a sinking sensation. They are not

going to leave until they find us. We killed police officers. They will want to arrest us, and they will search this place inside, outside, and upside down, until they can locate us.

This is a bad idea, trying to hide in this house, and I know it.

I try to think of what we should do. We can't move, not now, but if they move on and get farther away, we should probably try to get completely off the property.

For now, though, we sit tight. We wait.

Eventually, we hear them come into the house, and we hear them speaking to Kyvelki and her mates, who are not particularly helpful or polite, which doesn't do anything to make the situation better. I wish I could have communicated to her—well, it doesn't matter. Omegas in the Polloi don't listen to alphas. I was expected to hold my tongue during the entire exchange.

We hear the police come up into the bedroom where the door to our hiding place is. They look around, talking to each other about what they're doing, and so we know they're moving the bed around and a chest of drawers.

I hold my breath, waiting for them to pull the chair away from the wall.

Kyvelki's voice. "One of my alphas says he talked to one of them down by the pond a few mornings back. They might have gone through the path in the woods there."

"What pond?" says a voice.

"Would you like someone to show you?" says Kyvelki, all innocence.

The voices and footsteps retreat, leaving the room.

I let out a relieved breath, hoping it isn't as noisy as it sounds to my own ears.

Okay, we sit tight for just a few more moments, and then we need to move. I don't know where, exactly, but if we stay here, it's only a matter of time until they come back. Whoever was searching this room will remember they were interrupted.

I wish there was a window in this room so we could see if they've left the house, where they are exactly. I stay tense, listening. Doors open and close in the distance. Is that the front door or other rooms in this house?

Then, for a few moments, it seems quiet, and I start to move forward, indicating through the bond for everyone to stay close to me and follow my lead.

More footsteps.

I tense, going still.

We hear another voice, a female voice. “Well, my sister wasn’t at the gathering with the rest of us, and I assure you, the scent of that pack, it’s distinctive. I can tell they’ve been here. They left traces all over the living room downstairs.”

“You can really, um, smell each other?” says another voice, also female, but nonsense in a way that lets me know she’s probably a cop.

“Of course.” The other voice is closer. “There are rooms up here, into the attic. I think... oh, yes, the scent is getting stronger.”

I’m on high alert.

But I feel Lotus pushing out something through the bond, and I remember what Kyvelki said, that Lotus’s scent made Penelope want to please her. Lotus’s intention is overwhelming, and her scent makes it hard for me to breathe. It burns my nostrils.

“Oh,” says the voice. “No, never mind. I can’t scent them at all. You’d best go. They’re not here. Let me take you to another house, actually.”

It worked!

I grin at Lotus, who grins back.

“Wait,” says the other female voice, the cop voice. “What’s that chair in front of?”

Damn it.

“No, don’t look behind the chair!” the other voice is shrill. “Stop.”

This has the exact opposite effect, of course.

I hear the crackle of a walkie. “This is Jones. Request backup in the house we just left. I’m in the attic. I think they’re hiding in a hidden room, but I’m on my own.”

The walkie crackles back. “Copy that, Jones. Give us five. We’re still outside.”

I swear internally, looking around, trying to think of what to do.

Knight clenches his hands into fists, and I can feel it’s his intention to burst out of there with the gun and try to do something stupid, something that’s going to get us killed.

I shake my head, looking at Lotus. “Baby,” I whisper, “we fight, we die.”

She swallows.

She glances at Striker, who looks grim but nods his assent to me. Then she looks at Calix, who furrows his brow.

He gets to his feet. “Okay, you’ve got to follow my lead here, everyone.”

17

calix

I PUSH OPEN the door and emerge from the attic, hands up.

A police officer lifts her gun as I do, shouting at me to stand down, stand still, hands on my head.

I put my hands on my head and go still. “I want to speak to Dr. Coltrain,” I say. “Right now.”

She trains the gun on me. “Backup is coming.”

“Yeah, you could shoot all of us,” I say. “But you noticed how that one there—” I point at Penelope, who’s cowering in the doorway. “You notice how she suddenly started to try to get you not to look?”

Jones glances over her shoulder at Penelope and then back at me. Her voice is wary. “I did notice that.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Well, if my omega back here turns on the juice, she can make every single Polloi on this compound go crazy. You might be able to shoot them all, but do you really want to explain why you murdered a whole group of people when it’s on the evening news?”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“What are you saying?”

“Coltrain. Now,” I say. “We cooperate, no more fighting, no more issues. But we want to speak only to him.”

Jones hesitates, pointing the gun at me.

“Get on your walkie-talkie there,” I say, nodding at it.

“I can’t, not and cover you at the same time,” she says. “We’ll just wait for backup, and when they get up here, you can do whatever talking you want.”

So, we stand there, her pointing her gun at me, for moments that drag on and on.

Until more police officers are rushing up the stairs and coming in through the doorway. They come for me, but I yell at them that unless they want the entire compound mobilized against them, they need to leave me in here to talk to Coltrain and only Coltrain.

The threat of Lotus controlling everyone is pretty empty, because I don’t think she can do it. I think to influence people, they have to be close enough to scent her. And anyway, I don’t know if she’d even direct a bunch of people to hurt cops, especially not if it meant they were going to get shot to death.

But Kyvelki did say she’d die for Lotus.

So, it’s possible, anyway.

I reiterate it, claiming that my omega is too powerful not to be taken seriously. “Tell them how powerful she is, Penelope,” I shout.

Penelope, for her part, cringes and says we should be given whatever we want.

Coltrain pushes into the room, looking at me with wide eyes. He’s wearing a suit, but his tie is loosened and his hair looks mussed. He takes me in. “You.”

“Me,” I say.

“You’re the one who let her out,” he says.

“Just putting that together, huh?” I say.

“You’re an alpha,” he says.

I shrug.

“We’re not negotiating with you,” he growls.

“I think you are,” I say. “I think you have to.”

“I definitely do not,” he says. “And I don’t care if you threaten to mind-control the entire population of the Polloi into a suicide attack. I will never—”

“No,” I say, “that’s not my bargaining chip with you.”

“No?” he says.

“No.” I shake my head. “Here’s what’s going to happen, Coltrain. You’re going to bring us back to Cedar Falls, but we’re not going to be locked up downstairs in those



rooms that are prison rooms. You're going to give us a suite like the ones used for heats and ruts and paying customers. And then we're all going to work together to figure out what the hell it is your drugs have done to supercharge our alpha and omega sides."

"Wait." He swallows. "What?"

"Yeah," I say. "And then we're going to get some people looking into a cure. A real cure, even if it's not profitable. We're going to fix every single alpha and omega in that place."

"That's a lot of demands," says Coltrain. "It'd probably be easier to just shoot you all, don't you think? I saw what you bastards did to Debbie."

I raise my eyebrows at him. "So, you guyswerefucking."

Coltrain glares at me. "You said you had a bargaining chip. If I do all of that, what will you do in return?"

"In return?" I say with a big smile. "We will not go to the press." Honestly, we should have probably thought of this before. It seems obvious now, but I guess none of us really know any investigative reporters.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

He just laughs. “Gonna be hard to go to the press when you’re dead.”

“Well, I’ve been on the phone back here with someone,” I say. “Not the press, but a person on the outside, who needs to hear from me within a set period of time or else I release a number of documents that I’ve already downloaded from the Cedar Falls network. I’ve managed to get into everything, even stuff far above my security clearance.”

This is, of course, a lie. I haven’t done anything like that. Will he call my bluff?

Coltrain rubs his chin. “That’s it? That’s your bargaining chip?”

I shrug. “I mean, you can make it happen, right?”

“You killed Debbie. You killed two police officers here,” he says. “There are security guards from Cedar Falls you killed in New York City. You and your little pack, you’re stone cold murderers. You’re out of control. And you think that I can wave a magic wand and make the police not arrest you?”

“Yes,” I say.

He barks out a laugh and backs out of the room.

Jones stays there, covering me with her gun.

I look behind me at my mates inside the room in the attic, all of whom are looking me with incredulous expressions on their faces.

I look away, wincing. It's going to work.

I mean, if it doesn't work, they're just going to shoot us.

We can't die.

This isn't the end.

Besides, that would be a terrible ending.

18

striker

IT'S FUNNY HOW Calix didn't consult with any of us before committing all of us to go back to Cedar Falls.

It's one thing for him.

He worked there. We were kept there like dogs in cages.

The bond is shot full of confusion, worry, and anger as we all climb into the back of the van that used to transport us when we were the hounds. We're not handcuffed, not anymore, though we were at one point.

Calix convinced us to submit to it through the bond.

Well, Calix convinced Lotus and she rammed it down all our throats. There is so much crazy going on right now. After what Lotus did to us when she made us bite her...

And now this?

I have enough power in the hierarchy to make my displeasure known, but not enough to override her. She's the omega. I'm her lead alpha, but that doesn't mean I can stop her from controlling me.

And this is just... I'm supposed to simply accept it?

How does anyone accept that?

But Calix is eloquent, and he talked and talked and he made this happen, and they took off our handcuffs and the police are releasing us to Coltrain's custody, and they're ready to forget the whole thing even happened.

Calix got his cell phone back and a promise to give all of us cell phones, a promise to give us all sorts of things. He got Coltrain to say that he'll figure out a way to restore us to our lives. We don't know yet, because we've all been declared dead, but Coltrain said he can make it happen.

All of this because Calix threatened him with media exposure?

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

How could we not have realized that was what we needed to do before?

On the other hand, I'm one of the few people who's pushed us to look longterm. And for the most part, they've all pushed back because it's been accurate to think that we needed to look to our own survival ahead of anything else.

But it's galling to see how easily handled Cedar Falls is by simply threatening to tell everyone the truth.

If we'd done this earlier, would half of this happened?

Coltrain sits in the back of the van with us and any time any of us hounds speak, he looks startled, like he still can't believe it.

"When did it start?" he says.

No one says anything.

The van is moving at this point. We're all going back to Connecticut, for better or worse. Can we trust Coltrain? After all, we know that Calix doesn't have anyone who can leak information about Cedar Falls. His threat—the one he's using to pull Coltrain's strings—it's an elaborate bluff. Based on the strength of that, we've just given ourselves up to this man?

On the other hand, I suppose it's a little bit miraculous.

Through the bond, from Arrow, we can feel how incredulous he is that the police let

us go after we killed two of their own. He isn't sure how Coltrain could have possibly done it.

"When did what start?" says Calix.

"The talking," says Coltrain. "Dr. Acker said that she was worried you could do it and were hiding it. That you were all just biding your time before you could leave. Was it like that?"

I glare at him. "We didn't like it there. We did always want to escape. But no, we couldn't communicate."

Coltrain can't meet my gaze. "So, when?"

Again, no one answers.

Coltrain spreads his hands. "Okay, look, I get it. You don't like me. You never liked Dr. Acker. But let me explain to you that while she may have had a vested interest in suppressing any of your ability to regain your mental capacity, I sure as hell didn't. You can't imagine what a nightmare it was to discover that this rare side effect was happening sometimes to our clients. You can't think that I wanted anything except for it to be cured."

I regard him. Maybe that's true. Maybe.

He meets my gaze. "Mr. Butler—er, do you prefer Father Nicholas?"

I snort, looking away.

"Well, whatever you want me to call you—"

“Striker’s fine.” I meet his gaze again.

He flinches. “We fucked you up, okay, I get it.” He groans. “I do want to fix it. Can you believe that?”

No one says anything.

Coltrain sighs.

And we drive.

Maybe ten minutes later, Coltrain tries again. “I don’t see how I’m going to figure out how to help you or the other alphas and omegas with brain damage if you don’t tell me what happened or how it got better.”

“How about you tell us a few things first,” says Calix. “Establish some trust.”

“Oh, you got me by the balls, you know that?” Coltrain sighs. “You have no idea how hard it was to get you free of those cops. They were out for blood. And I... the first thing they did was show me Debbie’s body. The back of her skull was matted blood. She was just... bludgeoned. Whoever did that just kept at it after she was already dead. So...”

“Yeah, but you get that, right?” says Calix tightly. “Because you know what she did.”

“Some of it,” says Coltrain. “Acker kept things from me, though.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

“Were you fucking her?” says Calix.

Coltrain groans.

“I think that’s a yes,” speaks up Lotus softly. “Is that why you let her do what she did to my mates? To the men I love? Is that why? Because you were pussy whipped?”

Coltrain scratches the back of his head. “Okay, first of all, it was a long time ago, and it was, um, not like you’re thinking, exactly. It was only once, and then she just brought it up all the time. Like, ‘Digger, you remember when you first hired me, and I was twenty-four and you were thirty-eight and you slept with me.’ Like that. I mean, it doesn’t matter that she got me drunk or that she initiated and I’m not even accusing her of doing it in order to manipulate me. I don’t know if that’s why it happened. I don’t know. But she sure as fuck took advantage of that. And she didn’t...” He looks at me and then at Arrow and then settles on Knight. “A lot of women wouldn’t have taken so enthusiastically to sexually manipulating subjects who were experiencing developmental damage. She sure as fuck didn’t mind doing what she did to you.”

“So, it was all Acker’s fault,” says Calix softly, his voice a little sarcastic.

“No,” says Coltrain. “I did sleep with her, didn’t I? And when she started going off the rails, when she kept getting more and more unorthodox, I let her manipulate me. But I don’t think it would have held up if she’d tried to accuse me. She was consenting. It was once. I think I could have proved she was using it against me. But I didn’t say anything, because I didn’t want my wife to find out. And anyway, it’s not as if Acker started the program.”



“Who started the program?” says Knight. “You?”

“It was my idea, and I lobbied to be in charge of it,” says Coltrain. “And for years, before Acker arrived, I tried everything I could think of to get results, and I got nothing. She, however, got the alphas to be much more intelligent and much more focused and useful than anything I’d done. So, anyway, what brought back your ability to speak and to understand words?”

“We could understand you for a long time,” I say.

“Yeah, we suspected that,” says Coltrain. “But we don’t know how she did it.”

“An injection,” says Arrow.

“When?” says Coltrain.

“We still don’t know how long we were in there,” I say.

“I could have told you that,” says Calix. “Sorry. I don’t know how we never talked about it. But I had access to your files.”

“Anyway,” says Knight, “we sure as fuck didn’t know how much time had passed in Cedar Falls. It’s not like you gave us calendars.”

“Fine, fine,” says Coltrain. “But you couldn’t talk until what?”

“Until her,” I say.

Coltrain fixes his gaze on Lotus. “Your omega.”

“And I started to understand words right after I scented Calix,” say Lotus.

Coltrain looks at Calix. “Because this is some mystical scent magic? That’s what you’re trying to pedal to me? Scent magic fixed your brains?”

“Sort of,” says Calix. “I have this theory that whatever your drugs do, it’s similar to a bite frenzy, which is when people go feral. There are times when alphas and omegas go feral in the Polloi, and it’s almost always solved by the hierarchy of the pack, like someone higher ranked than you brings you back together. Our scent match sorted them, pulled them back from the feral edge. But not everyone has a scent match. They’re rare. So, we need something else for the other alphas and omegas in the basement of Cedar Falls.”

Coltrain is quiet. Then he turns away, looking off into the distance. “Feral,” he murmurs. “Huh.”

lotus

I REMEMBER THE last time I was in one of these suites. Well, I didn’t have a suite. I had just a room when I checked into Cedar Falls for my heat when I was twenty-one years old. This time, we have a suite, with a huge, huge bed that will fit all of us, I think. It’s meant for someone who’s paid for five or six caregivers.

I wonder about that, about what happened to me in that room where I was in before. I went into heat, and I came here and paid for some random people to have sex with me, and I was given an injection so that I wouldn’t remember any of it.

It wasn’t until after my heat faded that they realized something was wrong with me, because the heat was done, but I was still behaving erratically.

Coltrain personally brings us in here and tries to do what he can to make us comfortable, but everyone is cold with him and eventually, he leaves.

Then, we are alone, and I don't know what to do.

I feel it through the bond, all of them, the way they are processing what I did to them after I killed Acker, the way I forced them to fuck me and each other for days, and I know they can feel my shame and disgust through the bond. That wasn't me. That was... Vasilissa Lotus. Except she's in me, I suppose. I would have sworn up and down that there was nothing like that in me.

I used them.

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

I made them get me off.

I forced them to fuck each other.

Is that... did I use the bond to rape them?

“No,” says Calix firmly. “You’re our omega, okay? Don’t push things like that into the bond. Too ugly to even consider, baby girl.”

I want to be reassured.

But even as his words are reassuring, I don’t sense the same feeling through the bond with him. And the others are even more wary.

“I’m fine,” says Knight. “It was not unpleasant. None of us minded. But, uh, it was...”

“Don’t do it again,” says Arrow quietly.

“I won’t,” I say, and my voice cracks. “I swear I won’t. You guys have to understand that I didn’t mean to do it. It wasn’t a choice. It wasn’t a choice to kill Acker either. She just took me over, that other part of myself. It was my omega. She’s strong.”

