



Knot My Boss

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He told me to be professional. He never told me not to beg.

I thought I was signing up for an agricultural internship. I didn't realize I was surrendering my sanity to a seven-foot-tall, muscle-bound, ruthlessly controlled minotaur who fills my every waking thought—and ruins my nights with fantasies that leave me aching.

Sterling Johnson runs the most discreet, high-end minotaur collection facility in the country. He's professional. Impeccable. Off-limits. And after one reckless glimpse of what he does behind closed doors, I can't stop imagining what it would feel like to take his knot. To be locked against him, filled so deep I forget my own damn name.

I know it's wrong. I know if he catches me watching, it could destroy everything. But the more I see, the more reckless I become until the night I push too far—and Sterling shows me exactly what happens to desperate little interns who don't know when to look away.

Knot My Boss is a filthy, high-heat monster romance featuring: knotting, size difference, forced proximity, a human intern with no self-preservation instincts, and a minotaur boss who's been holding back his hunger until now.

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I swing my legs nervously, the too-big chair swallowing me whole, like it knows damn well I don't belong here. My boots barely skim the floor, and the slick Sterling's Pride Essential Services brochure in my sweaty hands crinkles from the death grip I've got on it. "Innovative approach to minotaur biological needs," the bold tagline blares at me like a neon sign over a strip club. I drag my gaze away, but it keeps snapping back like a rubber band to the words I shouldn't be obsessing over.

Dad had gone purple when I told him. "Honeyworths are traditional farmers," he'd thundered, veins bulging. "We don't get mixed up with...those creatures." Yeah, well. Four generations of corn and soybeans left me starving for something more. Something raw. Something that cracked open my chest and made my heart beat faster just by thinking about it. I just hadn't realized "faster" would feel like this—like an electrical storm riding shotgun inside my body.

The receptionist, all sharp smiles and even sharper nails, had chirped a "Mr. Johnson will be right with you," and offered me something to drink. I should've said yes. Now my mouth's so dry it feels like I'm chewing sandpaper, and the third trip through the glossy brochure isn't helping.

"State-of-the-art collection apparatus."

"Privacy-focused design."

"Competitive compensation for donors."

Each clinical phrase hits me low in the gut, twisting hard enough to make my toes curl inside my boots. I squirm in my seat, swallowing down the wrong kind of anticipation. This wasn't supposed to feel sexy. And yet.

The front door swings open. I freeze.

A trio of minotaurs strides through like they own the goddamn place—easily seven feet tall, shoulders so broad they make the door frame look like a toy. Casual business attire clings to them in all the wrong, delicious places—shirts stretched tight over thick chests, slacks doing a piss-poor job of hiding thighs like tree trunks.

One of them laughs, low and rich, and the sound vibrates right through me. Another swings his gaze toward me. Our eyes catch. Boom. My whole body locks up, heart slamming so hard it feels like my ribs might crack. Heat floods my face, and I jerk my head back down, pretending to study the brochure like it's a damn holy text. Too late. The scent hits me—thick and heady, earthy and male, like the woods after a hard rain. I grip the armrests, knuckles going white, trying not to breathe too deep. Trying not to imagine what that smell would taste like on my tongue.

I never should've come here. But God help me, I don't think I can walk away.

The door to the inner office swings open, and I nearly lose my grip on the damn brochure, my fingers fumbling like a kid caught sneaking a dirty magazine. I look up—and up—and holy hell, up.

The minotaur fills the entire doorway, a living wall of muscle and dark brown fur that gleams under the sterile office lights. Seven feet of raw, devastating power, packed into a button-down shirt that's doing the Lord's work just staying buttoned. His slacks? No help at all—every stride, every subtle shift of those massive legs is a study in barely-leashed force.

His bull's head tilts slightly as he surveys me, amber eyes razor-sharp and crackling with intelligence. And maybe something else. Something that makes my skin prickle and my stomach plummet straight through the floor.

"Mr. Honeyworth?" His voice is a low, velvety rumble—felt more in my chest than heard in my ears. "I'm Sterling Johnson. Owner of Sterling's Pride. Please, come in."

I scramble to my feet, brushing down my wrinkled khakis like that'll somehow make me look like I have my shit together. Spoiler: it doesn't. My legs feel about as stable as overcooked spaghetti as I follow him into the office.

It's big and polished—massive desk, awards gleaming on the walls, family photos placed with precision. The kind of space that screams control and success. Everything in its right place.

I sink into the chair he gestures to—thankfully built for human proportions—while Sterling eases into his custom-made seat, the frame giving a loud, protesting creak under his impossible weight. Even sitting, he dominates the room.

"Your application was... unexpected," he says, getting right to the point. His voice still has that low, rolling edge, like distant thunder you know is about to break wide open. "Agriculture business majors don't typically seek internships at facilities like mine."

I latch onto my prepared line like it's a life raft. "I'm interested in non-traditional agricultural models," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Your facility represents an innovative approach to?"

"Hank," he cuts in, nostrils flaring slightly, his tone brooking no argument.

Oh god, why does my name sound so good coming out of his mouth?

"Hank. Let's be direct. Do you understand what we do here?"

Heat climbs up my neck like a goddamn fire alarm, but I nod, soldiering through it.

"Yes, sir. You provide a safe, private environment for minotaurs to address biological needs and compensate them for their...contributions... which are used in agricultural applications."

There. Clinical. Safe.

Sterling leans forward slightly, and the sheer mass of him is enough to make me fight the primal urge to either bolt or drop to my knees. (And not necessarily in terror.)

"And you're comfortable with that?"

"Yes, sir," I blurt, too fast, too eager. Like a rookie offering himself up for slaughter.

"Why?"

The word slices through the air. Sharp. Demanding.

"I..." I swallow, forcing the words past the lump in my throat. "I believe the services you provide are essential and dignified. And I want to learn about every aspect of agricultural business, not just the ones humans dominate."

For a long, suspended moment, he just... watches me. His gaze is so heavy it pins me in place, a tangible pressure crawling over my skin.

Then Sterling leans back, his enormous horns catching the light like a crown, his face unreadable.

"This position requires discretion," he says slowly. "Professionalism. The ability to

handle delicate situations. Our clients come here because they trust us."

"I understand," I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

His eyes narrow, a slow, assessing rake from the top of my messy hair down to my still-trembling hands. "Do you?" he murmurs. There's no judgment in his tone—just a low, unsettling curiosity, like he's trying to peel me open and see what's really inside.

"A lot of people find our business... distasteful," he says, and there's a faint, bitter twist to his mouth. "Despite the fact that what we do is perfectly natural. Necessary."

"I grew up on a farm, Mr. Johnson. I've seen animals breeding my entire life," I manage to say, clutching onto the only thing that feels solid in my spinning head. "This isn't so different."

He snorts softly—a sound that rumbles somewhere deep in his chest—and shakes his head. "Except we're not talking about livestock, Hank. We're talking about sentient beings. With dignity. Privacy."

"I didn't mean?—"

He lifts a massive hand, cutting me off with an ease that should piss me off but somehow makes me want to lean into it instead. "I know what you meant," he says. "But you need to understand what you're stepping into."

The words aren't just a warning. They're a promise.

Sterling rises in one fluid, terrifying, gorgeous motion. The room seems to shrink around him.

"Come," he says, his voice darker now. Rougher. "I'll show you the facility. Then

we'll see if you still want the position."

I trail after Sterling through the hidden door behind his desk, the heavy scent of leather and something darker—something him —curling in my lungs as we step into a pristine hallway.

* * *

The tour is efficient. Clinical. Reception area. Staff room. Laboratory where collections are processed. Sterling explains everything with that smooth, practiced precision, and I nod along, pretending like I'm absorbing every word when, really, it's getting harder to breathe. Harder to think about anything except the way his voice vibrates straight through my bones.

And then we reach them.

The collection rooms.

Sterling pauses in front of one door, punching a code into the keypad. "This is where our clients' needs are addressed," he says, his voice steady enough to pass for casual—but there's a deeper hum underneath it, something almost... primal.