Nothing from the others.

I turn away from them, surveying the big bed here, putting my back to the kitchen area of the suite, to the living room area as well. I gaze into the bed, shaking my head.

Striker's voice, behind me, and the bond lights up as well. "We were taken over too, and we almost killed you, Lotus."

"But I didn't let you guys eat," I say.

"So, we're all even," he says. "Let's not worry about it anymore." This pushes into the bond like a command, and it sinks into me and I feel better.

"Don't do that shit," sneers Arrow. "That's the same fucking shit, Striker."

"I'm not trying to do that," says Striker. "We all know the bond just does that. Our emotions, they travel to each other."

"Okay," says Arrow, and suddenly, we're all feeling Arrow in the bond, and Arrow is certain that he wants neither Striker nor me to ever take control of him, ever again.

But it doesn't feel the same.

"See?" says Arrow. "There's a big fucking difference if you do it, Striker, even if you don't mean it."

"Because he's lead," says Calix, nodding.

I sit down on the bed, clutching my hands around my head, elbows pressed together in front of me. "We can't control it," I breathe.

And everyone's quiet, because we feel the truth of that and no one can deny it, and Calix has all the evidence of growing up in the Polloi to know it's the truth. The instinctive part of our designations is wild and untamed. It's not as if we can never control it, but sometimes, it takes over and when it does, we're just along for the ride.

The suite is stocked with food, and not just food we can cook for ourselves, but premade dishes that can be heated easily in the microwave.

We eat.

We all take turns in the two showers, because there are two bathrooms in this suite.

We put on the provided Cedar-Falls-issue pajamas, which are soft and gray and nondescript.

We don't all sleep together.

I sleep in the big bed and Calix and Striker sleep there, too, but we sleep far apart, none of us touching.

Arrow and Knight sleep on furniture in the living area—the couch and the recliner.

When I wake up, it's still dark outside, but I feel antsy. My pajamas are too tight and too scratchy, and I go into the bathroom and shed them and take a long, hot shower.

## Page 72

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

My body shivers and crests in the shower, and I know before it's over what is going on with me, but I just don't want to face it.

No.

Not when we have just gotten free of being overtaken by sexual control that went on and on. Not when I did whatever I did to them, even if they say it wasn't rape, and even if—whatever it was—was happening to me, too, like it took over me and used my body to rape them and that somehow raped me, too. Even if it's not really my own fault.

I can't.

Not again.

But.

As I climb out of the shower, shuddering against the towel, my teeth chattering, I know it.

I'm going into heat.

19

knight

I'M SLEEPING INthe recliner, which is probably the most uncomfortable of the

sleeping arrangements in this place, and that's probably why I wake up when I hear the shower come on. I feel around in the bond until I know that it's Lotus in there, and I feel a little tug to go and join her.

I have never showered with her yet, after all. I haven't showered with any of my mates.

But I fight with myself about it, because I haven't quite recovered from whatever it was that happened to us.

I was going to say, what she did to us.

But I realize I was wrong. Lotus didn't do it. Striker is right when he says that we have tried to kill her, and it's been against our will. He's right that whatever she did to us was against her own will. It's not Lotus's fault.

But it was, uh, traumatic.

I don't like being out of control, that's the thing. And I said that it was fine, and that it wasn't unpleasant, but that was a lie. It wasn't unpleasant at first, but it became unpleasant. It became very unpleasant when she wouldn't let us sleep and she wouldn't let us eat and when she insisted that our dicks stay hard and knotted up even if they were a little bit chafed from all the fucking she made us do. And she was making us assfuck each other, and that... I'm still sore.

Even so, when I get the spray of it through the bond, like a splash of hot water in my face, I go to the door of the bathroom immediately and yank it open.

She's there, in a towel, shivering hard, droplets of water clinging to her body, her hair slicked back and wet, and she looks incredibly small and incredibly vulnerable, and I go to her right away and wrap my arms around her.



“I’m g-getting you wet,” she says, her teeth still chattering.

“It’s fine,” I say to her. “It’s fine, I’m here. You need me, I’m here.”

She shakes her head at me. “It’s too much.”

“No such thing, omega,” I say.

“I’m...” She bites her lower lip, her eyes filling with tears.

“I know,” I say.

She begins to rub her wet forehead against my chest, grunting. “Knight, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

I put my hands all over her, crushing her small body against me as I gather her up and stand. “No, no, it’s not your fault. We can do this, omega, okay? You have to trust us.”

She’s still grunting, rubbing furiously.

I purr at her, and she calms down, cheek into my chest.

I hold her there against me, purring to her until she purrs back, and then I take her back to the bed.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

I peel away her towel and strip off my clothes and we lie in the middle of the bed, skin on skin, as she continues to shiver and shudder. Her skin is heated, and I have to admit I'm kind of surprised heat is actually hot. Through the bond, I feel from her, though, that it's only that way at first, in the very first stage.

Chills rack her body as she lies next to me, arching off the bed and whimpering.

Fuck.

I cover her body with my own, pressing all of my nude warmth into her.

She arches and bucks into me, tense, still shivering. God, her skin is so hot.

"Knight, please," she whispers.

It reminds me of when we first found her, when we were just coming back to ourselves, on the run, and we didn't have many words, and all she would say was please, please, and none of us could even get hard for her.

I don't let her beg again. I adjust us, easily sliding my hard cock against her slippery little pussy. "Here you go, omega," I tell her. "Here you go, this will help."

She groans as I slide into her.

"Good?" I ask.

"I'm hurting you," she says.

“Nah, I can take it,” I say, grinning at her. I’m still a little chafed, yeah, but she’s slick as all hell. It’s fine. “You want my knot?”

She only gasps, shivering as I sink into her, as her hot, wet cunt grips my erection.

And through the bond, I know I need to make her decisions for her right now, while she’s in heat. This is different than the way she took us before, when she steamrolled over our will to force us to do as she liked. She won’t be able to do that in heat. She’ll be needy and submissive, fragile and sweet, ours to pleasure and to care for.

I knot her right away, murmuring soothing sounds in her ear.

“Oh, yes, yes,” she gasps. “That’s good.”

“I got you, baby girl,” I inform her. “I got you now, and you’re going to be all right. Take my knot, just like you’re doing. Be a good omega and let your alpha knot you, baby.”

“Need it,” she breathes as she writhes under me, gasping, eyes closed.

First, I keep my chest pressed against hers, because she’s still shivering, and I want her as warm as possible.

But she keeps trying to fuck herself on my knot, so eventually, I sit up, seize her hips to hold her in place and begin deeply rocking myself into her slick little pussy, rubbing my knot against her sensitive opening even as I use the tip of my hard cock deep inside her.

Obligingly, she comes, and I can tell because of the bond.

It feels fucking amazing, and I come, too.

And everyone's awake suddenly.

I feel that through the bond, too.

Arrow races in from the living room to climb onto the bed, and Calix and Striker come in closer.

She's coming and shivering, her teeth clattering harshly against each other, letting out these piteous little moans.

"Fuck," says Calix. "She's in heat?"

"I'm s-sorry," says Lotus, shivering in the middle of the bed.

"Can someone help her?" I say. "She's cold."

"Yes, of course," says Striker, wrapping his body around her from the side.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

Calix bends down to capture her lips, kissing her gently and reverently. “Don’t worry, omega, you’re in good hands.”

Arrow is next to me, hand on my back, stroking one of Lotus’s thighs. “There are four of us sweetheart. We’ll get you through this.”

“But I...” She looks around at us, still shivering, her hair still wet from the shower, and she is so fucking small. “I don’t deserve you guys.”

“Shut up,” growls Striker.

“We’re yours,” says Arrow, his voice velvet. “You can’t doubt that, Lotus. You have to know we’re yours.”

“Everything for you,” says Calix, lowering his mouth to find one of her nipples.

She sighs as he begins to tease and nibble her there.

“There you go,” says Calix. “You like that.”

“She needs to come,” says Striker to me. “You’re hard, fuck her.”

“Right,” I say. I am hard, and I’m knotted in her, and I do fuck her.

Striker starts to toy with her other nipple while Arrow’s fingers snake over her thigh to find her little nub of her clitoris.

“There,” I say, thrusting into her. “There we go, omega. Let’s see how many times we can get you off, huh?”

She shudders, tipping her head back. “Th-thank you.”

“None of that,” says Calix. “This is why we’re here.”

He’s right. I love her. I’ve never loved a woman before I loved her, so I don’t know what it’s like for the others, but to me, she’s just perfect and soft and small and needy, and I have what she needs, and I’ll give it to her, and it’s right.

It feels different than being overridden, though I guess I know I am right now. I know that I’m in a rut, because I had an orgasm and I stayed hard enough to keep fucking her like this. It feels different than the harshness of what we endured before, though, and I don’t know why.

Maybe it’s just because I would choose this, regardless.

If Lotus needs me, I will do anything I can for her.

No matter what.

arrow

I’M THE ONE going to the door in nothing but a pair of boxers to talk to Coltrain a few hours later. Calix would have done it, since he’s been the primary point of contact with Coltrain thus far, but he’s currently knotted inside our pretty little naked omega’s pussy.

We’ve just been taking turns in her, which is hotter than some of our intense free-for-alls have been for some reason. I’m not entirely sure why, because I like our free-for-

alls. I'm a fan of being sandwiched between two of my mates, my cock in someone while someone's cock is inside me. I'm a fan of having each and every one of Lotus's pretty holes stretched full of my mates' cocks. I'm a big fan of all of those things.

But this is softer and slower, maybe a little sweeter. Just Lotus and one of my mates in the middle while the rest of us gather round and touch and toy with her. We get to watch her being fucked, watch as she's penetrated, watch as she tips back her head and gasps as she gets filled all the way up, watch her reaction to getting knotted.

I had my turn earlier.

I knelt between her thighs and her skin was still hot at that point, practically scalding, but she was through the worst of the chills. Her pussy was dripping, literally dripping, because she's practically gushing slick, but also because Knight had come in her and his seed was mingled in there with her essence. The entwined smell of the two of them was intoxicating. In fact, once I got into her, I begged for Knight to lick my mark, the one he made on my body, and he did, and that was really fucking good, practically electric.

Anyway, I slid my hard cock into her sloppy little hole and she shivered a little, and I bent down and kissed her and she opened her eyes in little slits and touch my chin and whispered, "Oh, Arrow, you feel good in me."

I kissed her and told her she was beautiful and that I loved her.

She dragged her hand over my chest and gasped that she loved me, too.

I pulled back to gaze down as I slid my knot into her. I wanted to watch her pretty pussy stretch to take me. She made the sweetest, sexiest little noises as I pushed in. I praised her, telling her what a good omega she was, how proud I was of her for taking my big alpha knot, and she let out little breathy, breathy groans as I inched my way

in. She was tight and wet and amazing.

And once I was knotted in, I fucked her a long time. I came three or four times, and she came probably ten times. A few times just from my knot, which made me feel pretty damned happy, but I also like her sweet little orgasms that came from my mates rubbing her clit while I fucked her.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

When I was exhausted, Striker was able to bark me down enough to get my knot down enough that I could get out of her, but my knot doesn't go entirely down, and neither does my hard-on. We're all in a full-on rut for her.

Anyway, now it's Calix's turn, and he's been riding her for probably close to an hour at this point. I'm answering the door, barely dressed, still hard as all hell, and back in the room, Striker is licking our omega's pussy and the edge of Calix's knot while Knight is massaging her breasts with both hands.

The whole suite smells deliciously of our co-mingled scents, and it's so strong that Coltrain seems to recognize it when I open the door. If it doesn't smell like sex to him, the fact I'm not dressed is probably a clue.

"Okay," he says. "Really? How often do you guys, um, do that?"

"She's in heat," I inform him.

"Shit," he says. He runs a hand through his hair. "Okay, then. I guess I'll be back in three to five days."

"We may be able to break it sooner than that," I say.

"Right," he mutters. "There are four of you." He tilts his head to one side. "And you're alphas. So, can you break it quicker?"

"Are you thinking of some way you can charge more money to omegas?" I say.

"Heats with alpha caregivers?"

“Have someone get in touch with me when you’re...” He looks me over. “Decent.” He walks off down the hall without saying anything else.

I shut the door behind him and come back to the bed. Through the bond, I can feel that Lotus’s heat is still raging. Everything we’re doing for her is appreciated, but she’s through the first stage of it, and she’s entering an even needier element of the heat.

I know what she needs, and I crawl onto the bed to latch onto Striker’s cock with my mouth. I begin to suck him plaintively, which makes Striker groan and Lotus groan, too. We all feel my mouth on Striker through the bond, even me. It’s good for her, for our sweet girl, not just to have the pleasure coming from her own body and the pleasure coming from Calix, who’s buried deep inside her pussy, but Striker’s pleasure too.

As I suck him, I can feel how wet my mouth is on his sensitive cock, how he likes the texture of my tongue as I drag it over the head of him.

He begins to thrust against my mouth, gasping apologies to me as he licks Lotus’s clit.

I take it, take his thrusts, gag against him and we all feel all of that—my gags in my body and the way they tighten around the head of Striker’s sensitive cock.

This tips Lotus over the edge, and she comes, clenching hard on Calix, who immediately comes, and then Striker comes, shooting down my throat, and both Knight and I have sympathetic orgasms, even though no one’s touching our cocks.

We all feel all of those climaxes, zinging through the bond like shooting stars.

It’s insane how good that feels.

I think about what sex used to be like—just my own pleasure and maybe a vague sense of pride if I satisfied my partner. And then this. The combined pleasure of all of my mates, which I feel in my body, which makes my body react.

How'd I get this fucking lucky?

striker

LOTUS IS SITTING on my face, and her pussy is smearing its juices and the combined leftovers of my mates's releases all over my chin and jaw. It's intensely hot as I delve my tongue in to taste all of it.

Knight is perched behind her, cupping her breasts, teasing her nipples and licking all over her neck, running his tongue over various bite marks that we all made on her, and each time, we feel the bond light up as he stimulates one alpha's mark or the other.

His cock is sometimes inside her pussy and sometimes not. He's been kind of shallowly fucking her in between letting me lick the head of him while I'm eating Lotus.

Right next to us, Calix and Arrow are sixty-nining.

My cock—no one's touching it—but it feels crazy sensitive, and every time I feel one of my mate's pleasure, my cock throbs sympathetically in time to it. I've had orgasms, actually spurting orgasms, during this heat that happened with no physical stimulation. I've had other orgasms that didn't involve ejaculation, but were more intense than any ejaculation I've ever experienced.

I'm lost here in this world of pleasure, this world of deep and utter connection, this world of Lotus's heat. It's not a bad place to be.

“Fuck,” breathes Arrow, and his pleasure explodes through the bond. He’s right on the edge of coming, and he knows if he comes, we all come, and he’s trying to hold back, but he can’t, because his pleasure just cranked all of us up a notch. “Fuck,” he gasps again. “I can’t stop it...”

“Come, Arrow,” says Lotus, reaching over as he puts his mouth back onto Calix’s cock. She brushes her fingers over our mates.

Arrow comes, and it’s like a flock of white-winged birds exploding into the sky.

## Page 76

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

We all come, one after the other, each orgasm detonating the next. We surge together, as if we are borne up on those white wings, as if our pleasure is crowding out the horizon.

We surge and break and surge and break and surge and break.

And then we feel something tip over into Lotus.

She collapses into a spot in the bed between all of us, and we all arrange ourselves, exhausted. Is the heat over?

How long has it been?

Doesn't matter.

Sleep is a warm, dark enclave tugging down on me, on all of us. I surrender to rest.

Dreamless and good, it engulfs me.

Some time later, I wake up. Calix is shaking me.

I blink at him, bleary-eyed.

"We need to eat," he says to me, gesturing with his head towards the kitchen part of the suite where we're staying.

Yeah, I'm hungry.

“We should try to get her to eat, too,” he says, getting off the bed and leaving the bedroom.

I get up to follow him.

“But it’ll depend on how horny she is when she wakes up. The heat tends to override appetite, but it’s important that alphas keep up with that. At the very least, she needs to stay hydrated.” His voice carries from outside of the room.

I catch up with him in the kitchen, where he’s pulling more of those pre-made meals out of the fridge.

“We’re running out,” he says. “I’m going to go down to the front desk and see if I can get more sent up. Can you heat things up and wake the others?”

“I can,” I say. “Is this how you do it in the Polloi?”

He nods. “Yeah. Alphas have to be the caregivers during heats, that’s what we learn.”

I nod.

“You good here?” He points. “I’m going to head down to the front desk.”

“Should I wake up Lotus?”

“No, let her sleep, but if she wakes up, try to get her to eat,” he says, turning and heading out.

“Hey,” I call after him.

“What?” He pauses, but he stays where he is, not walking back over to me.

“Why’s it feel different than, um, the frenzy?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “Does it really feel different?”

“It...” It does. I know it does. But there is some tendril of it that is the same.

“Let’s think about this later, huh, Striker? Let’s just get through this?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say.

Calix leaves.

I'm still in a rut. I have an erection and a knot, but I'm capable of ignoring this fact as I warm up food and go in to wake both Knight and Arrow to come and eat. We all stand at the counter in the kitchen area, butt-naked, holding the food, eating standing up, our cocks sticking straight out.

It's vaguely ridiculous and also kind of hot.

But it also seems like I could get used to it, like it could just become normal.

Calix comes back. He's dressed, but if he registers our nudity, he doesn't react to it, and we don't react to his clothes. He shovels food into his mouth and says that we really have no idea how long this heat might last.

Arrow speaks up. "Coltrain seemed to think that maybe we might be able to break it faster than betas."

Calix considers. "That might make sense, but it doesn't seem to be the way it works."

"But," says Knight, "heat breaks faster with more sexual partners."

"Says who?" says Calix with a shrug.

Knight rubs his forehead, thinking about it. "Well, I guess I thought that because I witnessed someone at the Cedar Falls front desk upselling an omega when I was here to get Dr. Acker. I don't know if she was just saying it to get more money or not."



“But it would makes sense,” I say. “Why else do the omegas in the Polloi mate with so many alphas?”

“Well, because alphas are a status symbol and because omegas like being the center of attention,” says Calix, waving that away.

“Oh, come on, Lotus isn’t like that,” says Arrow.

“I think,” I say, “if we want to break her heat, we need to be all connected.”

“You mean, we need to embrace anal,” says Calix, raising his eyebrows at me. He sets down his food and starts examining my cock.

I let him, because I feel that it’s not sexual. He’s looking at the damage. I bite down on my lip.

“Turn around?” he says to me.

I sigh. “Yeah, okay, I’m still sore.”

“You want a knot in there again?” he says to me.

“If there’s lube...” I swallow. “More lube than last time, anyway?”

But everyone gets very interested in their food, and none of us say anything.

“She wouldn’t want us to,” says Arrow, finally. “Not if we’re not up for it.”

“It’s different right now,” says Knight. “She’s... she needs us. I’m the one who woke up with her. She was a little bit pitiful, and it made me feel, I don’t know, it’s different. But if we think we should go for it, I can take it. Knot the fuck out of my

ass. I don't care. If she needs it—"

"Stop," says Calix, shaking his head at Knight. "Let's not do that with each other. That's the last thing we need, all of us competing over who can suffer the most for our omega."

"We have to break her heat," I say. "And we're all tired, and if we do it quicker—"

"Her heat will break regardless," says Calix. "It's not as if, you leave an omega out all by herself that she just stays in heat forever and ever. Heat always ends."

We all draw back, staring at him, and I feel our collective horror at this statement through the bond.

Calix sets down his food on the counter, scratching the back of his head. He sighs heavily and noisily.

"We would never leave her to get through her heat without help," I growl at him. "I would never do that, anyway. If you want out of this thing, Calix—"

"None of us had a fucking choice, did we?" he says, and there's real agony in his voice. "No one asked me what I wanted." He points at the rest of us. "And no one asked you guys either. You're just fine with it? Life-bonded to each other and her without even getting to know each other first? No chance to go back to your old lives? Chased and overtaken and forced into violence again and again? If I want out of this thing, what? Let's be real. There's no getting out." He picks up his food and stalks away, going into the living room area and leaving the rest of us there to gaze into his wake.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

I start to say something, but then I don't say it. I just eat.

Arrow and Knight eat, too.

Eventually, I decide I'm going to go after Calix. I don't know what I'm going to say, but—of all of us—I think I've probably had the most experience with talking to people about how to accept things that are out of our control. I was a priest, after all. I've spent a lot of time contemplating the classic quandary of why a loving God allows us to suffer.

But when I do, he's not in the living room.

He's with Lotus, in bed with her, feeding her, literally putting the fork into her mouth and encouraging her to chew.

"A little more, sweetheart," he's whispering to her, his voice tender. He's in fucking love with her. We all are.

Why, though?

I sit down on the edge of the bed.

Lotus chews. She's beautiful and nude, and I've never seen a pair of breasts that I liked more than hers. My cock throbs as I stare at her curves and her bare skin. I want to fuck her.

She feels it through the bond and gives me a little smile, her scent rising in response.

She swallows what she was chewing and eyes me.

“You’re making it harder for her to eat,” says Calix, eyes on our omega.

“I’m sorry, Striker,” whispers Lotus. “I didn’t mean to go into heat.”

“It’s not your fault, sweet girl,” I whisper back. “No one blames you.”

“One more bite, baby,” says Calix.

She shakes her head. “No, I’m not hungry. I just want...” She wriggles, her scent getting more intense. She gets up on all fours and crawls over to me.

I gasp as she pounces on me, taking my cock into her mouth and practically swallowing me. “Fuck, baby girl,” I mutter, stroking the back of her head as she sucks me. “Fuck, that’s good.”

She moans as her head bobs on me.

Calix sets the food down on the floor and comes over, freeing his cock from his pants. He arranges her, pulling her hips up, and he holds the head of his dick between his thumb and forefinger to line them up with her pussy. Then he pushes into her.

She moans again, around my dick, sucking me hard.

Calix and I share her, like that, me in her mouth, Calix in her pussy. He and I look at each other as we fuck her together.

She’s enthusiastic, her scent bright and threaded full of goodness as it goes on and on. When we come, she comes, too.

At this point, Arrow and Knight have come into the room.

Calix hasn't knotted her, and I look at him, and I say, "If you want to go, go."

He laughs. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't know what this is, what it means to be what we are—a pack, life-bonded, whatever. But I do know that if you really want to go, we'll have to find a way to make that happen. No one should be forced into this and definitely not forced into sex."

Calix pulls out of her.

Lotus's mouth isn't on me right now. She looks up at me. "What about me?" she says. "What about me, can I get out of this if I want? Can I go?"

I look up at the ceiling, a bitterness filling me.

"Let's break her heat," says Calix in a dull voice.

"Can you do that?" says Lotus, collapsing into me.

## Page 79

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:36 am*

I put my arms around her. “Would you like to watch your mates fuck each other, omega?” I say. “Would you like to be sandwiched in the middle of your mates while we fuck each other?”

She groans. “Please.”

And it’s like I said before. With more lube, more lube than last time, it’ll be fine.

lotus

IT DOESN’T WORK.

They’re sore, and I know it’s my fault, because of the time before, the biting frenzy, when I ran them ragged for my pleasure, and here they are, doing it again, for me, and it’s not working, because my heat is just raging through us all.

Knight’s ass is bleeding, and he says it’s no big deal, and that he can handle it, and I feel like I’m being crushed, like the walls are closing in on me and there’s nowhere I can turn.

Arrow keeps assuring me they want this, that they enjoy doing this for me, and I feel through the bond that it’s true. Well, that it’s both true and not true, somehow. That they enjoy it, but that they can’t not enjoy it, that even when it hurts, they like it, but that they—we—are all understandably frightened of it.

It’s power, the heat is power, a power that is both part of us and outside of us at the same time.

I realize I'm fighting it, and the fighting is the problem.

We can't end the heat.

We have to get through it, and that means surrendering. It is going to happen, and there is no stopping it. The best way to get it over with it is to just do it, because fighting it is only prolonging it.

So, I give in.

And my omega takes over. I don't exactly trust my omega, I have to admit. Whatever that part of me is, she sometimes goes too far. But I have no choice, so I let her take control.

She is gentle with my alphas, though, kissing each of them in turn and then softly ordering them to get on their knees by the bed.

She lines them up, so they are all settled down there, on their knees but with their torsos upright, their knees spread just a little, their cocks knotted up and pointed straight out.

She has me straddle each of them, tease their hard cocks with my pussy, settling on them but not taking their knots, kissing and stroking their chests.

"Tell me whose alpha you are," I coo to each of them.

And they all respond in husky, deep, masculine voices that they belong to me, to Lotus.

"You're my very pretty omega," Striker says to me, affectionate.

“You want to knot me, don’t you?” I say to him, giving him a sultry smile as I sink down on his hard cock.

“Yes,” he hisses.

“Too bad,” I say, giving him a wicked grin and climbing off him.

Then I go to the next alpha in line and tease him.

I do this for a long time, reducing all of my alphas to pleading with me to take their knots, gasping against my lips as I kiss them, saying please in voices that crack.

But finally, I get back to Striker and I take his cock again, sinking down onto him, all the way to the edge of his knot.

“You feel this,” I say to them. “You feel this through the bond.”

They all groan, and Striker’s eyes are close.

“Admit it,” I say. “Say, ‘yes, omega.’”

“Yes, omega,” whispers Arrow softly.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

The others say it together. “Yes, omega,” in a little chorus.

“You knot me through Striker,” I say. “All at once, right now.”

“Present, omega,” says Knight in a dark voice.

I groan, gasping, a mix of emotions and instinct, and then I do it. I pull off Striker and go down in front of all of them, down on my elbows and knees with my butt in the air and my legs splayed, ready for a cock, for a knot.

Striker growls and pounces on me. He knots me in one long fluid movement, and everyone reacts vocally, and the bond goes taut and strong.

“Good omega,” says Striker. “Take your alphas’ knots.”

It’s my turn to say “please.”

Because I see it now, see the path free of the heat, see it up ahead, like a light at the end of a long tunnel. I begin to beg frantically, reaching through the bond for my alphas, needing the energy of all of them to do as I said, to concentrate through Striker, to lend him the power of their alpha essence so that we are all as one, all together, all pushing towards this, my pinnacle, my satisfaction, my pleasure.

I hurtle towards it, feeling my alphas with me, all of us together, the light getting closer, its warmth touching each of us, welcoming us.

And then, we break through, and it’s a release, all of us basking in its joy as we find

this here,together.

20

knight

I FALL ASLEEPafter her heat breaks. I fall asleep while Lotus is rubbing antibiotic ointment on the little fissures at the opening of my asshole, something that I'm pretty sure I would never have thought I'd trust someone to do to me.

But then, I think about trying to explain to my past self that I actually like having men fuck me, and I know that past me would never have gotten that either.

I feel through the bond that she's sorry. She says she's sorry, too, but I also feel some sense of settledness about it. It is what it is. We are what we are. We're not like other people, and sometimes that sucks, but other times, it's an advantage. We have to take both the advantages and the disadvantages together. There isn't a world where we only get the good parts.

I fall asleep and dream nonsensical dreams that aren't even remotely sexual, which is nice, because I'm tired, and the thought of being aroused again anytime soon seems nothing but tiring, not even a little appealing.

When I wake up, I hear voices.

It's Arrow and Calix. They're not in the bedroom. They must be out in some other part of the suite.

I listen, burrowed into the bed, yawning, unwilling to move.

"I'm only saying, maybe we're more used to it than you," says Arrow.

“That doesn’t make sense,” counters Calix. “I should be more used to it than you. You guys didn’t grow up around packs. You don’t even know what this is like.”

“Well, no, we don’t know about what it’s like to be in a pack,” says Arrow. “But being an alpha, having a designation, it’s already meant I had to make sacrifices and I had to accept the fact I wasn’t like everyone else.”

“Me too,” says Calix.

“Well, in the Polloi, it meant something different,” says Arrow. “It meant, in a way, that you were marked for, I don’t know, sort of slavery.” He groans. “No, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s not slavery, not exactly, but the way the Polloi omegas use the alphas, the way they treat you guys—”

“Yeah, okay, I get it,” says Calix.

“Anyway, you thought you were escaping,” says Arrow. “You thought you’d live in this world, where you’d have freedom. And then... boom. Here you are scent matched and life bonded and stuck here. No freedom. It must make you angry.”

Nothing from Calix.

“Hey,” says Arrow, his voice gentle. “Hey, come here.”

I register Calix’s emotional pain through the bond, then, and I realize he might be crying.

“It’s going to be okay,” says Arrow.

## Page 81

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“It’s not, though,” says Calix. “And don’t give me that shit that Striker did, about me leaving. The pack needs me. I’m the best defense you have against Coltrain trying to put you guys back into captivity, don’t you think?”

“You don’t have to make sacrifices for the pack if you’d rather choose yourself, that’s what I think he was saying,” says Arrow. “I mean, I don’t want to speak for him. Should we wake him up?”

“Well, but there will be consequences if I choose myself.”

“Isn’t that the way with anything?”

Calix sighs. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to you. To any of you, but Lotus is my omega. I have to protect her.”

“I think that’s what he was saying, though. You don’t have to.”

“I—”

“It would be incredibly uncomfortable to fight that instinct,” says Arrow. “But if you wanted to, you could, don’t you think? It’s like you said, if we didn’t help Lotus through her heat, it would still end. We could have chosen not to help her. But we didn’t. It feels like we don’t have a choice, but we do have choices. It’s just that we pay way higher prices for making the choices we make.”

“That’s...” Calix groans. “Accurate, I guess.”

“I remember realizing this with Lotus when my ex-wife walked in on us.”

“Wait, what?”

“Did we not tell you this?”

“I mean, it’s been one thing after the other pretty much the entire time, so…”

“True,” says Arrow. “Anyway, point being, it’s not for the faint of heart, being an alpha. It’s demanding. It’s less demanding to be a beta, right? But it’s, you know, higher risks, higher rewards. Like, thesexwe have, Calix, feeling everyone’s fucking orgasms?”

“No, I know,” says Calix, and I can hear he’s grinning. “Yeah, that’s…”

“So, okay, it’s not like other sex, and it feels, I don’t know, quasi-consensual at times, right? Because, for instance, if a person wants to force me to do something and threatens to hurtme if I don’t—threatens, I don’t know, to stab me or something? You can say, in that instance, I still have a choice, because I can choose to take the consequence. I can choose to let them stab me. But it’s not the same as a choice without consequences. It is painful for us to deny our instincts. So, whatever it is with us and sex, it’s high risk. But the reward, it’s…wow.”

Calix is quiet again.

Lotus moves next to me, and I realize she’s been listening to this conversation, too.

She’s pulling on one of the Cedar Falls robes as she leaves the bedroom. “Okay, but we don’t just accept this, Arrow. We can’t just accept it.”

“Hey,” says Arrow. “Look at you, all through your heat and as pretty as a picture.”

“Why are you like that?” demands Lotus. “Why are you still into me?”

Arrow laughs. “You’re my omega. Are you not into me anymore, sweet thing?”

“Not the point,” she says. “Anyway it’s not fair. I have four alphas, and you guys only have me, and—”

“It’s not fair,” says Arrow. “But very little in life is.”

“Arrow, I killed a woman with my bare hands and then forced all of you into a days-long fuck fest where I damaged your bodies and would not let you eat,” she says. “And maybe I didn’t do it on purpose, but we can’t live in a situation where that’s just possible. No one can feel safe in that situation. I don’t want to hurt my alphas, but I can’t guarantee that I’ll have the presence of mind to make sure I don’t. And that isn’t workable.”

She’s not wrong, I have to admit. But I don’t know what she wants us to do, because we’re not breaking up or something. I get up off the bed, leaving Striker in there. I can tell now that he’s not asleep either, though. He stirs as I go past him.

Still totally naked, I find them in the living room. “If this is some speech to try to get out of this relationship, omega, forget it,” I growl. “I bit you, and you’re mine, and that’s not changing.”

Calix is sitting on the recliner and he slumps into it, tipping his head back to laugh helplessly up at the ceiling. “And here comes Knight, who’s predictably a caveman about it.”

“I’m not a caveman,” I say. “You know, I think you should let me bite you, Calix.”

“Just going to bite everyone?” says Calix to me, but he’s kind of flirting with me, and

I think about how within moments of meeting this man, he sucked my dick, how he was the first man to ever suck my dick, and I... fuck, I like it when Calix flirts with me, I have to admit. I soften.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“You could bite me,” I say, giving him a smile which I think is flirty. I don’t know. I haven’t done much in the way of flirting up until now, not with men or women.

“Where?” says Calix, waggling his eyebrows. “Can I bite you right there, above your hip bone? Or maybe that spot.” He points. “Just above your nipple, right there.”

I look down at myself. I should get dressed. But I don’t move. I just touch myself right above my nipple and think about Calix in my arms, his sharp teeth in my skin, cradling his head as he strikes me.

My cock wants to get hard, but it doesn’t. I’m that tired. Wow.

“Okay, guys, we’re all hot for each other,” says Lotus. “That’s obvious. It doesn’t mean we’re not basically in an abusive relationship, though.”

I round on her. “That’s not even true.”

“Isn’t it, though?” She spreads her hands. “I mean, if none of us can control ourselves—”

“You can control us now,” comes Striker’s voice from behind me. “You can stop us if we get triggered. You proved that.”

“Yeah,” she says. “But no one can control me.”