The door swings open, and for a second, I just stand there blinking.

The room is nothing like I expected. Soft lighting. Thick, plush carpet. A massive screen on one wall, a neatly arranged rack of magazines nearby. It feels more like a high-end hotel suite than a clinical facility.

Except for the centerpiece.

Right in the middle of the room, there's a padded apparatus—sleek and ergonomically

curved, adjustable in ways that scream comfort and intimacy at the same time. Not crude. Not mechanical. Something designed for pleasure.

"The mount," Sterling says, following my gaze. His voice drops a fraction lower, and I feel it in my blood, hot and thick. "Fully adjustable for comfort. The internal systems collect and process the biological specimens."

I have to clear my throat twice before I manage, "It seems... very sophisticated."

Sterling crosses the room, one massive hand trailing lightly over the mount's padded surface. And I swear to god, watching that simple touch—the way his fingers move, slow and confident—sends a bolt of heat shooting straight between my legs.

"It is," he murmurs. "Designed for maximum comfort and efficiency. Clients can position themselves naturally while the system does the rest."

I can't stop it—the image slams into my brain like a freight train. Sterling. Shoving his big body down onto that mount, muscles straining, head thrown back in rough, wild pleasure. A choked sound sticks in my throat. I shift, trying to discreetly adjust the sudden, painful tightness in my pants. God help me if he notices.

He keeps talking, like he hasn't just set me on fire from ten feet away.

"The rooms are completely private," Sterling says, motioning to the walls. "Soundproofed. Clients can use the entertainment systems or bring their own materials."

The big screen. The magazines. The things left unsaid hang thick between us, heavy enough to choke on.

I nod, my tongue thick and useless.

Sterling squats down next to the mount, showing how the various parts adjust—raising, lowering, angling just so—and it's so easy, too easy, to imagine standing there with him, his giant hands on my hips, positioning me just right...

Stop. Stop.

"The internal mechanism is self-lubricating," he says, flipping open a hidden compartment like he's discussing nothing more risqué than a toaster. "Temperature-regulated to simulate natural conditions."

I make a soft, helpless noise in the back of my throat and immediately pretend it's a cough. Sterling's mouth quirks at the corner. He heard it. He knows.

"Clients receive immediate feedback on quantity and quality," he adds, pressing another button so a sleek readout flashes across the screen, "and payment is automatically deposited."

I nod again because if I open my mouth right now, the only thing coming out will be a whimper.

He rises to his full, towering height, the mount between us like some charged line neither of us is acknowledging out loud. Not yet. He taps another button, revealing a discreet drawer lined with... accessories. He closes it quickly, but not before my brain catalogs everything.

"Clients have different preferences," he says, his gaze steady on mine. "We accommodate all reasonable needs."

Something in the way he says reasonable makes my stomach flip.

Then he faces me fully, crossing the space in two strides until he's standing just a

little too close. Not close enough to touch. Close enough that my body aches for it anyway.

"Any questions?" he asks, voice low. Dangerous.

I open my mouth. Close it. Shake my head.

So many questions. Most of them involving me, him, and very little clothing.

Sterling studies me for another long beat, the silence so charged it crackles. "Then let's go back to my office," he says, voice barely above a growl. "Discuss the position." He lets that last word hang, heavy with layered meaning. "Unless..." He cocks his head slightly, amber eyes glinting. "You've decided this isn't for you."

"No!" I say, too fast, too loud. I flush. "I mean—yes. I'm still interested."

For the first time, a slow smile tugs at his mouth. It's not kind. It's not safe. It's the kind of smile that promises ruin—and somehow makes you thank it for the privilege.

Something flashes in Sterling's eyes—approval, amusement, maybe something darker—and he turns, striding back toward the hall. Leaving me there, heart hammering, hands shaking, want thrumming through my blood like a second pulse.

* * *

Back in his office, I sink into the chair like my knees might betray me otherwise, clutching the folder Sterling slides across the desk between two fingers—careful not to let our skin touch. Not because I don't want it. Because if it happened, I might actually combust.

Sterling leans back, massive arms folded behind his head, posture the perfect balance

of lazy and lethal.

"You'll start with basic responsibilities," he says, voice like warm velvet dragged over a razor's edge. "Inventory management. Scheduling. Basic accounting. Assisting the cleaning team between clients."

All perfectly normal tasks. All requiring me to pretend I wasn't actively thinking about exactly what I'd be cleaning up after.

"You'll report to Helena Vasquez," he adds, nodding toward the folder. "She runs our cleaning staff."

I nod, throat dry, flipping open the folder to distract myself. NDAs. Health certifications. Emergency protocols. All neat. Buttoned-up. Professional. Not even a hint of the raw, aching reality that still lingers behind my ribs like a fresh bruise.

"The pay," Sterling continues, like he's not watching me squirm behind a paper shield, "is competitive. Reflective of the unique nature of our work."

He names a figure. I blink. Holy shit.

"That's... extremely generous," I manage, my voice scraping against the sudden dryness in my mouth.

"We value discretion and professionalism," he says simply. "Both command a premium."

I try to focus on the legalese in front of me—paragraphs blurring together into meaningless squiggles as my mind drifts back to padded mounts, to the low scrape of Sterling's voice explaining lubrication mechanisms like he wasn't slowly dismantling my sanity one word at a time.

"Our hours are eight to six, Monday through Saturday," Sterling adds. "You'll be working primarily weekdays. Some Saturdays, depending on client demand."

Another nod from me. Another lie. Because demand has a whole different meaning in my head right now.

Sterling's gaze sharpens, pinning me to the spot like a butterfly to a board.

"One last thing, Hank." He leans forward, massive forearms braced on the desk, the short, velvety fur gleaming under the harsh overhead lights. I swear the air between us shimmers—charged, electric.

"I personally use one of the collection rooms at the end of each day."

I freeze. Every muscle in my body locks up.

Sterling's voice doesn't waver. Doesn't soften.

"Minotaurs must relieve certain pressures regularly," he says, as if he's discussing crop rotations, not dropping a live grenade into the middle of my self-control. "Otherwise, hormone buildup affects our temperament. Our health."

My heart slams against my ribs, a frantic bird desperate to escape.

"I'm telling you this," he continues, "because if you accept this position, you will occasionally be on-site when I attend to my needs."

Attend to his needs. God help me.

"I expect," he says, his amber eyes burning through me, "complete discretion."

The temperature in the room spikes ten degrees. My hands tremble as I clutch the folder tighter.

"Of course," I croak, my voice so hoarse it barely counts as a whisper. "Complete discretion."

Sterling doesn't look away. Doesn't blink. Just watches me with the kind of patient intensity that says he could peel me apart thought by thought if he chose to. And worse—some part of me wants him to.

For a beat, the silence between us pulses thick and heavy, my own arousal a hot, humiliating weight pressing against the front of my pants. Can minotaurs smell that? Can he?

The thought makes everything worse.

Sterling finally leans back, the leather chair groaning in protest. "The position is yours," he says. "If you want it."

"If I—" I choke, then barrel ahead like an idiot. "I want it. I accept."

His mouth twitches—the faintest flicker of a smile—before smoothing back into unreadable professionalism.

"Welcome to Sterling's Pride, Mr. Honeyworth," he says, voice low and final. "I expect impeccable professionalism from all my staff."

"Yes, sir." Sir. The word slips out soaked in things I don't dare examine too closely.

He stands, rising to his full, devastating height, and extends his hand.

I scramble up, my own hand practically dwarfed in his. His skin is hot. Rough. Alive.

The contact sends a jolt straight up my arm, straight down my spine, straight—Well. Everywhere.

"I'll see you Monday morning," Sterling says, releasing me with an unreadable look. The ghost of that heat lingers on my palm like a brand.

I barely register his next words over the roaring in my ears.

"The receptionist will show you out."

I stumble through the door, heart still pounding, the phantom feel of his hand burning into my skin.

God help me. I have no idea how I'm going to survive working here.