“I mean, that’s not true,” says Striker, pushing past me. He’s about a head shorter than me, and he’s naked, and his skin is light brown and he’s a very attractive man.



He touches her shoulder and she looks at him, and he just kisses her, tipping her face back, and we all feel the kiss in the bond, and it makes me happy. I sag into the door jamb, and deep down, I just know everything's going to be okay if Striker and Lotus are kissing like that.

She pushes him off. "You're distracting me."

He brushes her hair away from her face, tucking it behind one of her ears. "Sorry, sweet girl. I can, though. Control you. All of us can. You've felt it. Your alphas can take you over. Each of us has the capacity to make you submit. Your omega submits in that way."

Yeah, he's right. I know this. When I told her to present at the end of the heat, for instance, I felt it. I felt the alpha power I have over her.

"But no one did," says Lotus. "Not during the biting frenzy. You all just submitted to me, and I was not good to you."

"We're okay," says Striker.

"You did feed us," says Calix. "I seem to remember you making us sandwiches. We were all out of our heads, and you wouldn't even let me hand out the plates. You were like, 'I can serve you!'"

Lotus blushes, ducking her head down. "But... Calix... you're not happy."

"I am," says Calix.

"But we all heard—"

"I'm reeling," says Calix. "I'm trying to get myself together. I'm trying to find my

footing. I'm not unhappy." He looks out at everyone but his gaze settles on me. "I don't want to leave this pack. I love you all."

"It's, uh, it's just backwards with us," I say in a gruff voice. "Usually, you'd take time to get to know someone before you fell in love with them, but we just fell in love and now we're trying to get to know each other, and that feels kind of strange."

"Is it backwards?" says Lotus. "Maybe it's always that way. You fall in love fast, and then you try to negotiate whether or not you stay in love."

"Shit," says Arrow. "That is exactly my fucking marriage."

"But in any other relationship, you could leave," says Lotus.

"We can leave," says Arrow. "It would hurt, but if it was necessary, any of us could. We'd find a way. We're all staying because we want to be here."

"Are we?" says Lotus. "I mean, I do. I want you, all of you. I never felt complete, not my whole life, until I had you, my beautiful, wonderful, amazing alphas. I'm... I need you." Her eyes fill with tears. "But if I hurt you, and you wanted out—"

"Not me," I say. "You're..." I look around at all of them. "I never felt like this before, you know? I didn't think I'd like it, but I do."

"I'm all in," says Arrow. "It's worth it."

Striker nods. "Oh, me, too. I'm in. Definitely worth it. Hell, I had committed to a life of celibacy, so if you think I'm going to be freaked out by a little domineering sex, you're crazy. It's still sex, right?" He smirks.

"Yeah," says Lotus, "but you could have sex—"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“No, I could not,” says Striker. “Come on, there’s no way on earth we can top the sex we have together. We have really good sex.”

Lotus blushes again. “True.”

I glance at Calix. It only leaves him.

“I’m here for now,” he says. “Probably forever, but...” He folds his arms over his chest. “You guys, you haven’t even reconnected with your families. It’s easy to think these packbonds are everything, because it’s all we have right now. But when you get back in touch with your loved ones, it could change. I don’t know if we should all be making promises.”

“These bonds are everything for me,” I say. I think about losing them. It makes me feel a sensation of panic that I’m not used to feeling. I don’t get that frightened that often.

“I’d let you go,” says Lotus, giving Calix a hug. “I would let any of you go.”

Calix wraps his whole body around her. “I’m not going anywhere. Unlike the rest of you, I don’t have a family to reconnect with.”

I touch his shoulder.

He looks up at me.

“Yes,” I say. “You do.”

His lower lip trembles.

And I kiss him.

Mine. All of them are mine. I'm not letting any of them go, not without a fight.

21

calix

ALL TOLD, WEspend a total of three months at Cedar Falls.

By the time we leave, we've been working side by side with people like Tammy with the omegas and alphas who are imprisoned down there. We've made enough progress to feel good about what we've done, but things are still pretty grim for those alphas and omegas.

The others all subjected themselves to dozens upon dozens of scans. Me too, actually, because they wanted to see if I was different than the others. We all had our blood drawn. We all sat in rooms with sensors stuck to our scalps and looked at pictures of butterflies and flipped through scent books that contained scents of alphas and omegas.

None of the results of these tests does anything to deny the theory that I had, which was that the reaction that happens to these alphas and omegas essentially causes them to go feral, much like a bite frenzy in the Polloi.

But nothing confirms it either.

We don't have any data on what a bite frenzy looks like. No one has even been able to scan a member of the Polloi's brain while he or she went through it. There

certainly isn't anyone in the Polloi volunteering to undergo that now, and we couldn't even induce a bite frenzy on command if we had a volunteer. No one knows how to make them happen.

One evening, while on a long walk with Tammy, who finds it strange that I'm an alpha, but is still friendly with me, even though I'm not really a Cedar Falls employee anymore, I tell her my theory that maybe the way to turn off ferality is through the hierarchy of a pack.

After all, when a biting frenzy happens, and it spreads through a Polloi gathering, it's eventually quelled. Why is that? Is it because every member of the Polloi has someone higher than them in the pack, who calms them down?

My mates started coming back to themselves because of a scent match. Pack bonds. So... maybe.

We don't have any way to test it, though. None of the omegas or alphas who are here at Cedar Falls have a pack. We do know the omegas respond to me, though, as an alpha. So, I try alpha-ing the omegas harder. I give direct orders to a set of them, and I instruct them not to do anything to interfere with the omegas instincts. "Let them nest," I say.

We get some encouraging responses from this.

We now have omegas who have some speech, but it's very basic.

We wait, hoping that it will come back with time, like it did for my mates.

However, they seem halted there.

Tammy and I discuss my theory with Coltrain, and he's not into it.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“You think I should let these brain damaged alphas and omegas mingle and mate, don’t you?” he says. “You think I should stop suppressing their heats and let them in with those alphas.”

“Well... no,” I say. “Not really, because you trained all the alphas to kill omegas, so I think that’s a really bad idea.”

“I didn’t train them,” says Coltrain. “That wasn’t me. That was Dr. Acker.”

“Whatever,” I say. “The only way my mates stopped being triggered in that way was because Lotus went feral again, and we can’t really make that happen here.” I don’t know what to do. If we let those omegas go into heat, then we either have to let them suffer through it, or someone has to have sex with them. It really shouldn’t be someone who isn’t also at the same developmental level, or else it’s just disgusting. But all the alphas are killer alphas. We’re kind of screwed at this point.

We float some other ideas. Let the omegas go into heat with each other, maybe?

But they are sometimes aggressive with each other, just as the alphas are with each other. We’re not sure that’s a great idea.

Let them go into heat and keep them comfortable with sex toys and blankets and the like, but no partners?

This gets debated for a long time.

By the time we’re moving out of Cedar Falls, we still haven’t gotten much further

than this.

Other things are happening while we're trying to work on this problem, though.

Arrow's ex-wife knows he's still alive, and she starts contacting Cedar Falls to try to find out what has happened to him. Eventually, this means that Arrow is back in touch with his family, and this means that everyone else slowly begins to get back in touch with their families.

We all meet everyone.

Arrow's parents come, and they shake hands with all of us and try not to seem freaked out that Arrow is currently in a bisexual relationship where he cheerily admits he's sexually involved with three other men. Mostly, they do okay with it.

Striker's family is much more old school Catholic, and they don't try to hide the fact that they're freaked out. Striker ends up going on a walk with them alone, just him and his mom and his two sisters and brother (apparently, his father just didn't come, since that's how much he wasn't going to hide the fact he was freaked out). When Striker comes back, he's alone. He says they left. They don't come back. He talks to them on the phone, though.

Knight's parents are really sweet, and they seem sort of gobsmacked that Knight is in any kind of relationship at all. They watch him be affectionate with us, and his mom actually gets teary eyed. She hugs me—she hugs all of us—but when she hugs me she says she thinks it's wonderful, just wonderful.

Lotus's family arrives, her sisters and her parents, and they are overwhelmed by all of us. I can imagine it must seem daunting, the idea of your little girl with this many men, all of us sort of huge and imposing in that way alphas tend to be huge and imposing. They try to make Lotus go on a walk with them, probably so they can try

to talk some sense into her and tell her that they'll help her get out of this if she wants, probably for reasons like that. Lotus won't, though, insisting that the pack is important to her, that we're all bonded for life, and that there's nothing she needs to hide from us.

I try to step in with them, to assure them that we all live to protect Lotus, that we are devoted to her safety, and that we love her. They hear my words, but I'm not sure if they truly believe them.

So.

Everything's awkward.

Maggie and her girlfriend come to see me. I don't have contact with my mother anymore. Her choice. She said I was dead to her when I wouldn't go and bite Selene, and she's sticking to that. As for my dads, well, I never had much of a relationship with any of them, even with Jason, who was probably the contributor of half my DNA. I looked the most like him, anyway, and he seemed to think I was his. We were close, sometimes, mostly when I was younger. He sure as hell isn't ever going to go against the edict of his omega, though. If my mom says I'm dead to her, I'm dead to him, too.

Lotus remembers Maggie, but she can talk now, and she expresses to Maggie and her girlfriend (whose name is Kim) how much she appreciates them taking care of her right when I got her out of the facility.

"Well," says Maggie, "we almost let you get hit by a car."

Lotus laughs. "That wasn't your fault. I just didn't understand anything."

"Then we kept you in that room, like you were a prisoner!"



“You didn’t want me to get hit by a car,” says Lotus, who’s still laughing.

I can tell Maggie wants to talk to me about what I’ve gotten myself into here. She says a few little things here and there, about how she knows that I wanted something else out of my life, and I remember having conversations with her, right after I left the Polloi, conversations about monogamy.

But I don’t go and talk to her, because it makes something in my chest open up and ache in a way that’s too painful to truly feel entirely.

I should have known that wouldn’t be for me, anyway.

I should have known I would never be enough for someone, that a woman would want only me.

That was never in the cards for me.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

And then I brush that aside and refuse to think about that anymore.

The weirdest thing that happens is when Kyvelki and Theodorus show up at the facility together, and they're both freaked out by all the things in the secular world that they're not used to, like sliding doors and all the televisions and cell phone notifications jingling into the air. They both look like startled rabbits.

They want to talk to Lotus about a revolution.

That's what I think it is, anyway.

Kyvelki says we've gotten here so easily because of the will of the Goddess. "She has her eye on you, and you are under her protection."

I disagree. Kyvelki has a little bit of a point, I suppose. We were chased by law enforcement and we did, you know, kill people, but we haven't been brought up on murder charges. We were chased by Cedar Falls, who wanted to kill us all, but we're not dead, and we're in fact being helped by the facility. So, this could look like some kind of divine providence, I suppose.

But when you take into account the laundry list of terrible things that have happened to us all this far...

Well, if the Goddess likes us, I'd hate to see how she treats people she doesn't like, let's just say that.

I don't believe in the Goddess anyway.

Kyvelki says that we are meant to lead our people out of hiding and into the light of a new day. “You are special. You are a special pack,” she says. “And you, Lotus, you are like no omega on earth.”

I wonder, though.

I wonder about the omegas downstairs. If I could get them integrated, too, like Lotus, would they be just as powerful? I wonder if Lotus really is special, or if that intensity in her scent and her command is a side effect of drugs.

“You just don’t want anything to be supernatural,” says Lotus when I say this to her. “I get it. You don’t want the Polloi to be right about anything. They weren’t good to you, and you want to reject them.”

“No,” I say, offended by that. “The supernatural is ridiculous.”

“Well, there’s something with us, though, Calix, with the way everything has gone with us,” she says.

“Biology,” I say. “Instinct. Pheromones. Hormones.”

“The bites, though?” she says with a shrug. “You can’t deny there’s something about omegas and alphas that’s just... magic.”

I snort.

Lotus wants a nest.

She’s wanted a nest for a long time, just like the omegas in the facility want a nest. It’s a deep longing in all of them, something that seems to drive almost all of their behaviors. The nest-making consumes the omegas now that they’ve been allowed to

engage in nest-making behaviors.

Lotus tries to nest.

She's tried to nest everywhere we've been. She tried to make a nest in the punishment house. She tried to take over Penelope's nest and claim it as hers. Here, in the suite at the facility, she does her best. But despite her best efforts to turn our suite into a nest, it's never going to be home, and we all know that.

So, eventually, we leave.

I won't say we leave just because Lotus wants a nest.

But, well, we adore her, and she's our omega, and she needs it, and we are all very motivated to make her happy.

Leaving is fraught with all sorts of issues, most of which come from Coltrain. He's been surprisingly accommodating to us, but I realize that it's because we provide an existential threat to his entire way of existence. Coltrain is married with three kids, the oldest of which is twenty and the youngest of which is fourteen. He and his wife have been together a long time, and he's currently at the phase of parenthood where everything's crazy expensive. College. Weddings. New apartments. Cars.

He craves stability.

He does not want to go to jail or be excoriated in the court of public opinion, which could lead to the corporation that owns Cedar Falls firing him. He wants everything to stay the way it is. I get that he was easily manipulated by Acker for this same reason. Acker threatened to explode his life—tell his wife he was unfaithful, destroy his marriage, end everything. He was willing to allow her to do unprecedented unethical things just because he wanted to protect that life.

So, I'm certain that he'll do pretty much anything to keep us from destroying him.

The thing is, he's paranoid about us leaving. He kept Acker close, and he wants to keep us close. We're a threat, and as long as he has us under his roof, he's accommodating. Letting us go scares him, however, and it's obvious that it does.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

I manage to convince him that if he uses Cedar Falls resources to bankroll our lives out there, it'll be just as good as us being here. I float it like we should be paid as employees, because we will be coming back to the facility practically daily to continue doing work on the research here.

My mates hate it.

They don't want to be bought and paid for by Coltrain. They hate Coltrain and they don't trust him.

But eventually, they all go for it, mostly because they aren't really sure what they would do for money otherwise. It's not as if they can go back to the jobs they had before. Arrow can't work for the police. Striker can't be a priest. Knight can't be a mafia hitman. Lotus never finished her schooling, so she doesn't have a profession to even go back to. They would all have to start over from zero.

And that's to say nothing of the fact that the legalities of bringing all of them back from the dead have proved confusing.

The truth is, if Arrow's ex-wife Carla hadn't known he was alive and started contacting Cedar Falls asking questions, Coltrain would have been quite happy not to tell anyone's family anything. But that forced his hand, and that's why the others have contact with their families.

As for undoing death certificates?

That brings exactly the kind of attention Coltrain doesn't want.

And he'd rather keep us here, because he can withhold us from our families and keep control over them in that way. With us being out, he thinks we'll scheme and take him down.

We won't.

Or, at least, I won't, and I'll do my best to convince the others as well. Because I want to help the omegas who are locked up here. The alphas too.

And I don't even blame Coltrain for this, not exactly. I don't think he's innocent in it, that's for sure.

But when we killed Dr. Acker, it didn't change much.

It wasn't satisfying, and it made Lotus feral, and she feels guilty about it all now.

Vengeance just isn't what it's cracked up to be.

I manage to convince everyone that it's going to be fine if we go out and rent this apartment in New Canaan, just twenty minutes from the Cedar Falls facility, and if we all go there, and if Lotus can make herself a nice nest, that we're all going to figure out how to be, you know, together. A pack.

So, we go.

After three months, we go.

lotus

AT FIRST, NESTING is a full-time job.

I have a budget. We are being paid salaries, and we sit down and figure out how we should divide and conquer the money. We decide how we will pay for rent and groceries and all those sorts of things. But there are five of us, so we have enough money for everything, very easily.

Anyway, I get a nesting budget, and it's kind of huge. I think this is because my alphas are too indulgent when it comes to me, but I also feel like it's necessary, like this nest is really important, and like I've been waiting for far too long to make it.

I don't spend crazy amounts of money. I do go and buy a lot of essentials, like blankets and fabric, but I make a lot of things, too. I sew pillows out of plush fabrics, and I stuff them full of shredded memory foam and down fillers and all sorts of good and soft things.

At first, it's all I do.

I try to be organized. I try to look at everything, make a big plan, and then follow the plan. But what happens is that—while I'm in the middle of finding a certain kind of fabric—I get an idea for something else, which distracts me, and I end up trying to focus on that for a while.

So, for a while, I have about seven different projects at various stages, and I'm trying to finish something, anything, just to feel like I've accomplished one thing. It takes a while, and I begin to think that my method isn't a method at all, just concentrated chaos.

It's a full-time job.

But then, it starts to come together, almost like magic, but maybe because some part of me knew what I was doing all along, even when I didn't realize what I was doing. I begin to see why it was I stopped in the middle of one project to work on a different



one, because having that one done makes the first one much easier.

When the nest is done, it's a perfect room of soft lights, soft cushions, soft pillows, many blankets, warmth and goodness. It's everything I ever wanted.

And then, with the nest done, I promptly go back into heat.

## Page 87

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

This heat is different than the last one, when my mates were all so ragged. None of us are sore and exhausted this time around. All of us are eager and ready.

It breaks in four hours.

Then we all lie there in the nest, sweaty and naked, and Knight says we can stretch that out next time if we want, and everyone laughs.

I ask Calix about it later, the next day, I think, when he and I are doing laundry from the nest, shoving the washing machine full of blankets, and he says that in the Polloi, a heat breaking quickly is taken to mean it's likely the omega is pregnant.

"Oh," I say, feeling myself shrink inside.

He sighs and pulls me against him to kiss the top of my head. "I haven't forgotten about it, you know. I did talk to Coltrain."

I wriggle out of his grasp.

"It's more complicated, you know," he says. "Not only do all the omegas down there have their tubes tied surgically, but they're on birth control to stop their periods, just for the sake of convenience. No one wants women with the brain power of toddlers to have to change tampons."

"Oh," I say, wondering why I hadn't thought of this before. "I haven't had a period this whole time."

“Right,” he says. “It’s an injection. It’ll wear off in about six months. Then your cycle should start again. Now, why you’re going into heat at all, however...” He shrugs.

“I shouldn’t?”

“It’s all connected,” he says. “Heat means ovulation. Ovulation should mean menstruation eventually.”

“But with my tubes tied—”

“That just means the ovulated egg can’t get into your uterus,” he says.

“Oh, right, I guess I know that,” I mutter. “Right. The tubes being tied, it doesn’t stop my reproductive cycle, it just stops me getting pregnant.”

He nods. “Tammy and I talked it over, and we think you’re having anovulatory heats.”

“You talked about this with Tammy?” I put my hands on my hips.

“Sorry?” He cringes.

I sigh. “Okay, what does that mean?”

“It means, like, you’re going into heat, but you’re not ovulating,” he says.

I bite my bottom lip.

“Okay, so a beta ovulates once a month, and she doesn’t go into heat,” he says, “but for a few days of the month, when she’s fertile, there are changes in her body, similar

to an omega's heat. She'll be more receptive to sex. She'll have changes in cervical mucus—like slick but not as intense. She'll even have a difference in smell. It's all mammalian stuff, right? We're not a separate species than betas, we're just... heightened."

I nod. "Okay, okay. This is interesting. I guess. But what if something's really wrong with me that I'm not having periods?"

"Yeah, well, Coltrain doesn't want you going to another doctor, someone who isn't in house at Cedar Falls," he says. "And I have to admit that with your being an omega, the truth is that the regular medical establishment is kind of idiotic about us. The tendency for modern medicine is to suppress anything omega or alpha."

"Try to make us like betas," I say.

"Yes."

"What about the Polloi?" I say. "What do women do in the Polloi if they aren't having their periods?"

He snorts. "Stupid things. Most of them won't hurt you, like drinking herbal teas and doing ritual dances under the full moon. Some of them carry the risk of infection, like yogurt douches and shit. It's quack folkloric medicine, Lotus."

"Yeah, but isn't it true that a lot of midwives have knowledge of things that modern medicine doesn't know about because men are afraid of women's cycles and things like that?"

"No," he says. "People who are proponents of that kind of claptrap try to say that the medical profession is corrupt, but the medical profession is based on evidence and trials and science, and this stuff is all just hogwash."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

I get it. He hates the Polloi. And I'm not saying that everything the Polloi does is good or right. But he can't have it both ways. The first thing out of his mouth is that modern medicine is biased against omegas and then he says that everything the Polloi does is claptrap. What am I supposed to do, then? Where am I supposed to go?

"Coltrain says he'll schedule a surgery to undo your tubes being tied if that's what you want," says Calix. "But you should also think about the fact that it's not going to mean anything until you start menstruating again. You might as well wait. And, you know, anyway, are we sure we want to bring a child into this mess?"

I'm stung. "This isn't a mess to me, Calix. This is..." My family. My life bond. The loves of my life.

He kisses me. He apologizes. He says he wants it for me, he wants me to have a baby, and he wants me to be happy.

I believe him.

But I remember that he said he was staying "for now."

Am I going to lose Calix? I'm not sure if this is his forever, even if I am positive it's mine.

arrow

IT'S BORING.

I think that's the best way to describe it.

Calix is consumed with whatever he's doing at Cedar Falls, and we still go in for tests and things, but not every day. At first, Lotus is really focused on nesting.

The two of them are busy, but Striker, Knight, and I are sort of adrift.

At first, it's fine. We have a lot of television to catch up on, after all. We've been in danger, on the run, worried and frightened, for sometime. At first, we only have the energy for relaxation, because it's exactly what we need to calm our nerves. At first, we simply settle into safety.

But after a while, it gets boring.

It sort of reminds me of my marriage to Carla, I guess.

It's better than that marriage, what I have with my mates. The bond is amazing, often very intense. The way I feel devoted to these people, the way I can feel their sensations and emotions in my body, the way we are bonded, it's beyond anything I could have imagined.

It's only that you get used to things, even really intense things, and you get used to them faster than you'd expect you would.

I spend too much time reflecting on boredom itself.

What is boredom?

Is it simply not having anything to do?

I think it's more complicated than that. I can be bored while doing things. Like, while

gathering up the trash in the apartment or loading the dishwasher? While doing those things, I'm bored.

It's because I can do those actions on auto-pilot. I don't have to think. I can act, but my brain is free.

So, I begin to think that boredom is about not having anything engaging to think about.

But I also get bored with activities that require a lot of focus, I find, and the reason for this is just that they're demanding, and I'd rather not waste my energy on doing hard things when I could just relax.

Except relaxation is boring.

What do I want?

Maybe that's the problem. I don't want anything. I have everything I need. The way that Coltrain is perfectly happy to keep us on as if we're staff at Cedar Falls means we don't need to work. Anything else we need, we just get, easily.

I mention boredom to Striker once and he gets real philosophical about the whole thing, opining about God and taking time to notice the little things and being grateful and all this other stuff. He says that boredom is about paying too much attention to what we are lacking.

"Notice what we have, Arrow," he says in this voice of his that I have come to realize is his sermon voice, where he sounds all ponderous and wise and whatever.

Maybe he's right?

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

Maybe we just notice what we have.

On the other hand, doesn't it bother him that there are so many unanswered questions?

Why were we all able to heal ourselves and get our memories back when the alphas and omegas in Cedar Falls don't seem to be able to?

Why is it that we all have the strange snake-like alpha teeth when no other alphas have those?

Why is it that Kyvelki and Penelope were so affected by Lotus's scent?

I mean, doesn't he think these things probably mean something?

Knight agrees with me, for what it's worth. "Yeah," he says. "It's like I said, we're superheroes or whatever. But just because we're something special doesn't mean we have to do anything like that."

"Like what?" I say.

"I don't know, like lead some revolution, like Kyvelki wants us to do."

What would a revolution even look like?

"I just want to stay here, in our apartment, drink beer, watch TV, and fuck our omega," says Knight. "This is great. There's no reason to make things unnecessarily



complicated.”

Is he right?

Am I being crazy?

Why am I so bored?

I start tagging along with Calix. He can do good things for the omegas, right? I wonder if I can help out there, too.

Turns out, I can. My alpha scent calms the omegas, who they have kind of succeeded in trying to teach to talk. They talk more than they used to, anyway, but they still seem stunted developmentally. It’s like being around children. It’s disturbing to me.

Calix tells me his theory about bite frenzies, and I have to wonder why we’re not out there, talking to the Polloi, trying to find out more about all of that.

Calix doesn’t want to talk to anyone in the Polloi. He pushes that aside, and I realize he’s got baggage.

I get it.

The place is weird.

I also know that there’s no way that he and I can go in there and find out answers, not with the way they treat alphas. But Lotus, she’s got a scent that makes people bend over backwards to do her bidding. We should be using that.

“The Polloi don’t understand bite frenzies,” Calix says. “There’s nothing to find out.”

I kind of suspect he's right.

That it's not really about finding anything out, it's about being bored.

When I was a police detective, I was occupied. I had things to solve, cases to put to rights. They were like little puzzles that gave me something to do, and they meant that I was doing good for other people. I know I can't go back to being a police officer, but I also can't live like this, not forever, not without something to do.

I say it to Lotus one day, that I think I want to get a job.

"Okay," she says. "I'm wondering about that, too. But I guess I'm waiting to see about getting an operation to get my tubal ligation reversed, seeing if I want to get pregnant. It's just that I still haven't gotten my period, and it's been long enough that the shot I had should have worn off, and I haven't gone into heat again, and I want to see a doctor outside of Cedar Falls, but Coltrain is kind of blocking that, and—"

"Whoa," I say. "You haven't told me any of this."

She shifts on her feet. "Do you even want kids, Arrow?"

"Uh..." I shrug, thinking about it. I haven't thought about it in a long time.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“Because you’re older than me,” she says.

“Not that much older,” I say. It really isn’t bad. She was only twenty-one when she went into the facility. I was twenty-seven when I went in, but she went in a year after I did. So, there’s a seven year age difference.

We were all in there for varying amounts of time.

But anyway, I’m thirty-two now. She’s twenty-five.

I’m the oldest. Calix is actually the youngest, younger than Lotus, at twenty-three. Striker is thirty, and Knight is twenty-nine.

“Well, you didn’t seem to be even trying to have kids with Carla,” she says.

“Yeah, I mean, Carla didn’t want kids,” I say. “Which I was fine with, but it’s just because I don’t have strong opinions on it, I guess. If the other guys in our pack really want to pass their genes on or whatever, we should let them knock you up. I don’t really care.”

“Don’t really care,” she repeats.

I feel through the bond this does not please her. I don’t know what to do. I’d like to please her, but I don’t want to lie to her.

“I mean, I know this,” she says, running a hand through her hair. “I already know. We’re bonded. I feel things. Knight has never wanted to be a father and is pretty

much convinced he'd be terrible at it. Striker's perfectly happy without ever doing it. He was going to be a priest and priests don't have kids. Calix... I don't even know if he wants to be in the pack. I know this. I'm the only one who..." She trails off. She starts to chew on her thumbnail, and she's talking even faster now. "And I don't even know if I do. I'm still young. I don't need to get knocked up this fucking instant, right? I could wait. On the other hand, if I wait, you're going to be really old—"

"Wait until when?" I say. "When am I going to be really old?"

She glares at me.

"You'd be an amazing mom, Lotus," I say. "I love the idea of you pregnant. I love the idea of us having a kid to take care of. I think Knight and Striker would actually be great dads. I actually think I'd dig it, myself. And Calix, too. It would be good. If you want a baby—"

"I don't know!" She throws up her hands. "I feel like I'm supposed to want a baby."

"Oh," I say. "Yeah, that sounds like Carla. She was real big on not wanting to be an incubator, saying that women are worth more than their wombs. I totally agree. And anyway, there are way too many people on the planet. We're good. We don't need to make more, not really."

I feel through the bond this is not what she wanted to hear either.

"You do want to have a baby," I say to her.

"I'm not sure," she says. "Maybe a job. Thing is, though, I hadn't declared a major yet when I was in college. I still didn't know, when I lost my memory, what I even wanted to do with my life, and I don't know that now either. It just seems so huge, you know? How am I supposed to know that?"

“Well, you don’t have to pick the right thing,” I say. “You can just pick a thing, and if you don’t like it, you can do something else. You can change your mind.”

“Right, but I don’t even know what I want to do.”

“Well, me either,” I say. “I said I wanted a job, not that I knew what kind.”

She nods at me, studying my expression. Her own brow is furrowed, like she’s thinking really hard.

I decide to level with her. “Look, baby, the truth is, I’m kind of bored.”

She gives me a little smile. “Bored?”

“Hey, if you want to get pregnant, maybe that’s it. Maybe that would cure my boredom. Maybe that’s all we need.”

“I need to have surgical intervention to get pregnant, though,” she says. “And I think being bored is a terrible reason to become a parent.”

I snicker. “You’re right. Sorry.”

She reaches out and puts her hand on my forearm. “But me too.”

“Huh?”

“Bored,” she says, nodding. “Yeah, I think that’s the feeling I have. Aimless, directionless, confused, boredom.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“Oh,” I say. “Well, shit. Knight and Striker aren’t. Striker is fine, and Knight is happy being lazy. And Calix is always busy. So, I just figured I was the only one.”

“It’s like, it was too much all at once, but now it’s not enough. We were in constant danger, always on the run, and now... nothing.”

“Exactly,” I say. I tilt my head to one side. “You ever think about the questions that never got answered.”

“Like?”

“Like our alpha teeth, for instance? Why are ours different than others?”

“Right,” she says. “Kyvelki thought we were, you know, a prophecy or something.”

“How bored do you have to be to want a spearhead a revolution?” I say to her.

“What would that even be like?” she says. “It sounds dangerous, you know? And I’m really over danger, actually, for the rest of my life.”

22

striker

I USED TO begin every day reading the scriptures in the morning. Sometimes, I’d work my way through stories in the Old Testament, and sometimes I’d read Psalms or Proverbs. Sometimes, I’d read the teachings of Jesus, and I’d always be

struck—everytime—at what an inclusive person he was, how he was so, you know, good.

I don't start again, not for months, after we're safe and together.

It's not because I don't still believe in the bible, or because I don't want to take comfort in scripture. It's because I'm worried that I'll start getting ideas for homilies.

And if I do, there's nothing to do with those ideas, right?

I'm not a priest anymore, and I can never be a priest, even if the Catholic church decided to get real cool, real fast, with a whole bunch of things that are part of my reality right now. Some Catholics are okay with homosexuality, and I fuck men now and they fuck me. But polyamorous relationships? Not so much. And we're not married. Basically, no Catholic is cool with people being in a relationship and fucking and notbeing married. And anyway, it doesn't matter what's okay for laypeople, I can't, not as a priest. I'm supposed to be celibate.

So.

I don't.

I just don't open a bible for months.

Then, I do, once in a while, and I think I'm safe. I don't get any ideas, I don't feel inspired, and there's no breath of God's divine word coming through me.

Until one day, it starts.

At this point, to add insult to injury, Arrow is all, "I'm really bored," and I try to talk him out of it, because I don't want to be the guy who can't be satisfied with my life. I

say a lot of good stuff, about how we can focus on gratitude and how we can be thankful for what we have and how we can stop craving things we don't have and...

I can never be a Catholic priest.

Which is kind of fine, though, right, because I was never the strictest of Catholics to begin with. But I liked that about Catholicism, the fact that you had that sort of freedom, freedom of interpretation, a freedom that never seemed present in Protestant traditions, all of whom seemed to split off over super trivial things, like whether or not baptism should be immersion or sprinkling or if God could manage to turn grape juice into his blood or if it had to be wine or—

Just.

None of that is important, in my opinion. It's all details, and God is too big to be confined by details.

So, I slowly start coming to terms with the fact that being Catholic is a detail.

God's bigger than the church. The church is an institution that's been around for thousands of years, and I will always respect the church because of that. There's something stately about being Catholic. There's something about the weight of those centuries of tradition. There's something powerful about it.

But God is bigger than that.

And the essence of God?

Can he use a lapsed priest who's found he's an alpha and who's in a polyamorous bisexual relationship? Of course he can. What? Do I think there are limits to God?



## Page 92

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

I start to get ideas.

Okay, I can't have a parish. I can't have a congregation. But these homilies, the ones that God is giving to me, I can still preach them. I can write them down and post them on the internet. I can do it on a blog or social media. I can video them and put them on YouTube or even TikTok. I have the capacity to get out this message, the one that feels as if it's being put on my heart by God himself. And I feel like maybe the world needs to hear about alphas and omegas. Maybe betas need to hear it. And maybe alphas and omegas need some path to spirituality.

I know going public like that is something Coltrain won't like, so I don't want to spring it on him.

Instead, I make an appointment and go to his office and tell him I'm exploring options, but that this is something I really want to do.

He flips out and forbids it. He yells at me, like he can tell me what to do, like he has control over me.

I don't take it well. I don't yell back, but I get angry. I stalk out of his office feeling furious.

Calix comes and finds me, because of course Coltrain sends Calix to keep me in line.

I want my mate, this man who I love, to support me.

Calix, on the other hand, I feel through the bond, has been traumatized by religion.

His Goddess is the same thing as God, in my opinion. God is bigger than gender. God is neither female nor male, but both. God is big enough to encompass the Goddess, to encompass the Polloi religion. I have always believed God is big enough for all religions. If I see God as Allah or as Shiva or even as not really God, just the teachings of Buddha... it's all just seeing God from a different perspective. God is just God.

And what God is? Love, joy, peace, togetherness, justice, and every other good thing under the sun.

So, there's room for the Goddess there, but Calix doesn't have room to see religion as anything other than oppression.

"I can't believe you still believe in those kinds of fairy tales," he says to me.

"I don't believe in fairy tales," I say to him.