* * *

I drive home in a fog, one hand clenched uselessly on the steering wheel, the other still tingling with the ghost of Sterling's handshake. I personally use one of the collection rooms at the end of each day. The words loop inside my skull, low and dark and impossible to scrub clean.

By the time I park outside my apartment, my pants are doing a piss-poor job of hiding the fact that I'm half-hard and getting worse by the second. The cold night air doesn't help. Hell, it makes it worse—sharp and biting against skin that already feels too tight, too hot. I barely make it through the door before I'm tearing off my clothes, slamming the bathroom door behind me like it can hold back the images clawing through my head.

The water in the shower is ice-cold, needles against my overheated skin. Doesn't matter. Doesn't touch the fire burning underneath. I press my forehead against the tiles, breathing hard. I should stop. I should.

Instead, my hand moves without permission, fingers wrapping around myself, slick and desperate, as behind my eyes— There he is. Sterling Johnson.

The image crashes over me with the force of a breaking wave: Him loosening that tight-ass tie with slow, methodical fingers. Him popping the buttons on that poor abused shirt, dark fur revealed inch by agonizing inch. Those massive shoulders rolling back as he shrugs it off, casual and devastating.

I see him crossing the collection room, thighs thick and flexing with every slow, deliberate step. I imagine him gripping the mount—big, brutal hands curling around the handles—and sinking his hips down against it. Powerful. Fluid. His back muscles tensing, rolling, straining under the effort.

My hand jerks faster, hips stuttering into the rhythm of the fantasy.

I imagine the sounds he might make—rough, raw grunts forced from deep inside that huge chest, breaking into broken, hungry moans. I picture the sweat slicking his fur, dripping down the thick ropes of his spine, pooling in the small of his back as he works himself deeper, harder, faster. And those eyes—those molten amber eyes—fluttering half-shut, mouth parted on gasps he couldn't hold back if he tried.

The image of it—the sheer raw power of him, the complete abandonment, the overwhelming need—breaks me.

I come with a muffled groan, Sterling's name tearing itself from my lips before I can stop it. The orgasm rips through me, fierce and punishing, leaving me shuddering against the cold tile, every nerve sparking like a live wire.

For a few long, ragged seconds, I just stand there, chest heaving, the water beating down on me like judgment. Shame crashes in hard and fast, rolling through me until I feel like I might drown in it. What the hell am I doing?

This is my boss. A minotaur. Someone who's been nothing but professional. Who probably thinks of me as nothing more than a new intern—another human kid desperate for a job.

I tell myself it's just curiosity. Just attraction to something new and forbidden. It'll pass once the novelty wears off. Once I see how clinical and routine it all is. But deep down, under the self-recrimination and the cold spray of the shower, I know the truth.

This isn't novelty. This isn't curiosity.

It's something primal. A magnetic pull I can't explain—and sure as hell can't control.

I'm so screwed.

Or rather... I'm not. And God, I have never wanted something more in my life.

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I pull into the Sterling's Pride parking lot a full twenty minutes early, the kind of early that screams anxious newbie trying not to screw up. My stomach flutters like I swallowed a beehive. The lot's already filling up—oversized trucks and custom SUVs built for minotaur frames, gleaming in the morning sun. A few human-sized cars tuck between them like afterthoughts.

I sit there gripping the steering wheel for a second too long, then shove the door open before I can lose my nerve. It's just a job, I tell myself. Professional. Routine. You can do this.

Inside, the receptionist from my interview greets me with a bright smile. Her nameplate reads "Marina Michaels," and her lipstick is the same sunny coral shade as her blouse.

"You must be Hank," she says, already reaching for a phone. "Sterling mentioned you'd be starting today. I'll let him know you're here?—"

Before she can touch the receiver, a heavy tread sounds down the hallway. And then he's there. Sterling Johnson, clipboard in hand, shoulders so broad they practically scrape the doorframe, dressed in a deep blue button-down that makes his dark fur gleam like polished mahogany.

My mouth goes dry. Bone-dry. Emergency-level dehydration dry.

"Mr. Honeyworth," he says, voice a rumbling purr that I feel low in my belly.

"Precisely on time. Good."

"Good morning, sir," I manage to croak out, hyper-aware of Marina watching our exchange like it's her morning entertainment.

Sterling's amber eyes flick over me—fast, efficient—and for one crazy second, I swear they linger. Just a flicker. Just long enough to light a fuse under my skin.

"Marina will handle your paperwork and orientation," he says. "I have a supplier meeting in five minutes." He turns, the thick cords of muscle shifting under that shirt, and for a second I just stare like an idiot.

Then he pauses, glancing back.

"Helena expects you in the supply room at nine sharp," he says, voice cutting through my daze like a blade. "Don't be late."

Before I can nod again like a bobblehead, he's gone—striding down the hall, every step radiating that low-banked power that makes my knees want to forget their job.

Marina shoots me a sympathetic smile. "He's not as intimidating once you get used to him," she says, like I didn't just almost trip over my own tongue.

I doubt I'll ever "get used to" Sterling Johnson. Not when my body is busy staging a rebellion every time he so much as breathes.

"Come on," Marina says, cheerful and oblivious, "let's get your paperwork sorted." She leads me to a small side office where a terrifying stack of forms awaits.

As I dig in—scribbling my name more times than should legally be allowed—Marina chatters easily, filling the space with little tidbits about the facility.

"We've been open for five years now," she says, twirling a pen between her fingers. "Sterling built it from scratch after inheriting the land. You should've seen the early designs—he was obsessed with getting the ergonomics right."

I look up from a particularly brutal confidentiality agreement. "He designed the equipment himself?"

"The initial prototypes, yeah," Marina says, dropping her voice like she's sharing a juicy secret. "Then he brought in engineers to refine everything. But Sterling? He tested every version personally. Wouldn't ask anyone to use something he hadn't tried himself."

The image hits so hard it physically rocks me back in my chair.

Sterling. Testing the mounts. That huge, devastating body braced over the equipment, moving against it, working himself toward release with brutal, unstoppable force. My pen freezes mid-signature. I snap out of it a beat later, dragging my gaze back to the page and pretending I'm not seconds away from spontaneously combusting.

"And now we have ninety regular clients, plus another fifty occasional users," Marina says, oblivious. "Some come weekly, some monthly. We're actually at capacity most days. Sterling's thinking about expanding."

I mumble something vaguely appropriate, but honestly? All I can hear is the echo of Sterling's voice describing internal lubrication and temperature regulation. All I can see is the way his hands moved over the mount. All I can feel is the dangerous, magnetic pull—Getting stronger by the second.

Monday had barely started. And I was already so fucking screwed.

* * *

An hour later, my hand feels like it might actually fall off from signing so many confidentiality agreements. I've been issued security credentials, gotten a crash course on front office protocols, and just when I think Marina might hand me another stack of paperwork, she checks her watch and smiles.

"Perfect timing," she chirps. "Let's get you to Helena."

My stomach does a slow, anxious flip.

Marina leads me down a wide hallway that smells faintly of clean linen and industrial disinfectant, the overhead lights a little too bright. She stops in front of a massive supply room bustling with movement. Inside, a woman in her fifties is barking orders at two younger staff members who are sorting piles of folded linens like their lives depend on it.

"Helena, this is Hank—your new helper," Marina says, then disappears like she's avoiding shrapnel.

Helena Vasquez fixes me with a stare so sharp I feel it slice clean through my nervous smile. Hands planted on her hips. No-nonsense energy radiating off her like a physical force field.

"You ever clean biological material before, boy?" she demands, voice rough as gravel.

"I grew up on a farm," I offer, fighting the urge to stand up straighter. "I'm not squeamish."

Helena snorts—a sound of pure, unfiltered skepticism—and tosses a set of industrial gloves at my chest. I fumble to catch them.

"Farm's one thing. This is different." She ticks rules off on her fingers. "First rule: always wear protection. Second rule: what happens in the collection rooms stays in the collection rooms. Third rule: you do exactly as I say, no questions asked. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She narrows her eyes like she's waiting for me to crack. When I don't, she gives a brisk nod, apparently satisfied.