"They won't take you back in the Catholic church," he says to me. "And you still somehow want to believe in their God? That God does nothing except discriminate."

"God is bigger than that," I say. "I don't judge God by the way humans interpret him. Humans get God wrong all the time. God's bigger than our mistakes."

"But you can't deny science," he says. "How can you believe that the world was created in seven days by someone speaking it into existence and—"

"I don't," I say.

He blinks at me.

"I don't know how God did it," I say. "But I don't believe in a God who flies in the

face of scientific fact. Evolution is real. But that doesn't mean God isn't real, too."

He folds his arms over his chest, like he's never heard anyone say something like that, but it's not a crazy thing amongst educated Christians to hold stances like this. One does not have to give up God because of science. It's possible to have both. In fact, I'm convinced we need both.

Even when I speak to dyed-in-the-wool atheists, I often feel as if there's a spirituality to their beliefs. They have the same awe as I do when we both look at the natural world—from the intricacy of a spider's web to the vastness of the galaxies. In my opinion, that awe is God. They don't have to call it God for it to be God, you know? We both feel it.

And I think humans need God. We need that feeling of something bigger than us, something that connects us, something that is within all of us. If we try to live without it, I feel like we always feel empty.

In fact, this is one of my homilies, wherein I draw parallels to the peace and togetherness that I feel in the bond with my pack to the peace and togetherness we can find in spiritual tradition.

Calix just sputters. "It's nothing but pain," he says. "Why would you want to ally yourself with that?"

"It was pain for you," I say. "I see that. I see that there were people in the Polloi who twisted your natural desire for God and used it badly. They used God to hurt you. But blame them, not God. God loves you, Calix. The Goddess loves you."

He laughs, this long bitter laugh. And then he says that he can't talk to me about this, because it's like we're speaking different languages.

Maybe so.

But I can't help but feel as if I'm trying to speak his language as best I can, and that he won't give me the courtesy of even trying to learn the one I'm trying to speak.

knight

IT'S SLOW, BUT I notice.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

I said that I wasn't giving up any of my mates without a fight, and it's true. I'm not.

But the only fighting I've ever really known how to do was the physical kind, and I don't think that kind of fighting applies here.

They say it's not happening, that they're not pulling apart, but they are.

First, Calix is spending nights away from our apartment. He says he's just working late at the facility, trying to figure out how to save the omegas and alphas there, and I have to admit that no one's doing that.

I would help, but I don't know how.

But then, other things are happening. Lotus is talking about having babies, and... well, that scares the fuck out of me, and I might not be as supportive as I could be of that.

I don't mean to make her cry when we have a big, pack discussion about it.

But I do.

And then, Striker wants to start a fucking religion. He says that's what he's doing, but it kind of sounds like that to me, because it doesn't sound like any Christian religion I've ever heard of. It sounds like he's just making shit up that sounds good to him, regardless of whether or not anyone else agrees with him. So, if you're going to start a YouTube channel preaching a bunch of spiritual stuff that doesn't align with a traditional religious text, but just comes out of your own brain? I mean, you're

starting a religion, aren't you?

But he doesn't really appreciate my take on that, I have to admit.

And then Arrow and Lotus decide they're going back to the Polloi compound to try to talk more to Kyvelki, and I say I'll come along, and neither of them seems to want me to, so I decide to not do that.

But when they come back, they're even more convinced that we're, like, the fulfillment of some Polloi prophecy, and that we should spearhead a revolution.

I can see it's only a matter of time before the revolution and Striker's religion converge on each other and join forces.

The problem with Kyvelki's revolution is that it's all about the Polloi.

And yeah, okay, there are a number of problems with the way alphas and omegas are treated in our society, and we need protections and laws, and hell, we should probably blow the lid on Cedar Falls, even if that would mean we had no income after we did that...

But.

We cannot further the interests of the Polloi, because they are a society that is abusive to both men, alphas, and betas. On this point, Calix and I are agreed.

But I'm pretty sure Calix wants to leave.

And we've all felt shit through the bond, and none of us have said anything about it, but I think he's having an affair.

Probably with that Tammy chick that he works with all the time at Cedar Falls. I mean, whatever I felt, it might not have been sex. It could have just been Calix masturbating, who knows. (It's honestly weird, but I think we all still need solo time, even with this many sexual partners. We feel it in the bond sometimes when someone's jerking off, though.)

I've thought about confronting him, but I don't. Mostly because I think if I do, he'll leave, and I don't want him to go.

So, I don't say anything.

No one says anything.

And then, one day, Calix says something himself.

calix

I DO NOT mean to have sex with Tammy.

It's funny, because people always say shit like that, and it always sounds like the most dickish thing to say, but I think people say it because it's true.

I'm not really making excuses for myself. Though I will say that the pack never really sat down and had a conversation with each other about whether or not we were exclusive to each other. I think there was an assumption, though, so I'm not making an excuse. I did not do this thinking that it would be just fine or that it wouldn't hurt my mates. I knew it would. I did it anyway.

When I did it, though, I wasn't thinking about them.

I feel like they haven't been thinking much about me, either.

## Page 94

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

I feel like... I feel like I spent my whole life thinking about everybody except me, and right when I got the chance to think about myself, it was snatched away from me by this scent match that demanded I put the pack ahead of myself.

It's not that I'm selfish, I swear.

It's only that...

Maybe I am selfish. But why is that other people get to be selfish, and they don't have to share a woman with three other men? Why is it that when they say they don't want to share their woman, no one even calls them selfish?

So, am I selfish?

Before I tell the pack, I talk to Maggie on the phone, and we're in utter agreement about everything.

"It's impossible," she says, "no matter what anyone says, for it ever to be anything other than a mess. I don't think one woman can love four men equally without having a favorite."

"She doesn't have a favorite," I say. "It's not like that." But then I think about it. I think it might be Knight. Or maybe Striker. Definitely not Arrow, that's pretty obvious.

But oddly, later, when I tell them, she's sitting in Arrow's lap, and they're apparently on some mission together to the fucking Polloi compound, so who knows.



I'm not her favorite, that's for sure. On the other hand, I did pull away recently. I did fuck another woman. So... what did I expect?

"Well, maybe not yet," says Maggie. "But you know how it goes. Maybe at the beginning, everyone feels on equal footing and there's always a lot of sex. But the minute she gets knocked up, and it's by one of the guys, and everyone always knows, it changes everything."

"Yeah," I mutter, because I do know. I've seen packs where all of the children were fathered by one of the alphas, and where he controlled access to the omega, treating her territorially. I've seen packs where the alphas know which kids are theirs biologically, and they treat the kids that aren't theirs badly. I've seen packs where the alphas are so jealous of each other they beat each other bloody. I've seen all sorts of things.

"I never wanted it for you, Cal," says Maggie. "I want for you what I have with Kim. To have your person, someone who can unequivocally put you first, not put you and four other people first, especially when all four of you have radically different ideas."

"It's not what I wanted for myself either," I say.

Maggie gives me her support, though, which is a good thing. I don't know how it even works, really. In the Polloi, you didn't leave after biting an omega, so I don't know how it is I think I'm going to pull it off. We all feel each other in this bond of ours. We are a scent match.

Who do I think I am?

I haven't thought it all through when I come out with it.

We're in the middle of one of our fights, which have been happening with increasing

regularity. It reminds me of that time, before we all went feral for the second time, before Lotus demanded that the others bite her, when we were all at odds, and I wondered how this pack could even work.

These arguments often end up with Striker barking all of us down, telling us to go and cool down. In rare cases, Lotus has intervened. Once I thought Knight was going to punch someone, and she got cold and regal and formal, and he whined and submitted to her.

I don't know what we're arguing about. Five things.

Striker wants to start some YouTube channel doing sermons. Lotus and Arrow want to take up the mantle of the Polloi, who are so very oppressed or whatever, and Knight is arguing with everyone.

I just say it. "I'm thinking about leaving the pack."

And they all get quiet and look at me.

Lotus gives me a small, sad smile. "I thought it might come to that, Calix. I don't want to lose you, but I want you to be happy. I've felt you... in the bond... is it Tammy?"

Well, I guess I knew everyone probably knew, too. I guess I wondered why no one was saying anything. I thought they must have felt me in the bond. We all feel each other's sexual arousal. Not always, but often. "It doesn't matter who it is," I say.

"Hey," says Lotus, "I'm jealous, like jealous as all hell, and I hate her, but..." She lifts her shoulders. "I wouldn't do anything about that. I love you, Calix. I want you to be happy more than I want you all to myself."

I'm not sure how I feel about that. It should feel good, but it feels like rejection. I want to say that the sex with Tammy is better than what I've had with Lotus, but they've felt it in the bond. They'd know it was a lie. The sex is... pedestrian. It's nothing like what we have together, but...

"Why?" growls Knight.

I look at him.

"No," says Lotus to him, firm. "We don't need to be like that with him."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“He has a reason, right?” Knight crosses his arms over his chest.

I nod. “I just don’t think it works.”

“What?” says Striker. “What doesn’t work?”

“Polyamory,” I say. “It’s a good idea in theory, but I’m not sure... I don’t think it can ever be fair, and I don’t think it’s...” I rub my forehead. “It’s not like I want Lotus to myself.” I lock my gaze with hers, tell this directly to her. I love her. I can’t not love her. “I know I’m not enough for you, and I wouldn’t want to take what you need away from you. I wouldn’t want to punish you in that way. You’re my omega. It’s just that I want... to be significant, I guess. To be someone’s special someone. Not, like, one of your fucking harem.”

“It’s not how I think of you,” she says quietly.

“Whatever you’re doing with that beta whore,” says Knight, “it’s bullshit, and you know it.”

“Knight,” says Lotus, exasperated.

Knight sighs. “Calix, it’s not just her you’re leaving, you know that, right? It’s me. You’re rejecting me. I thought... you and me... I thought...”

I don’t even know what to say to that. Why did I think Knight was Lotus’s favorite? Was it because he’s my favorite? Am I allowed to have favorites? But no, this is just proving my point. This whole idea is impossible.

“You just... you put up, like, a wall,” says Knight.

“I didn’t put up a wall,” I mutter.

“We never see you,” says Striker. “You don’t want to be here. You... honestly, I get it. It must have been awful for you, getting out of the compound, running from being forced into mating that Selene woman, and then... the scent match. It must have felt like you were being forced again. I really do get it.”

“I just want a choice,” I say. “Tammy, it’s not... it’s not what we have, but I get to decide, you know?”

“ItisTammy.” Lotus’s voice hitches.

Shit. I turn to her. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t get it,” says Arrow with a shrug. “Sorry, Striker can get it, but I don’t. But, whatever, man. Knight’s right, you just disappeared, and you haven’t been around. You did put up a wall. If you do feel forced, I don’t want to fucking force you, you know?”

“Yeah, you do whatever you need to do,” says Lotus, but she’s on the verge of tears.

Fuck.

“No,” says Knight. “I don’t accept this.”

“Knight,” says Lotus, rounding on him, her nostrils flaring. “Stop it.”

Knight glares at her. He glares at Striker and then at Arrow. “You’re making a mistake, Calix,” he says, and now he’s glaring at me.

“In the Polloi,” I say, “I couldn’t leave.”

“Well, you shouldn’t,” says Knight.

“But we’re not in the Polloi,” says Striker. “We have a life bond, but we don’t own you, Calix.”

“I just... I don’t know how it works,” I say. “If I leave, and we all still feel each other in the bond.”

“I guess it’ll be painful,” says Lotus, wiping at a tear. “But we’ll figure it out. Things that hurt don’t tend to hurt forever, right? We’ll accept it, if it’s what you want.”

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you,” I say.

“I know,” she says.

“I know it’s not your fault that any of this happened,” I say. “I just didn’t ask to be scent matched to you. I didn’t ask for this to happen to me. I was just getting my life on track. I was just getting a life, and then...”

“I know,” says Striker. “I get it. You escaped a cult, essentially, and then you were chased by law enforcement and compelled into group sex with us. It wasn’t exactly against your will, but it wasn’t what you would have chosen for yourself either. And now, you must feel as if your whole life is decided for you, and I can see why you feel as if you want your freedom.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“That’s actually it, exactly,” I say, nodding at him. “Thank you.”

“Okay,” says Arrow, “but what about the rest of us? We were imprisoned, turned into murderous creatures that were treated like dogs, and we didn’t have a choice either, and you don’t see us fucking Tammy.”

“Arrow,” says Lotus. “Please try to be—”

“It’s true,” I say. “I get what you’re saying. No question, you guys have had it worse than me.”

Arrow scoffs. “Look, it’s not a competition. We’re not trying to get the award for who suffered the most.”

“That’s not what I meant,” says Striker.

“Look,” says Arrow, “none of us are exactly happy here.”

“What?” says Knight.

“I mean, Lotus and I have been talking about it,” says Arrow, “about all of it. Why do you think we’ve been going to talk to Kyvelki? We all need something to do. But it doesn’t have to mean you leave the pack, Calix. It doesn’t mean you fuck betas. It doesn’t mean—”

“Just, let’s calm down,” says Lotus.

“You’re not happy?” says Knight. “Seriously?”

Arrow groans.

“Okay, what you and I were talking about, Arrow,” says Lotus, “it’s different that what is going on with Calix, because he has been feeling this for a while, and—”

“I want you to get knocked up,” says Knight.

Lotus rounds on him. “Why are we even bringing that up?”

“You do it,” says Knight to me. “You knock her up. And stay.”

I let out a guffaw. “Hey, I’m not... that isn’t...” I try to gather myself. “Look, I don’t think bringing children into polyamorous relationships tends to solidify them.”

“I’m not sure it tends to solidify monogamous relationships,” says Striker. “From my experience as a priest with counseling couples, I think that if a relationship is strong, it weathers the disturbance of a child, but if it’s already weak, the child is a lot of strain and effort on a bond that isn’t built to withstand it.”

“Fine, I get it,” says Lotus, and she’s angry and hurt, and it spills through the bond and cuts into each of us. “No one wants to have a baby. Igetit.”

Instinctively, I reach for her. It just seems right to pull her into my arms.

She pushes away. “What is wrong with you?”

I step back, holding up both hands. “I don’t know.” I think I’m going to start crying now, too, and I don’t know if it’s because the bond is flooded with Lotus’s pain or if it’s because I feel like an utter piece of shit for having caused this, all of this. “I’m



going to go, actually.”

“Do not go,” says Knight evenly. “You stay here.”

I don’t stay.

I flee the apartment.

I run away.

23

calix

“YOU DID WHAT?” says Tammy.

I’m in her apartment, where I’ve never been before. We mostly have hooked up in weird places, like the back seat of her car or in empty rooms at Cedar Falls. I texted her that I wanted to see her, and she told me to come over, and now I’m here, telling her what happened, and she’s freaked out. I don’t need a bond to know that she’s freaked out.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“Why would you do that?” she says. “Please tell me you didn’t do that because of me, Cal, because I’m not in a position to commit to that. You’re an alpha.”

“I’m aware,” I say. “You’ve been aware. If you had an objection to my designation—”

“I can’t take your knot.”

“I know this too,” I say, although she’s wrong. I mean, if I can take a knot in my fucking asshole, a beta woman can absolutely take one in her pussy. Fisting is a thing. Women birth babies. I would never force her to take my knot, though, and I can’t claim she’d enjoy it.

“Well, you wouldn’t want me longterm is all I’m saying,” she says.

Oh. This is that thing, where people say the things they feel and act like it’s you who feels them. She wouldn’t want to date an alpha longterm, that’s what she’s saying. I decide to pretend that’s what she said. “Why not?”

“Because you’d want more than what I can give you. Because I wouldn’t be enough for you, and I want to be... enough.”

“You want to be special and important,” I say.

“You already have an omega,” she says. “I would never... you would never really want me like you want her.”

“Well, if I was so happy with her, why was I with you?”

“Don’t,” she says. “Don’t pretend you could be with me.”

“What if I could?”

“Come on, Cal.” She puts her hands on her hips.

“But if I could,” I say. “If I could, would you try?” I only ask this because some part of me knows she’s going to say no. I don’t want her to keep rejecting me the way she’s rejecting me, as if I’m rejecting her. I want her to own it.

She can’t look at me.

“Because I’m a freak,” I say. “You can’t be with a freak. You want a nice, normal man in the end, one with a normal penis, one without teeth.”

She looks up at me. “You... it’s hot, Cal, and being with you, it’s...”

“But just as a diversion, just as an adventure, just as something temporary. If it were permanent, you’d want something normal.”

“You’re putting words in my mouth,” she says, glaring at me.

“Sorry,” I say.

“It’s not even going to stick,” she tells me. “You have a life bond with that pack. You’re going to go back to them anyway.”

I eye her, nodding at her, like I agree with her. I should never have come here. What was I thinking? “I should go,” I say.

“Cal,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” I say. “No, you don’t need to apologize.”

And then I leave.