"Today you learn the cleaning protocol. Tomorrow, inventory management. By Friday..." She shrugs. "If you haven't run screaming, we'll talk about giving you more responsibility."

Helena jerks her chin toward the two younger staff members, barely glancing up from their tasks.

"That's Miguel and Lisa," she says. Miguel nods without looking at me. Lisa offers a brief, polite smile before returning to folding what must be the thousandth towel of the day.

"They've been with me three years," Helena adds, grabbing a clipboard. "You want their respect? Earn it."

No pressure or anything.

The morning flies in a blur of bleach and meticulous instruction. Helena drills me like I'm training for the goddamn Olympics of sanitation. Every inch of the collection rooms has to be scrubbed down to medical-grade standards. Every padded surface. Every screen. Every discreetly hidden mechanism.

"The dummy mounts are expensive," Helena barks, demonstrating how to wipe down the curved, padded surfaces like she's polishing a priceless artifact. "Handle them like they're made of gold."

I nod, focusing hard on the angles of the equipment. Not on the mental slideshow playing in the back of my mind: Sterling's hands on these same surfaces. His body braced, moving, sweating.

Focus. FOCUS.

"The internal mechanisms are self-cleaning to an extent," Helena continues, hitting a button that activates a low hum as the sanitization cycle kicks in. "But we still manually check every part. One mistake? One infection? Sterling's reputation takes a hit—and so do our jobs."

I trail behind her, heart hammering as she disassembles a section of tubing and shows me the pneumatic components—the ones responsible for creating "sensation."

It's... a lot. A lot of very expensive, very sophisticated, very suggestive machinery.

"The sensors monitor pressure, temperature, and volume," Helena explains, utterly unfazed. "They adjust automatically for each client's dimensions."

Dimensions. As in—Sterling's dimensions, when he uses it after closing.

A fresh wave of heat crashes over me, prickling along my skin. I force myself to nod like a normal person, praying Helena doesn't notice the flush burning up my neck.

By lunchtime, I've helped clean two rooms under her sharp, relentless supervision. The work isn't hard exactly—but it's meticulous. Surgical. There's no half-assing it when you're elbow-deep in equipment designed to accommodate bodies twice your

size and ten times your strength.

I'm grateful for the thick gloves. Grateful for the clinical language Helena insists on using. Grateful for anything that helps me pretend this isn't the most wildly inappropriate workplace fantasy fuel I've ever encountered in my life.

Helena claps her hands together sharply.

"Thirty minutes for lunch," she announces. "Staff room's down the hall. Use it. Don't touch the client lounge. Got it?"

"Got it," I echo, pulling off my gloves and trying not to look like I just ran a marathon.

She doesn't wait for a response—just marches off toward another checklist.

I wipe a bead of sweat from my forehead and head for the staff room, my mind already spiraling ahead. If this was just day one, I was completely and utterly fucked.

* * *

The staff room is small but cozy, the faint smell of coffee and disinfectant clinging stubbornly to the air. A battered kitchenette squats in one corner, a couple of mismatched tables scattered in the middle of the room.

I'm unwrapping my sandwich, trying not to think about padded mounts or temperature-regulated tubing, when the door swings open hard enough to rattle the frame. I look up—and nearly choke on my own tongue. A massive minotaur fills the doorway, his horns brushing dangerously close to the ceiling tiles. For one heart-stopping second, I think it's Sterling. But no. This one's lighter—tan fur instead of dark brown, broader through the shoulders, and wearing a grin that could light up a

whole damn city.

"Fresh meat!" he booms, voice so big it bounces off the walls, making me jump like a startled cat.

I fumble to my feet as he crosses the room in two easy strides, extending a hand big enough to probably snap my wrist if he wanted.

"I'm Marcus," he says, grinning like this is the best part of his day.

I slide my hand into his as carefully as someone disarming a bomb. His grip is firm, solid—but he reins it in, like he's used to human fragility.

"Hank," I manage, hoping my palm isn't visibly sweating.

Marcus chuckles—a deep, rumbling sound that feels like it vibrates right through my ribcage—and grabs a protein shake from the fridge. It looks comically tiny in his hand, like a dollhouse prop.

"Sterling mentioned he hired a human intern," Marcus says, cracking the lid on the shake. "Brave choice."

I take a massive, desperate bite of my sandwich just to give my mouth something to do besides blurt out something humiliating.

"How's your first day treating you?" he asks, leaning casually against the counter. The counter creaks under his weight but somehow holds.

"It's... educational," I say, once I swallow.

Marcus throws his head back and laughs, the sound filling every inch of the small

room.

"I bet. Helena's got you under her thumb, huh?"

I nod, chewing like my life depends on it, trying to figure out if there's a polite way to say I've spent the morning elbow-deep in equipment that's seen more action than my entire adult life.

Marcus doesn't seem to notice my panic. He props a hip against the counter, grinning like he's got all the time in the world. "Don't let her scare you," he says. "She's tough, but she's the real deal. Been with Sterling since day one. Would walk through fire for him, if he asked."

There's a weight behind his words I don't understand—but before I can ask, he shifts tactics, studying me over the rim of his shake. "So what brings a human to Sterling's Pride, anyway?" His tone is light, but there's an edge to it. "Most of your kind avoid us unless they absolutely have to."

I clear my throat, grateful for the excuse to slow down.

"I'm interested in innovative agricultural models," I say, trying to sound way more confident than I feel.

Marcus grins, flashing slightly pointed teeth. "Is that what they're calling it these days?"

Before I can come up with a clever reply—or, you know, any reply that doesn't make me sound like a horny idiot—the door swings open again.

And this time? Yeah. It's him.

Sterling Johnson. Clipboard in hand. Impeccable blue shirt stretched tight across his chest. Eyes sharp and assessing. My whole body goes on lockdown, muscles pulling taut like I'm bracing for impact.

Sterling's gaze skims over me in one quick pass, his nod curt but not unkind.

"Mr. Honeyworth," he says, acknowledging me before turning to Marcus. The change in his tone is immediate—harder. More commanding.

"I thought I heard you in here."

Marina pokes her head in from the hallway, catching the tail end of the exchange.

"For context," she says with a grin, "Marcus and Sterling go way back. Roommates at State University. That's why Marcus gets away with being a smartass."

Marcus winks at me, like this is all just one big cosmic joke.

Sterling doesn't smile. He doesn't even pretend to smile.

"We need to discuss your last sample results," he says to Marcus, voice dropping into that rough, no-nonsense register that makes my stomach flip inside out.

Marcus grimaces. "That bad?"

"Office. Now."

Sterling's words crack like a whip, sharp enough to leave a mark.

As they head for the door, Marcus throws a wink at me over Sterling's broad shoulder. I catch it—unintentional, probably, playful maybe—but it sends a flush

crawling up my neck anyway.

Because the only person I'm watching walk away is Sterling. The stretch of his pants over thick, muscled thighs. The casual roll of his shoulders as he moves. The absolute command he carries like a second skin.

I drop back into my chair, my half-eaten sandwich forgotten, my heart pounding like I just ran a sprint. And all I can think, as the door clicks shut behind them, is: I am so. Completely. Screwed.

* * *

The afternoon blurs past in a whirl of bleach, latex gloves, and Helena's no-nonsense voice barking instructions like I'm in boot camp for the clinically depraved.

"Accessories," she says briskly, hauling open a locked cabinet like she's unveiling the world's least appropriate treasure chest. Neatly organized trays of implements—smooth, curved, textured—gleam under the fluorescent lights.

I fight to keep my face neutral as she hands me a piece of equipment whose purpose is... alarmingly obvious.

"These get sanitized twice," Helena says, flipping it over with the casual detachment of someone discussing paperweights. "Once through the industrial sterilizer. Then by hand. No exceptions."

She catches my expression—a quick, horrified twitch—and snorts.

"Oh, please. Don't tell me you're shocked," she says, shaking her head. "Everyone's got preferences."