I leave again.

And I’m alone.

24

knight

IT’S BEEN Awhile since I’ve been in Cedar Falls, but I don’t have any problem getting in. I go right downstairs, too. This bottom-level of the facility is still a secret, and most of the people who work here don’t know what’s really down there, but they think I’m just part of the staff now. They think I’m down there doing research, innocent research, and that there are no victims.

## Page 98

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

On the bottom level, I have free rein of the place, and I go wherever I like. Some of the staff see me and say hello, giving me a friendly wave. No one asks what I'm doing. No one tries to stop me from going anywhere.

It's not hard to get the stun gun from Dr. Acker's old office, that's all I'm saying.

No one's even done anything with the office, either. All the stuff is there.

I get other things, things that are just in this filing cabinet she had in there. I get handcuffs and zip-ties and I put all that in a bag and I just walk out with it.

No one stops me then either.

They just smile and wave.

Good to see you, Knight.

Have a nice evening, Knight.

Easy.

The next thing I do is go and scope out an old, abandoned warehouse I used to know about. The place is still there, and it's still easy to get inside. I check out a few rooms on the upper floors that still have doors on them. I think I can secure these doors with padlocks.

I need to get padlocks, though, so I do that.

I go to Walmart and buy what supplies I need. I get other things besides padlocks. I get some kerosene heaters and lights and I get blankets and I get a couple cheap beanbag chairs.

Finally, I'm ready.

I don't need to be a tracker to hunt down Calix, because we have a life bond, and I can feel him in the bond. But being a tracker probably doesn't hurt.

On the other hand, Calix is just at his sister's house.

I remember this place, because it's where we found Lotus the first time.

That time, we went to a window and yanked Lotus out of there.

This time, I go to the front door and knock.

The sister answers. "Hey, Knight," she says.

"I know your brother's here," I say.

"Okay," she says.

"Well, tell him I'm here," I say. "Tell him I want to talk to him."

"You know..." She looks me up and down. "You don't own him."

"Heismine," I say darkly. "If you don't go and get him, I'm going to come into your house and find him myself."

"You're a jackass," she says. "Stay away from my brother, you abusive fuckwad."

Then she slams the door in my face.

I'm about ready to break the door down when Calix shows up at the door. He smells fucking good, and I remember the first time he got down on his knees for me, and I'm lost in that sweet reverie of his mouth on me.

"Knight," says Calix, his tongue darting out to run over his upper teeth. He has that thing going on for him, that thing where he's ostensibly afraid of me but also turned on underneath that. He knows I'm never going to actually hurt him.

I think he knows that.

Well, whatever.

"Calix," I say. "Come with me?" He gets the choice to come willingly. I'll start with that.

“Where?” he says.

“Don’t worry about that,” I say. “Yes or no?”

“What if I say no?” he says, and he’s fucking flirting with me.

I close the distance between us, seizing him by the back of the neck. I kiss him. He tastes like home and pack and sex and everything good in the world. “You want to find out?”

Calix’s scent is going haywire. He grins at me, his eyes half-lidded. “You’re... you scared my sister, you know that?”

“Do I look like I give a fuck?”

He laughs. “No, no, you never do.” He reaches up to rest his hand on my arm, which I’m still using to grip the back of his neck. He looks into my eyes. “Hey, I cannot come with you right now, but if you really want to talk—”

“That’s the wrong answer,” I say. And then I pull him up against me and we fight for just a few minutes. It’s not much of a contest, because Calix is not trained like me. He might be as big as I am—alpha genes or whatever—but he’s weak and he’s no match for me. So, it takes me all of thirty seconds to subdue him and handcuff his hands behind his back.

He grunts, cheek against the ground as I have him pinned. “What the fuck, Knight?”



“You’re mine,” I tell him, hauling him up. I grope his crotch. He’s hard. He has a knot. I kiss him again.

He sags into me. “Are you kidnapping me, then, Knight?” He’s still flirting with me.

“Fuck yes, I am,” I say. “For your own damned good.”

He laughs into my chest, pressing his erection into my leg. He smells amazing.

His sister comes back to the door, and she’s screeching a lot of questions at me, saying that I can’t do whatever it is I’m doing, and that I need to let her brother go and I just ignore her. I push Calix away from the door toward the car I brought.

“It’s fine, Maggie,” Calix calls over his shoulder. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, what?” she says. “This some kinky game?”

“Something like that,” says Calix.

“Fine, so say your safe word,” she says.

Calix laughs helplessly.

“You have a safe word, right?” she shrieks.

“I won’t hurt him,” I tell her. “I’m in love with your brother. He’s my life mate.”

“I trust him, Maggie,” said Calix, and he grins up at me.

Trust.

Shit, I hadn't known how much I wanted to hear that from someone.

I kiss him again, a desperate kiss. "I'm not losing you," I tell him.

"You're such a caveman," he says to me, but it's affectionate.

I shove him forward, getting out the keys to open the trunk of the car.

"Wait," he says, looking up at me. "Let me ride in the back seat. Do not put me in the trunk."

I put him in the trunk. He may be sexy as all fuck, and I may be in love with him, but he still has to learn a lesson.

arrow

KNIGHT IS IN the back seat of the car that Lotus and I are taking to drive to the Polloi compound. She and I get in, and I get ready to start the car, and I see movement out of the corner of my eye in the mirror and then he's up and on me.

He stuns me, and it hurts like fuck.

Lotus is screaming at him, but he ignores her, focusing entirely on subduing me.

"Sorry about the stun gun, Arrow," Knight says. "But I couldn't do it any other way. I couldn't risk you fighting me off." He handcuffs me to the steering wheel and presses the stun gun against my skin. It's not on, but it's a threat. "Drive."

"Seriously?" I say.

"Yeah, if you stun him while he's driving, he'll kill us all," says Lotus. "What the fuck is going on, Knight?"

"I'm not losing you," he says fiercely. "None of you. Now drive, Arrow, or I will have to put you in the fucking trunk."

I start the car. "Okay, I'm driving, but this is fucked up, man. I get that you don't understand how to have a relationship or whatever, but you don't just force people at stun-gun-point to do your bidding. That's not how this works."

"Drive," he mutters.

Lotus shakes her head at him. “What is wrong with you?”

striker

KNIGHT TOOK ME from the living room of our apartment, handcuffed me and forced me into his car. Now, he’s walking me into a room in an abandoned warehouse, one decked out with kerosene lights, bean bag chairs, and blankets. It’s not going to be real comfortable, but he sort of tried.

I’m sort of amused and touched despite myself.

I still remember the time that I was crying and Knight held me, the way he took possession of me in a very sexy fucking way. He made me feel safe in a way that I haven’t felt safe since I was a kid.

I love this man.

I get he just captured me and now he’s keeping all of us prisoner here, and that’s, um, fucked up, but...

In his way, he’s being kind of sweet. What passes for sweet from Knight anyway.

Lotus is perched on a bean bag chair, looking murderous.

Both Arrow and Calix are handcuffed and each lying on their stomachs on separate blankets.

He nudges me down on my knees on another blanket, and I settle there, looking up at him, chuckling under my breath. “Knight. You can’t—”

“I can do whatever I want,” he tells me. He reaches down and rubs his thumb over his

bite mark on my body, and it makes me feel shivery and good and turned on. But then, I've had an erection since the minute he handcuffed me, so I don't even know what to do with that. "First thing we're all going to do is tell Calix that we don't want him to leave us."

Calix laughs. "Okay, but Knight if you force them to—"

"None of us want him to leave," snaps Lotus. "He knows that already, and he's doing it anyway. He wants to do it for himself. We care about him, so we are letting him make his own decision."

"Fuck that," says Knight, shaking his head. "Fuck that, no." He leaves me and goes and kneels down next to Calix. "I'm not letting you go. You understand that?"

Calix laughs. "Just going to keep me hostage here until I agree to be your boyfriend again, Knight?"

"Mate," says Knight. "Come on, Calix, we are more than boyfriends. This is forever, and you know it. I would die for you, now what the hell makes you think you can just leave?"

Calix is smiling. He likes it. He likes being told that he can't leave, and I realize, now, we maybe did the wrong thing with him. I did understand where he was coming from, and I know he didn't want to be forced. I didn't want to force him, but maybe I didn't convey to him how much I want him.

"I know what you need," says Knight, getting to his feet. He starts working on his zipper. "Get up on your knees, baby," he tells Calix, his voice velvet.

Calix's scent gets deep and dark and delectable as he obeys. "You know, despite what you may think, Knight, giving people your cock to suck does not solve every

problem.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“Sure about that?” says Knight, freeing himself. He does have a very nice cock, and it’s all knotted up over there, and I can smell the scent of his essence leaking out of the tip of him, and I can feel, through the bond, how turned on both Knight and Calix are.

“Pretty sure,” says Calix, licking his lips, staring right at Knight’s erection.

“Well, how about you put it in your mouth anyway?” says Knight gently. “Just as an experiment.”

Calix laughs.

Fuck, my cock is throbbing. I want him to do it. Arrow and Lotus are both watching, intent, and their scents are rising, too.

“For science?” says Calix.

“For science,” agrees Knight, reaching down to trace the shell of Calix’s ear.

“Shit,” says Calix and gives the head of Knight’s cock a kiss.

We all feel it. We all make noise.

“Good,” says Knight. “That’s very good. Now a little more.”

Calix obligingly opens his mouth and we all feel how wet and sweet it is for Knight to sink into his mouth.

Everyone groans.

I wish I could touch myself, but I'm handcuffed, and I can't. Somehow, that thought makes my cock even harder, and I'm even more turned on.

"That's good," Knight breathes. "You're real good at that, Calix. I love the way your clever, talented little mouth feels on my cock."

Calix takes him deeper.

Knight sinks his hand into Calix's hair. "Just like that," he murmurs. "Suck me just like that."

Calix is almost plaintively suckling Knight now. It feels insanely good through the bond, and it's hot as hell to watch, one alpha on his knees, the other standing over him, authoritative but also affectionate. I feel my arousal surge, and I think I might be on the edge of an orgasm, even though I've had no actual, physical stimulation.

Knight tips back his head, letting out an affected sigh. "Fuck, I'm not going to last. Everyone in the bond, you're all watching, and it's..."

"Let him make you come, Knight," whispers Lotus.

"You like it, don't you, omega?" says Knight. "You like watching this? You like my cock?"

"I adore your cock, alpha," says Lotus, who is slipping her fingers down the front of her pants to touch herself.

The bond crackles as she does, her fingers on her clit like electricity on a live wire.



I moan, and so does everyone else.

Three seconds later, we're all coming.

Calix is peppering Knight's softening cock with little kisses as Knight is running his fingers through Calix's hair. I've made a total mess of my pants.

Lotus lies back on the beanbag chair.

"Say you're going to stay, Calix," says Knight.

Calix grunts. "I... I don't know. They don't forgive me."

"We do," I say.

"I will make them forgive you," says Knight. "Say you'll stay."

Calix sighs. "I'll stay," he whispers.

"Good," says Knight, relieved.

And then, it's quiet for some time.

I'm not sure what this means. Probably nothing, but maybe not. Maybe all Calix wanted was to be wanted, in the end, and maybe we won't lose him after all. On the other hand, I definitely do not think a blow job is going to solve all the underlying issues that led to Calix sleeping with someone else, so, I don't think anything is really different. But if Knight thinks it is, fine. "Okay," I say, "you got what you wanted, Knight, so take these cuffs off and—"

"No, I didn't," says Knight. "Calix isn't the only one who was trying to leave."

"Yes," says Arrow, "yes, he was."

"Well, whatever you want to call it, we're all distant," says Knight. "We have more things to solve here. And if I have to make each and every one of you suck my cock until we get them solved, I will do exactly that."

26

lotus

I HAVE TO admit that mind-blowing orgasm has done a lot to improve my mood. Even with being captured and locked up in this warehouse, I'm floating in a little

glowy, happy place that is being intensified by the fact we're all sharing it in the bond.

Deep down, I know I should probably be doing something to get us out of this situation. I need to talk Knight down, get him to take the cuffs off my mates, and we need to have a conversation, like adults, so that we can solve all of this.

But instead, I hold out my arms and I push out through the bond how much I want to be touching them, my men, my pack, my alphas. And they come to me, getting to their feet even while their arms are cuffed behind their backs. Soon, we're all entangled, sort of on the beanbag chair and sort of on the floor. We're all kissing each other, and I'm tasting each of my men's tongues and sweet, unique tastes, and I'm running my hands over their bodies, their chests and arms and abdomens.

Pretty soon, they're all hard again.

I start sucking on Striker's hardness while rubbing Calix and Arrow, and Knight, who has the best range of movement, kneels behind me and whispers roughly in my ear that I need to be a good omega and let him take off my pants.

I don't stop him, just acquiesce and surrender.

Knight reaches around to run his fingers between the lips of my sopping wet pussy. He toys with my aching and needy clit while I try to take Striker deeper and tug Calix's and Arrow's erections.

"Omega," says Knight, using his other hand to toy with his mark on the upper slope of my breast, "you are very, very wet. A pussy this wet needs an alpha cock, doesn't it, baby girl?"

My mouth is full, so I just moan my assent.

“I’m going to fuck this wet little pussy,” Knight tells me. “And we’re all going to feel how good it feels through the bond, how much our pretty omega likes being jammed full of her alpha, and how good it feels for my cock to slide in and out of her slippery, tight hole.”

I practically crest. I just came, but I could come again.

“Fuck her, Knight,” says Arrow in a gravelly voice. “Fuck our omega, please.”

“Yeah,” gasps Calix, “yeah, she needs it.”

Knight slides the head of his cock into me.

I groan around Striker.

“Good girl,” says Knight. “Such a good omega, getting her pussy fucked. Take my cock, sweetheart.”

I take it, and he slides all the way deep inside.

Everything stretches, as if the colors of reality smear into each other, and we all gasp in unison... and then it snaps back into place, and we hover there together, in a bright, bright world of intensifying pleasure, which gets more and more intense, growing and growing and growing until, we all tumble off into a full-pack orgasm, everyone at once, washing through us in pure ecstasy.

Knight doesn’t knot me, but he stays inside me as he gets soft, and I lay back against his chest. He holds me there as we all collapse against each other, out of breath, riding the waves of bliss we’ve found together.

“This is what we’ve needed,” Knight tells us, very serious.

I can't find it within me to argue with that. I hum, happy, safe and sated, here with my life mates. I feel so close to them right now that it seems ridiculous we were all so distant recently.

## Page 103

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

I reach out to Calix. I stroke his face with one hand, and then belatedly realize my hand is covered in someone's come, and I giggle and apologize.

Calix seizes my wrist and begins licking my fingers clean. "I don't mind a little Arrow smeared all over me," he says, grinning.

Arrow grins at him. "I'll smear you any time you want."

Calix laughs.

I sigh as he licks me clean. "Did you mean it?" I whisper.

His mouth pauses. "Mean what?"

"That you'll stay?" I say in a tiny, tiny voice.

He doesn't speak for a long moment. Then, he resumes lapping up Arrow's release.

"I mean, you don't have to," I say, resigned to this, but sad. "It's dumb to think we can solve all this with orgasms."

"It is not," mutters Knight.

"How can you still want me, omega?" says Calix, and I feel his shame and confusion through the bond.

I lift my head to look at him. "Calix, I have your bite and we're mated. How can I not

want you?”

He stops licking again, meeting my gaze. He looks practically devastated. “The way I was raised, if an alpha did this to an omega, had sex with another woman, it...”

“What?” I say in a low voice. “Would he be stoned to death?”

Calix sighs. “Well, no, not anymore. But it would be bad.”

“The way I see it, I have sex with men that aren’t you all the time,” I say. “If you really want other women, I can make that work. I just think we need to figure out ground rules, because...” I hunch up my shoulders. “It does make me kind of insanely jealous when it’s not one of our mates.”

“I don’t need other women,” he says immediately.

“But maybe you do,” I say. “Because you left the pack and you—”

“It wasn’t about that,” he says. “I wanted to feel special, that’s all. But...” He shuts his eyes. “The truth is, I feel more special and more desired and more at home in this moment than I pretty much ever have. Let me stay, please.”

“You never have to get permission from me for that,” I say. “I don’t decide that for you. You decide that for yourself.”

“Look,” says Arrow, “relationships change with time. We don’t have to nail everything down forever. Calix is the youngest of us. He never had a monogamous relationship.”

“I have never had a monogamous relationship,” Knight scoffs. “Neither has Striker.”

“Uh, that’s not true,” says Striker. “I mean, I never had a committed sexual relationship, but it’s not like I didn’t sort of try dating before I took the plunge and became a priest.”

“Whatever,” says Knight. “Not everyone needs that.”

“Okay,” says Arrow, “you don’t need that, and I know that I don’t need that ever again. But maybe Calix does. Maybe we can give him space to go and explore that and still have the pack here to come back to... or not, if he doesn’t want it. Things are going to change as we all mature. When Lotus has a baby—”

“If I have a baby,” I interrupt.