"I'm not shocked," I say quickly. Too quickly. "Just... trying to understand the protocols."

Helena levels me with a look that says bullshit more eloquently than words ever could.

"Minotaurs have specific needs," she says, tapping a device against her palm like a pointer. "Some like a little extra... stimulation. Our job isn't to judge. Our job is to keep everything clean and functional."

She walks me through the proper cleaning techniques, her tone utterly clinical. I try to match it—really, I do—but my mind keeps betraying me.

Keeps slipping sideways.

Keeps wondering whether Sterling ever opens this cabinet. Whether he ever chooses something for himself before locking the door and giving himself over to the raw, animal need his professional facade hides so well. I flush hot under my gloves, grateful Helena's too busy scrubbing a very suggestive shape to notice.

By five o'clock, my brain feels like someone stuck it in a blender.

Helena gives me a grunt of grudging approval as she strips off her gloves. "Not bad for your first day," she says. "Tomorrow, eight sharp."

I mumble something polite, shoulders sagging in exhausted relief, and head toward the tiny locker they've let me borrow. I'm dragging my backpack onto my shoulder when I sense a presence behind me—heavy, solid, radiating heat. I turn—and there he is.

Sterling.

His massive frame fills the doorway, one hand braced casually against the frame, his expression unreadable.

"Mr. Honeyworth," he says, voice low and smooth. "A moment."

My heart goes into freefall. I follow him down the hall like a man walking to his own execution, every step tightening the coil of tension in my gut. In his office, he gestures for me to sit without a word, already flipping through a stack of papers on his desk.

"Helena reports you managed adequately today," he says, not looking up.

I grip the chair, willing my voice not to crack.

"Any concerns?"

"No, sir," I say, hoping my face doesn't betray me. "The protocols are straightforward."

Sterling finally glances up, and it's like being hit with a spotlight. His gaze pins me in place—sharp, assessing, almost unbearably focused.

"And the nature of the work?" he asks. His tone is casual, but there's something... heavier underneath. "Still comfortable?"

"Yes, sir," I manage, feeling the heat creep up my neck despite my best efforts.

For a moment, he just watches me, silent. The air between us feels thick enough to drown in.

Then he nods, once. "Good," he says. "Tomorrow morning, you'll shadow Marina to

learn the scheduling system. Afternoon with Helena. Same for the rest of the week."

"Understood."

He returns to his paperwork like the conversation never happened—like my entire body isn't vibrating with adrenaline and something worse.

Dismissed, I stand to leave.

I get to the door before impulse shoves the words out of my mouth.

"Mr. Johnson?"

He doesn't look up.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for the opportunity," I say, heart hammering so loudly I'm sure he can hear it.

This time he lifts his head. Surprise flashes across his face for half a second before smoothing into something cooler, more contained.

"Prove yourself valuable, Mr. Honeyworth," he says. "That's all the thanks I need."

I nod, throat dry, and force myself out the door before I embarrass myself further.

Outside, the parking lot is nearly deserted. The last few staff cars pull away, engines rumbling into the dusk.

But Sterling's massive black SUV is still there, parked in its reserved spot like a

sentinel.

I freeze, one hand on my door handle.

I personally use one of the collection rooms at the end of each day.

The words echo in my head, low and dark, stirring up images I should not be thinking about. Is he in there right now? The thought hits like a punch to the gut—raw, vivid, impossible to look away from.

I sit down behind the wheel but don't start the car. Instead, I stare at the front doors of Sterling's Pride like they might open and reveal something I shouldn't see. I imagine him moving through the halls—stripping off that perfect blue shirt, rolling his massive shoulders as he steps into a private room. Locking the door. Approaching the mount. Bracing his hands against it. Working himself, hard and desperate, until he finds the release his body demands.

My skin burns. My cock throbs painfully against my khakis.

A tap on my window nearly sends me straight through the roof. I jerk around to find Helena peering at me through the glass, eyebrows raised. I scramble to roll the window down, my heart still racing.

"Car trouble?" she asks, suspicion written all over her face.

"No!" I croak. "Just... checking messages before driving."

She squints at me like she knows exactly how full of shit I am but lets it slide.

"Get home safe, kid," she says gruffly. "Early start tomorrow."

I watch her walk to her car and pull away, leaving me alone again. Alone with the memory of Sterling's voice. Alone with the heavy, aching need he doesn't even know he's ignited in me.

Get a grip, Hank. You cannot survive here if you let this get to you.

But deep down, some reckless, desperate part of me knows: It's already too late.

* * *

The rest of the week settles into a grueling, strangely hypnotic rhythm.

Mornings with Marina—learning the Byzantine maze that is Sterling's Pride's scheduling system, sitting at her desk while she rapid-fires client info like a caffeinated auctioneer.

Afternoons with Helena—scrubbing, sanitizing, handling inventory until my arms ache and my gloves are soaked with sweat.

By Thursday, I'm trusted with supply management—tracking orders, restocking rooms, making sure every towel, every lubricant dispenser, every— accessory —is exactly where it's supposed to be.

It's exhausting. It's relentless. It's perfect.

Because every time my mind starts wandering—every time it tries to conjure images of Sterling's hands bracing against the mount, Sterling's voice roughening into a growl—I have to shove it down under a mountain of protocols and supply lists.

It almost works. Almost.

Marina is a fountain of information under the guise of "training," her voice breezy as she clicks through the scheduling software. "Mr. Taurus comes every Tuesday at two on the dot," she says, tapping the screen. "Room Five. Extra magazines. Won't start without them."

I nod, pretending I'm only interested academically.

"Dr. Kim's in Thursdays. Does all the sample quality assessments. If she calls you into a lab room, wear a mask. The Rivas brothers—" she rolls her eyes—"come together, separate rooms. Can't stand to lose to each other, even at this."

I absorb it all, fascinated. It's a glimpse into a world I never even knew existed—and Sterling is at the very center of it.

"Sterling's known most of them for years," Marina says. "Some since college. They trust him completely. That's rare."

Before I can stop myself, the words tumble out:

"What was he like in college?"

Marina grins like she's been waiting for me to ask.

"I wouldn't know firsthand," she says. "But Marcus might. Roommates. Sterling's not the type to gossip about himself."

I file that away, along with everything else. Every little shard of him I can collect.

The week drips by like honey. I catch glimpses of Sterling everywhere—moving through the halls, conferring with staff, tapping into the scheduling system. Always professional. Always distant.

But every accidental brush of his voice across my skin, every flick of his gaze over me, leaves me dizzy, burning alive inside my slightly rumpled buttondown and khakis.

I am drowning in it. And somehow, I don't want it to stop.

* * *

Friday afternoon.

I'm knee-deep in towels, restocking Room Three, the soft scent of disinfectant clinging to my gloves, when the door swings open behind me. I spin around, arms full—and nearly collide with a wall of reddish fur and irritation.

A younger minotaur—broad-shouldered, impatient—fills the doorway, already yanking open the buttons of his shirt like he owns the place.

"About time," he grunts. "I've got a meeting in thirty minutes."

I freeze, heart slamming against my ribs.

"Sir, I'm not—" I stammer, careful to keep my eyes locked firmly on his face and not anywhere lower— "I'm just restocking."

He pauses, finally registering the human standing between him and whatever fantasy he had queued up.

"Where's the regular attendant?" he demands, nostrils flaring.

"There must be a scheduling error," I say quickly, still clutching the towels like a shield. "This room isn't ready yet."

He snorts in pure disgust. "Typical. Tell the front desk I'm in Room Four."

He turns, already buttoning his shirt back up, when another presence fills the doorway behind him—Sterling.

The younger minotaur backs up like he just smacked into a wall of granite.

"Mr. Johnson!" he blurts. "I was just?—"

"Room Four is prepared for you," Sterling says smoothly, voice like cool steel. "Marina is adjusting your account to reflect the inconvenience."

Mr. Taurus mutters something vaguely apologetic and beats a hasty retreat.

Sterling's attention swivels back to me.

Sharp. Heavy. Inescapable.

"Mr. Honeyworth. A word."

I set the towels down carefully and follow him into the hallway, my cheeks flaming so hot I'm surprised the fire alarms haven't gone off.

"I'm sorry, sir," I blurt before he can speak. "He just walked in while I was restocking?—"

Sterling lifts a hand, silencing me immediately. "The error was in scheduling," he says simply. "Marina is addressing it."

He holds my gaze, and the weight of it presses against my chest, stealing my breath.

"You handled it appropriately," he says. "Many would have panicked."

The praise slams into me harder than any rebuke ever could. "Thank you, sir," I manage, my voice embarrassingly hoarse.

Sterling nods once, but his eyes sharpen, catching something in my expression. Something I probably didn't mean to show.

"In the future," he says, voice lower now, "always lock the door when preparing a room. And wear your lanyard at all times so clients can identify you immediately."

I glance down, realizing too late that my ID badge is missing—left sitting stupidly in the supply closet with the rest of my forgotten professionalism. "Yes, sir," I say. "It won't happen again."

Sterling watches me for a long beat—long enough that my lungs start to ache—then says, almost as an afterthought: "Helena speaks highly of your attention to detail."

My heart nearly stops.

"Continue to impress her," he adds, already turning away, "and your responsibilities will increase accordingly."

And just like that, he's gone. Leaving me standing there, sweating, trembling, stupidly proud.

Not just because I survived my first week. But because Sterling Johnson—the man who could have anyone's loyalty, anyone's respect—had seen something in me. Something worth noticing.

And fuck if that didn't make my whole body light up like a struck match.

* * *

Later that evening, just as I'm gathering my things, Marina already long gone, I hear it.

"Mr. Honeyworth," Sterling's voice rumbles from his office doorway.

I turn so fast I nearly knock over my chair.

He's there—still in his work clothes, but different now. Tie loosened. Top button undone. A thick line of dark fur visible at the hollow of his throat, just a hint of what I know covers the rest of him.

It takes everything I have not to stare.

"Your first-week evaluation," Sterling says, his voice low and even as he slides a form across his desk. He doesn't sit. He stands behind the desk, one hand braced on the surface, the muscles in his forearm shifting with each small movement.

I cross the room, conscious of the way the air seems heavier here—thicker, almost tangible.

I glance down at the paper. Above satisfactory. Across every single category. A tight, foolish thrill curls through my chest.

"No questions, sir," I say, voice a little rougher than I intend. "Thank you."

Sterling's eyes—sharp, molten amber—hold mine for a moment longer than necessary.

"Good," he says. "You'll take on client check-in procedures next week. Marina will

handle your training."

He hesitates, a barely perceptible beat, and then adds:

"The incident today with Mr. Taurus—you maintained composure. That's valuable in this business."

I nod, my chest stupidly warm at the praise.

"I try to be professional," I say.

For a second—just a second—something like amusement sparks in his eyes. Dark. Quiet. Dangerous.

"Indeed," Sterling says, his voice dipping lower. "That will be all, Mr. Honeyworth. Enjoy your weekend."

Dismissed. Professional. Perfectly normal. Except when I step into the hallway, heart pounding against my ribs, I glance at the clock.

6:05 p.m.

The facility is empty now. Silent. Just Sterling and me.

And in five minutes—maybe less—he'll be stepping into one of those private rooms. Unbuttoning that immaculate shirt. Loosening the last of his restraint.

Giving in.

The thought grips me so hard I stagger a little, catching myself against the wall like an idiot. I make it to my car somehow, slamming the door shut with shaking hands. I

sit there gripping the steering wheel, the keys dangling uselessly from the ignition.

What if I stayed? The question slides through my mind like a knife.

What if I found a reason to linger? What if I caught just a glimpse? The fantasy unfurls itself inside me—wild and vivid. Sterling bent over the padded mount. Those huge hands braced against the frame. His body straining, muscles bunching under slick fur, hips driving forward with brutal, hungry force.

The sounds he might make—Low, rough grunts. Maybe a deep, broken moan when he finally, finally let himself go. My skin prickles. My throat dries out.

I start the car with shaking fingers, forcing myself to drive away before I do something reckless. Before I cross a line I can't uncross. But as I drive home, the images chase me down the road like predators. Sterling working his body to the edge. Sterling panting, sweating, coming against that mount, trembling from the force of it.

I toss and turn half the night, the sheets twisted around my legs, guilt and shame and pure, reckless want warring inside me.

I tell myself this is insanity. That it's dangerous. That it's career suicide. And maybe it is. But by the time the sky starts lightening outside my window, one thing is carved so deeply into me there's no fighting it: Some day, when I get up the nerve, I'm going to find a reason to stay late.

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3

S ix weeks into my internship at Sterling's Pride, everything feels like muscle memory.

Mornings at the front desk, greeting clients, checking IDs, pretending like I don't know exactly what they're here for. Afternoons elbow-deep in inventory lists and cleaning rotations, pretending like the padded mounts and gleaming accessories aren't permanent fixtures in my imagination now.

I know the clients now. Their names. Their quirks.

Mr. Taurus, Room Four, sports channels blaring, an unnecessary stack of towels. Dr. Bennett, classical music and the specialized warming lubricant, always the same brand. The Rivas brothers, arriving separately but always tossing competitive glares like knives as they pass in the hall.

But the person I know best— The one I've learned almost too well—Is Sterling.

Sterling, who arrives at exactly 7:30 every morning. Who makes his rounds at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. sharp. Who disappears into his office to tackle mountains of paperwork with terrifying focus. And who, without fail, every evening after closing, steps into Room 8.

Tonight, I'm going to see him. Really see him. The plan has been festering in my brain for days, the seed of it taking root and spreading until it's the only thing I can think about.

I know Helena's leaving early for a doctor's appointment. I know the cleaning crew won't arrive until 7 p.m. I know Sterling's routine—so predictable it feels like he's offering it up to me like a challenge.

All I need is an excuse to stay late.

At 5:45, I'm in Room Six, mechanically restocking towels, checking my watch every two minutes like a man waiting for an execution—or a miracle. The last client cleared out fifteen minutes ago. Marina's shutting down the front desk. I need something airtight. Something plausible.

The supply closet saves me—a box of specialty lubricant that hasn't been logged yet. Inventory. Boring, tedious, absolutely legitimate inventory. I snag the clipboard, grab the box, and head for the tiny back office where we track stock.

"Heading out, Hank?" Marina calls as she breezes past, purse slung over her shoulder.

"Just finishing an inventory count," I say, praying my voice sounds normal. "Helena said we might be low on the warming formula."

Marina shrugs, uninterested. "Don't stay too late," she says. "Sterling gets grumpy if anyone messes with his closing routine."

She disappears into the night without another word.

The building settles into silence. Heavy. Echoing.

The digital clock blinks 6:08 PM.

I freeze when I hear it— The soft click of Sterling's office door. Heavy footsteps moving down the corridor. Measured. Deliberate.

I set the clipboard down, heart hammering so violently it rattles my ribs, and slip out into the hall. I creep toward the collection wing, every step painfully slow, my breath locked tight in my throat. At the corner where the hallway bends toward Rooms 7 through 10, I press myself flat against the wall, listening.

Sterling's footsteps fade into the distance.

Room 8. He's in Room 8.

I wait—thirty seconds, maybe a minute—long enough that my nerves stretch so thin I can feel every inch of my skin buzzing. Then I inch forward. Room 8's door is ajar. Three inches, maybe. A narrow, dangerous crack. An invitation—or a trap.

I stand there for one terrible, trembling heartbeat, mind screaming at me to turn around, go back, save myself. I move closer anyway. The sounds reach me first. The low whir of equipment. The soft thump of something heavy shifting against padded material. A rough grunt, deep and broken.

The sound rips through me like a live wire. I press closer, angling myself toward the gap, pulse pounding so loudly I'm afraid he might hear it. And through the sliver of open space—I see him. And the sight hits me like a goddamn wrecking ball.