“If you have a baby,” says Arrow carefully. He touches me. “I want to come back to that, but let me finish my sentence.” He addresses everyone. “If we have children, our relationship will change, and we may all feel differently about things. That doesn’t mean that it’s the end of what we have. What we have... I don’t get the feeling it does end. It’s forever. That’s what a life bond is.”

“Mmm,” says Striker, nodding. “It’s security. Humans need that. We need choices, too, but choices make us insecure and unsettled. We need some parts of our lives that are secure, things we can count on. And we’ve lost sight of that, of how much we can count on this, our pack.”

Wow, he’s right. I’ve been so focused on so many other things. Kyvelki’s prophecy, my fertility, all of those unknowns. It’s made me forget the sweet, wondrous foundation I have here.

“But, Lotus,” speaks up Arrow, “to go back, do you want to have babies?”



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’m twenty-five years old. I want... a choice. That got taken from me. I want thechoicerestored.” I look at Striker. “Like you’re saying, we all need choices.”

I feel a surge of goodness in the bond, agreement, all of us settling together. It’s very nice. I writhe into the sensation of it, feeling supported and loved and accepted.

Then I lift my head. “Knight, what you did, it’s not cool. You took away our choice. You forced us here.”

“Whatever,” says Knight, banding an arm around my waist and holding me tightly against his firm chest. “You guys all talk too much and you think too much. We need each other. End of story. That’s all that matters.”

“Well,” says Striker, “that matters, but it’s notallthat matters.”

Knight snorts. “You’re just making it complicated.”

“It is complicated,” says Calix ruefully. “But I think you’re all right. What we have together is simple. I’ve been fighting it, because I thought it was boxing me in. But if you guys mean it, if we can have this—us—and still have choices? I want that more than anything on earth. I’ve never had—” His voice breaks. “I’ve never had a family like this, people who love me, who won’t turn on me if I do the wrong thing. My mother cut my off. My father—well, he never could even acknowledge he was my father without causing tension in the pack. And when I left, they turned their backs on me. I want to trust you all, I really do, I just... I don’t know if I knowhowto trust like that.”

“We’re going to teach you,” says Knight. “And if you get confused again, I will kidnap you, tie you up, and feed you my cock until you get it.”

I can’t help but laugh.

“You know, that’s actually sweet of you, Knight,” says Calix, smiling up at the other alpha. “I fucking love you, Knight, do you know that?”

“I do know that,” says Knight. “And I love you, too. I love all of you. Because you are allmine.”

I giggle, wriggling into his body. “You’re right, Calix. He’s a caveman. He’s just going to club us over the head and drag us into warehouses by our hair whenever he feels like it.”

“Damned straight,” says Knight.

“Okay, so, about the cuffs?” says Striker.

“Oh,” says Knight. “Are we done? Or do you guys want to talk this to death for twelve more hours?”

I yawn, feeling a sleepy warmth trickle into me from the bond and our shared happiness. “I think there’s going to be a lot of talking in our future, yeah.”

Knight groans.

“But now, sleep would be nice,” I say. “Can’t we go sleep in our nest, the nest I made for us, the perfect, good nest? Please, Knight?”

“I worked very hard to make this place comfortable for you guys,” says Knight.

“Mmm, let’s agree I’m better at nesting than you,” I say with another yawn.

“I mean,” says Knight, “that’s not fair. You’re an omega. You have nesting instincts.”

“You have good instincts too,” says Striker to Knight. “We wouldn’t be what we are without you, Knight.”

“We wouldn’t be what we are without each and every one of us,” says Knight seriously. “I need all of you. And you guys, no matter how much you worry, you need each other, too.”

27

calix

I SLEEP THAT night in our nest, my nude body pressed between Striker’s and Knight’s. I don’t really believe that everything’s going to be okay. I want to believe it, but I can’t. Nothing in my entire life has ever worked out well, so I just can’t believe it, not yet.

But I want to believe it, and so I decide I’ll try.

Lotus is right.

There’s a lot of talking in our future.

Arrow starts texting us all these links about about ethical nonmonogamy, and he seems very gung-ho about the way it should work, even if he claims that he has no interest in having sex outside of the pack. But he says it’s all about communication and boundaries and respecting each other’s boundaries. He tells us about the concept of compersion, which is when you get a vicarious experience from seeing a person

you care about have sexual pleasure with someone who is not you. And while I can admit that I have experienced this with the pack, when I try to imagine Lotus, for instance, having sex with someone outside the pack, it makes my stomach churn.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

How can they let me be in this pack when I did what I did?

And then Tammy, seeing Tammy is fucking awkward.

The thing is with Tammy, I don't know if they even could have experienced this compersion thing for me, because I don't know that I did it because I was pursuing pleasure. It was selfish, sure, but I didn't do it because I wanted to have fun and hurt people. I did it because I felt desperate and trapped and scared. I thought that it would make me feel free.

It didn't.

But Striker and I have some talks. A lot of talks. When he was a priest, he essentially did a lot of work that might be considered counseling, as if he was a therapist, and while he wasn't trained in psychology, per se, he did a lot of research into psychology because he wanted to do his job better. That's Striker for you.

So, some of these talks help me understand things like attachment style. Striker says that when a person is raised in an abusive environment, and he says the Polloi qualifies, it's likely a person will develop what is called a disorganized attachment style, which means a person will be alternately anxious and trying to nail down loved ones for security and then avoidant, running from intimacy, because it makes a person feel unsafe. When a child doesn't securely attach to a caregiver, apparently, it makes it really hard to securely attach later in life.

But Striker says the good thing is that a secure relationship later in life can help a person heal. And I want to believe I have that with my mates. I want to believe.

It's funny how after that thing with Knight nothing really changes and yet everything changes.

Nothing changes, because we're all still doing our "things." I'm still going in to Cedar Falls and working with the alphas and omegas. I'm still focused on trying to undo the damage done to them. Arrow and Lotus are still going to visit various Polloi compounds, talking to Kyvelki, and spending a lot of time trying to do work to change inequities in the way that alphas and omegas are treated in society. Striker is working on his TikTok sermons or whatever. And Knight becomes sort of our house husband. He starts cooking for us and managing the household chores (this doesn't mean he personally does them, exactly, more that he orders us around and comes up with creative punishments when we don't obey him, which usually involve his sexual gratification and, um, you know, spanking), and he becomes our anchor, the person who keeps the home and hearth, I guess. Knight likes that, though. He likes, uh, owning us? It's sort of exactly what I think he's always wanted, is to have a group of people to command and also to love.

So, it would seem as if we're all still scattered, but we aren't. We have each other as a secure foundation, a warm and good place that cradles us as we go out into the world to do whatever it is that we are trying to do. So, in that way, everything changes.

I think what it does is to take the pressure off our exploits. They still matter, but they don't have to matter as much because we have our pack now, our sense of belonging, and our connection matters more than anything else.

One day, I sort of realize that I've come to trust it without noticing that I do. I've come to rely on it and to simply believe it will be there. I didn't make a choice to believe that my mates will always be there for me, but it happened at some point, while I wasn't paying attention.

While all this has been happening, Lotus's cycle has started again, which means that

she's going into heat and she's menstruating, which...

Okay, so a weird thing about my mates? They have a thing about blood.

I'm not squeamish or whatever, so it doesn't bother me. Anyway, whatever it was Acker did to them, this blood thing is just locked in. I don't mind, though, and Lotus doesn't mind and they definitely don't mind. So, anyway, Lotus having her period tends to mean they all go into a rut, and considering I'm in the bond with them, I usually have a sympathetic rut and... it's fun. No complaints.

Unlike beta women, who have a monthly cycle, omegas' reproductive cycles happen less often. In the Polloi, omegas go into heat usually twice or three times a year. No one knows why this is, but I speculate that our reproductive cycles are more likely to be effective, so there's no reason for an omega to be fertile twelve times a year, unlike betas, who have a much lower rate of conceiving.

But now that Lotus's cycle is happening, the prospect of reversing her tubal ligation comes up again, and it turns out that, considering she's so young, there's a really good chance it will be successful and that she'll be able to get pregnant on the other side of it. So, they schedule it, and it's a laparoscopic surgery, minimally invasive. She doesn't even have to stay overnight. She comes home within hours after it's over, and it works.

After which, she promptly goes back on birth control, because she says she's not ready, but that she's pretty sure someday, she's going to be. That's been two years ago, and she's still deciding. We're all okay with that. It's her body, after all.

Okay, this is not entirely true. Striker, Arrow, and I are all okay with it. Knight is typically a caveman about it and has done things like swapping out Lotus's birth control for sugar pills. (The amount of effort he put into this is insane. He reproduced the little blister pack so well that she couldn't tell the difference. It was a

commitment. I have to hand it to the guy.) But the thing about birth control is that it suppresses Lotus's heats, so when she went into heat, we all knew what happened. So, that was a fun heat when we all had to wear condoms.

There were lots of very serious talks after that happened, where Striker was very stern and barked a lot at Knight about how this kind of thing was borderline abusive and Knight was really lucky we weren't just chucking him out of the pack for doing that shit.

Knight sulked for a long time about it. He's still sulky about it. He claims that he can feel through the bond that Lotus really wants to have babies and that she's just afraid to do it, and Lotus, for her part, says maybe that's true.

Maybe that's why she forgives him.

Why we all forgive him.

It's hard to draw moral lines in the sand with each other. We've all committed murder. We've all done very violent things. We've all been out of our heads and out of control.

We have each other, that's the thing, and that's our constant. We hold that line, no matter what.

At Cedar Falls, one night, one of the alphas gets loose and goes straight for one of the omegas, a male omega, probably because he's in heat, I think, since we have been doing some controlled heat experiments (with the option of giving them sex toys and fuzzy stuff instead of orchestrating sex with them).

Anyway, it's bad.



The alpha is a hound, trained by Acker, and he tries to kill the omega.

But he doesn't.

Maybe because of heat, and heat short-circuits that training to some degree, I don't know. Anyway, I get called in around three in the morning and when I get there, we're all watching this alpha knot this omega six ways from Sunday on the security cameras. Guards went in to try to stop what was happening before I got there, but then the fucking started and the alpha stopped trying to kill the omega.

## Page 106

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

So we wait it out.

He bites the omega.

Which... I keep saying, as we're all watching the cameras, that this is going to happen. They are goddess-damned feral, after all, pure instinct. No way does go any other way.

But, uh, they start talking immediately.

Within four days, they have their memories back and all of the brain damage is completely reverse. But they also don't know each other and they're bonded, and it's very messy. I'm not really sure if either of them were nominally, erm, gay before this happened either, so that's... yeah.

We're not really sure what to do.

We can pair up the omegas and alphas in the facility, and try this happening again, but we're taking a risk with the omega's lives and we're making big decisions for these people in terms of what happens after they have bites. Additionally, this new alpha-omega pair are very angry with Cedar Falls, as well they should be. Coltrain, however, wants to minimize the fallout from any scrutiny over this. He wants to keep it all a big secret, so he's refusing to allow any contact with the alpha's or the omega's families.

And while this is really great that this happened, I feel like we still don't have any answers. We don't know why the drugs that are given at Cedar Falls sometimes make

omegas and alphas feral. We don't know what the effect of this prolonged ferality is, either.

To me, it doesn't seem like this omega has a potent and powerful scent the way that Lotus does, but I don't know if Lotus's scent is related to our scent match. One thing that is true, though, is that the alpha has teeth like ours, the big fang-like alpha incisors. So, it stands to reason that the effects may be very similar.

I want to bring Kyvelki in to scent the new omega. Coltrain refuses to allow this.

There's a week full of stress and tension and a lot of confusion about what I should do and whether we should go public, even though we've signed non-disclosures with Cedar Falls and its parent corporation. We meet with a lawyer to find out what the consequences would be if we break that legal document.

And then, while we're all debating that, the omega and the alpha escape the facility, go home, contact the press, and it just blows up.

Cedar Falls' corporate owners sweep in real fast, offer a bunch of law settlements, shut down the entire facility, and they come in and want to talk to me. After a few conversations, they put me in charge.

I float an idea that we pair up the alphas and omegas in heat while having guards standing by with stun guns to stop the alphas from doing any permanent damage to the omegas and that we muzzle them so that they can't bite.

That's what we do.

The brain damage is reversed and they aren't bonded, and immediately when they come back to themselves, the corporation offers them huge cash settlements in exchange for never talking about it and not pressing any charges. Every single one of

them takes it, even the original mated pair who blew the whistle on everything to begin with.

I wait for some sign that these alphas are going to be “triggered” like my mates were. But they aren’t. I have to admit, the last time my mates were triggered, it was before Lotus’s first heat. She stopped it, reined them back in, but it hasn’t really happened again since her heat. Maybe the heat restores some kind of pack hierarchy that limits the ferality? I hope that’s the case.

Coltrain himself gets “reassigned.” He keeps his pension and his big house and keeps sending his kids to expensive private colleges. I think he maybe gets a very nasty scolding from the corporation, but... basically, it’s a slap on the wrist, no real consequences.

So, it feels like, two minutes after it blows up, it just blows over.

Nothing’s changed.

Drugs like the ones given out at Cedar Falls are being given out at facilities all over the country, and the wave of current regulatory bodies in government is tending towards less regulation, not more. No one’s going to step in and stop this very profitable business that works by selling omegas and alphas a little story that they can be just like betas.

After all, who wants to be a freak?

I can’t blame them.

One night, I curl up with Lotus in the living room in our apartment, which is still being paid for by the corporation that owns Cedar Falls, after all, and I lay my head in her lap, and I say, “Sometimes I wish I wasn’t an alpha.”

She brushes her soft fingers through my hair and says, “I’m glad you’re an alpha.”

I shut my eyes.

“What did the job offer look like?” she says.

My eyes are still closed. “They want to close down Cedar Falls as a facility for profit and turn it into nothing more than a research facility. They say it’ll all be volunteers. They say they want very scientific, double-blind studies with all sorts of controls and they want me to stay on in an advisory capacity. Basically, it’ll be my job to make sure that everything they do is ethical. I’ll be the person who makes sure the test subjects are protected and that we don’t violate their rights.”

“You don’t have to take it,” she says. “We don’t have to keep relying on them for money. We can get, you know, real jobs.”

I laugh softly. “Oh, come on, you and Arrow are right in the thick of doing all that activism work, going out and doing speaking gigs to tell betas about how to accept and accommodate alphas and omegas. It’s good that you guys are doing that. And it’s good to use the money from Cedar Falls to do good.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:37 am*

“Yeah, maybe,” she says. “But I wonder if that’s not just an excuse to take blood money.”

I sigh. I don’t answer.

I remember this security guard who I talked to when I was looking for my mates right after they escaped. He talked about how he kept his job at Cedar Falls because if he left, Cedar Falls would keep doing whatever they were doing, but if he stayed, he had the ability to make small changes from within.

That guy’s still there.

I see him in the halls sometimes.

He used to offer me cigarettes, because that time I talked to him, I pretended to be out there because I smoked. I had to lie and say I quit. It got to be a big thing, and I had to tell him I used nicotine patches and he was real curious, saying he tried it with the gum and it never worked for him, and...

Anyway.

Real life isn’t always about easy black-and-white choices.

“I’m going to take it,” I say. “We could use the health insurance, right? In case Knight fucks with your birth control again, this time successfully.”

“Yeah,” she says. “Yeah, I’m not getting younger. Neither are you. Neither are our

mates. We should do that, soon, I think. We should start seriously thinking about getting pregnant.”

I think about whether or not we should bring a child into a world like this, one as flawed as this one is, and I know the answer. Yes. We can’t stop living and loving because the world is a bad world. We have to find the light in the darkness wherever we can.

Our pack is my light.

Our love.

I think it, and I feel the bond surge, lighting up my connection to each of our mates.

Then, one by one, they start to filter into the room.

“So,” says Knight, “what are we doing? Armed insurrection? I looked up the dude who owns the big corporation. I don’t mind kidnapping him. Having a talk with him with my fists. Or with knives, if necessary. I’m flexible.”

“Calix is taking the job,” says Lotus, still brushing at my hair. I’m still lying in her lap.

“Well, I’m in full support,” says Striker, sitting down next to us. “I think we can do some good from within. It’s a long fight. This is just one battle.”

“They’re lifting the gag order,” I tell Striker. “You can talk about Cedar Falls on TikTok if you want.”

“Really?” says Striker. “That’s interesting.”

“I think they’re going hard for their official position, which is that they had no

idea what was going on there, and they were horrified to find out, and now they're fixing everything." I'm sarcastic.

"It's still good news," says Arrow. "I don't know, you guys. Maybe we're still going to be the prophesied superhero scent-match pack who leads the revolution."

"Well," I say with a little laugh, "if that's the will of the Goddess, who are we not to answer the call?"

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