Sterling stands facing away from the door, his massive frame bent slightly over the mount, the soft lighting casting his body in a sheen of gold and shadow. He's completely naked. And somehow, even after all the fantasies, the stolen glances, the daydreams that kept me awake at night—I still wasn't ready.

Dark fur clings damply to the thick ropes of muscle along his back, his shoulders flexing with every slow, deliberate drive of his hips. The powerful swell of his ass clenches rhythmically, each thrust a study in pure, restrained force.

I can't see his face. I can't see the front of him.

But I don't need to. The way his entire body moves—controlled, devastating, holding back strength that could break the mount in half if he let it—is more intimate than anything I've ever seen in my life. One massive hand grips the padded handle, fingers digging into the material with white-knuckled restraint. The other slips down between his legs—adjusting, guiding—his fingers quick and sure like he knows exactly what he needs.

My mouth goes dry. My heart slams against my ribs so hard it hurts.

I should turn around. I should walk away, save whatever shred of self-respect I have left.

But I don't.

I can't.

I stand there, rooted to the spot, watching as his pace shifts—his hips snapping harder, faster, the mount groaning under his weight. His breathing roughens into ragged, desperate gasps.

And then it happens— A low groan rips out of him, deep and raw, nothing like the composed, reserved man I know. It vibrates through the floor, through the air, through me, leaving a tremor in its wake that settles deep in my gut.

And that's when I see it.

Just visible as he adjusts again—between the thick spread of his legs—a bulge swelling at the base of his shaft. Growing larger with every thrust.

A knot. I'd read about it in the endless, guilty hours I'd spent combing through minotaur anatomy articles, pretending it was research, pretending it wasn't about him. Seeing it—real, right there, attached to Sterling Johnson—hits me harder than any academic article ever could.

It's huge, thick and obscene, straining his body even as he drives himself harder into the mount.

My hand moves without conscious thought, pressing against the throbbing ache in the front of my pants, trying to ease the overwhelming pressure building there.

It doesn't help.

Nothing could.

Sterling's hips jackknife forward, the mount creaking under the brutal force of his release. He arches, every muscle in his massive frame locking tight—his thighs trembling, his broad back flexing under the strain. A sound tears free from him—low, wrecked, broken—and it's the hottest fucking thing I've ever heard.

For a long moment, he stays there—pressed deep against the mount, massive body heaving with every harsh breath. Sweat glistens along the ridges of his spine, trickling down in slow, sinful rivulets. I watch, dazed and desperate, as he shifts, the muscles of his thighs flexing, his hand steadying himself on the mount like even he needs a moment to recover.

And standing there, half-hard, half-horrified at myself, I realize—I am never going to be the same again.

* * *

I need to leave. Now. Before he turns around. Before he sees me standing here, wide-eyed and trembling, a witness to something I was never meant to see.

I force my body to move, slipping back the way I came, every step measured and silent. My heart slams against my ribs, too loud, too frantic, and every second feels like I'm dragging a spotlight with me. I'm halfway to safety when it happens—my elbow clips the wall with a soft thud.

In the silence of the hallway, it sounds deafening.

Sterling's head jerks up. His ears twitch, sharp and alert, and his voice slices through the quiet: "Hello? Is someone there?"

Panic freezes me in place. For a split second, I can't breathe, can't move, and then adrenaline shoves me forward. I hurry, trying to be quiet but fast enough to disappear, the sound of shifting weight and the creak of the mount chasing me down the hallway. I barrel into the supply office, nearly dropping the clipboard I left behind, and plant myself at the desk like I've been here all along, carefully counting inventory.

My hands shake so badly the pen jerks across the page. My breathing is ragged, and worse—so much worse—my arousal is still painfully, unmistakably present, straining against the front of pants. I fight to breathe normally, to steady my hands, to look like I belong here.

Heavy footsteps approach. Getting closer.

Sterling fills the doorway a moment later, half-dressed, his shirt tugged on carelessly and misaligned, the belt at his waist hanging undone. His fur is still damp with sweat, darkened in places where it clings to the dense muscles underneath. His amber eyes narrow slightly as he surveys the room—and me.

"Mr. Honeyworth," he says, his voice low, unreadable. "I thought everyone had left."

I glance up, praying my face shows nothing but innocent surprise. "Mr. Johnson. Sorry, I'm just finishing an inventory count. Helena mentioned we might be running low on some supplies."

Sterling's nostrils flare slightly. I remember too late what I've read about minotaur senses, and my stomach twists hard. Can he smell it—the sharp edge of fear, the thick scent of my arousal?

"I see," he says after a beat, the words even but edged with something I can't quite name. "It's nearly 6:30. This couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

"I—I just wanted to be thorough," I stammer, heat rising up the back of my neck. "I can finish quickly and get out of your way."

He says nothing for a long moment, just studies me in that way that makes my skin burn. His silence stretches tight between us, and the air feels thick enough to choke on.

"In the future," Sterling says finally, his voice dropping even lower, "inform me if you'll be staying after hours. I don't appreciate unexpected... interruptions... to my closing routine."

The pause after the word interruptions feels deliberate, almost accusatory. I nod quickly, clutching the clipboard tighter.

"Yes, sir. I apologize."

Sterling holds my gaze, and I have to force myself not to flinch. His amber eyes are cool, unreadable, but there's something behind them—something I can't name, sharp

and dark and heavy enough to leave my knees weak.

"Lock up when you leave," he says. "No later than 6:45."

"Yes, sir."

He turns to go but pauses at the door, one hand braced casually against the frame. Without looking back, he speaks, voice low and deliberate.

"And Mr. Honeyworth?"

I can barely get the words out. "Yes, sir?"

"My private use of the facilities is exactly that. Private. I trust that's understood."

My stomach plummets. Ice floods my veins.

He knows.

I choke out, "Completely understood, sir."

Sterling nods once, sharp and final, and then he's gone. I sit down hard in the chair the second he disappears from view, my legs trembling so badly they refuse to hold my weight.

My heart continues to hammer, faster and faster, pounding out a rhythm of panic, shame, and something much darker thrumming just beneath it. I should be horrified at myself, and I am—should be burning with guilt over what I did—but all I can think about is him.

The way Sterling's muscles moved under sweat-slicked fur. The sound he made when

he came, deep and broken and raw. The glimpse of his swollen knot locking him to the mount, every inch of his powerful body straining for release.

The memory is seared into me, raw and vivid, impossible to shake.

I don't dare move until I hear the heavy roar of his SUV starting up outside, the rumble of the engine fading into the night. Only then do I force myself up, finishing the inventory count with trembling hands, knowing full well it's a meaningless formality at this point.

The drive home is a blur, headlights sliding across dark streets, my mind a chaotic, burning wreck of images and emotions I can't contain.

I tell myself I'm ashamed. That I should be. That this crosses every line of professionalism and decency I thought I had.

But deep down, the truth is sharper than guilt and hotter than shame.

I don't regret it. Not even close.

Once inside my apartment, I don't even make it to the bedroom. I stumble to the couch, ripping at my belt, shoving my pants down my thighs with shaking hands. I'm already leaking, already so hard it aches, every nerve in my body lit up and screaming for release.

In my mind, it isn't the collection mount he's using anymore. It's me. It's Sterling closing the distance between us, those massive hands bracketing my body, pinning me in place with effortless strength. His cock—not the sterile equipment—pressing against me, heavy and hot, his breath rough in my ear as he claimed what he wanted.

I imagine the stretch, the impossible, glorious fullness of him inside me. Imagine the

thick base of his shaft swelling, knotting me to him, locking us together in a way that meant I wouldn't—couldn't—escape.

The fantasy snaps me apart embarrassingly fast. I come with a broken gasp, Sterling's name spilling from my lips as my hips jerk helplessly into my hand. Shame follows immediately, hot and suffocating, burning through the fading aftershocks of pleasure.

As my breathing slows, reality claws its way back into me.

What the fuck am I doing? This can't continue. It's reckless, dangerous. It's wrong.

I sit there, sticky and raw, guilt gnawing at my insides. I tell myself I'll get these thoughts under control. That I'll find some way to bury them before they destroy everything. But even as I clean myself up and pull my pants back on, I know I'm lying. I can't forget what I saw. Not the way Sterling's body moved. Not the thick swell of his knot as he lost control.

Not the way I felt—shaking and alive and desperate—like every cell in my body had finally woken up.

Unable to help myself, I open my laptop and start searching. Clinical sites. Academic articles. Each one feeds the obsession growing unchecked inside me. I find a detailed explanation, buried deep in a veterinary textbook—descriptions of minotaur anatomy, diagrams and warnings printed in dry, factual language that does nothing to blunt the impact.

The knot—technically the bulbus glandis—is an evolutionary adaptation designed to lock partners together during climax, ensuring successful mating. In modern minotaurs, it's less about reproduction and more a quirk of physiology, but it's still fully functional.

The articles caution about interspecies relationships, about preparation and adaptation, about the danger of trying to accommodate something so large without serious care. The warnings should scare me. They don't. If anything, they make me want it more.

I slam the laptop closed, disgusted with myself, heart pounding too fast in my chest.

Tomorrow, I tell myself, I'll be professional. I'll look Sterling in the eye. I'll pretend I never saw him, never heard those raw, broken sounds spill out of him, never wanted so badly to be the one dragging them from his throat.

But even as I lie in bed that night, sleep nowhere close to finding me, I know the truth. If the opportunity comes again—If I have even a whisper of a chance—I'll take it.

Because for those few stolen minutes, watching Sterling Johnson in his most private, most vulnerable moment, I felt more alive than I ever have before. And no amount of guilt will ever make me forget it.

I'm useless this morning. Despite two cups of strong coffee and the desperate urge to seem normal, my brain refuses to cooperate. Marina's walking me through the new scheduling software, but her words slide over me like water over glass. All I can think about is last night—Sterling's massive form bent over the mount, muscles shifting under sweat-slicked fur, the glimpse of his knot swelling thickly at the base of him, the rough, broken sounds tearing from his throat.

"Hank? Are you listening?"

Marina's voice cuts through the fantasy like a slap, and I jerk upright, blinking at her.

"Sorry," I mutter, dragging my attention back to the glowing computer screen. "Just tired."

She gives me a concerned look, head tilted. "You don't look so good. Coming down with something?"

Coming apart with something, I think bitterly, but I force a weak smile. "Just didn't sleep well."

It's the truth, technically. I spent half the night tossing and turning, replaying the scene from Room 8 on a relentless, fevered loop. In some versions, Sterling turned and caught me watching, his expression dangerous and dark. In others, he confronted me in the hallway, furious—or worse, not furious at all. In the worst versions—the ones that left me sweaty and hard beneath the sheets—he didn't mind. He wanted me

watching.

"Well, try to focus," Marina says, tapping a pen against her clipboard. "Sterling wants you handling check-ins independently by next week."

At the sound of his name, a visceral heat licks up my spine, shame chasing it so quickly it leaves me dizzy. I shift uncomfortably in my chair, grateful for the desk hiding the reaction I can't control.

And then, as if summoned by the sheer force of my humiliation, Sterling appears.

He moves through the reception area with that devastating, effortless authority that's become a permanent fixture of my private fantasies. Charcoal suit, crisp shirt, tie snug against his thick neck—impeccable, as always, except now I know what he looks like underneath it all. The thought makes my mouth dry out completely.

"Ms. Michaels. Mr. Honeyworth." He nods to each of us, voice low and perfectly even.

"There's been a change to the afternoon schedule," Sterling continues, glancing briefly at Marina. "Dr. Kim will be arriving at two instead of four. Please adjust accordingly."

"Of course," Marina says, already tapping it into the system.

His gaze shifts to me next, and my stomach flips so hard I grip the desk under the guise of repositioning myself.

"Mr. Honeyworth," Sterling says, holding my eyes with his own steady, unreadable gaze. "You'll observe Dr. Kim's procedures today. Understanding the health aspects of our work is essential."

"Yes, sir," I croak out, my voice embarrassingly hoarse.

Sterling studies me a beat longer than necessary, enough that heat crawls up my neck, flooding my face. Does he know? Can he somehow see what I've been thinking all morning—the filthy, impossible fantasies I've built around his body, his sounds, his knot?

"You look flushed," Sterling says finally. "I hope you're not bringing illness into the facility."

"No, sir," I say quickly. "Just... didn't sleep well."

Something flickers in his eyes—a glint of suspicion, or maybe amusement—but it's gone so fast I can't catch it.

"See that you rest properly tonight," he says, voice clipped. "We maintain high standards here."

And just like that, he's gone, his footsteps retreating down the hall, leaving me clutching the desk like it's the only thing keeping me upright.

Marina snorts, giving me a side-eye glance. "Seriously, Hank. You look like you've seen a ghost."

More like I've seen my boss naked and can't stop picturing his cock knotting inside me, I think viciously.

"I'm fine," I say instead. "Let's just finish this training."

The rest of the morning drags painfully slow. Every time the front door chimes, I flinch, half-convinced it's Sterling coming to call me out. Every time the phone rings,

I imagine it's his voice on the other end, low and furious, summoning me to his office. And the worst part—the truly, brutally humiliating part—is that a small, broken piece of me wants that summons. Wants him to call me in, shut the door, and strip away every ounce of plausible deniability we're both still pretending to cling to.

* * *

By lunchtime, I'm a wreck. A twitchy, useless wreck who can't even finish a sandwich.

I sit hunched in the staff room, picking at the bread with numb fingers, my stomach twisted into knots too tight to fix with food. Every creak of the building, every soft murmur from the hallway sets my nerves on edge, my body ready to bolt like a startled deer.

When the door swings open, I nearly leap out of my skin, heart slamming into my throat.

It's just Marcus.

"Whoa, easy there," he says with a laugh, his massive frame filling the doorway. "Didn't mean to spook you, kid."

"Sorry," I mutter, shoving my sandwich back into its bag like it personally offended me. "Just jumpy today."

Marcus grabs his usual protein shake from the fridge and leans back against the counter, studying me with those too-perceptive eyes that seem to see way more than I want them to.

"Woman trouble?" he asks casually, then pauses—long enough to make it deliberate.

"Or... man trouble?"

I nearly choke on my water. I cough, sputter, wipe at my mouth with the back of my hand.

"What? No. Just—didn't sleep well," I lie, and it sounds weak even to me.

Marcus grins, flashing a hint of pointed teeth. He takes a swig from his shake, like he's savoring my discomfort.

"If you say so," he says, unconvinced. "But I recognize that look. You've got it bad for someone."

I force a laugh—too high, too sharp—hoping it covers the crack running straight down the middle of me. "You're imagining things."

"Am I?" Marcus tilts his head, amused. Then, softer, with an odd note of seriousness, he says, "Word of advice, kid. Be careful who you set your sights on around here. Some waters are too deep for swimming."

Before I can respond—or even think about what the hell that's supposed to mean—the door swings open again. And this time, it's Sterling. He steps inside, immaculate as ever, but there's a new weight behind his eyes, a focus that locks onto me like a heat-seeking missile.

"Mr. Honeyworth," he says. "A word. In my office."

My heart plummets straight into my shoes. This is it. He knows. He saw me. He's going to fire me. I scrape my chair back with a screech and follow him out, my legs barely remembering how to work. The hallway feels impossibly long, the walls closing in with every step.

Sterling opens the door to his office and gestures for me to sit. He stays standing, looming over me, his broad frame casting a shadow that feels suffocating.

"Dr. Kim mentioned something interesting during our call this morning," he says, his voice mild.

The panic inside me loosens slightly—until he continues.

"Our lubricant inventory shows we're fully stocked on warming formula. Despite Helena's insistence yesterday that we were running low." He fixes me with a stare so piercing it feels like a blade pressed against my skin. "The inventory you were so diligently counting after hours."

And just like that, the panic slams back into me, worse than before.

"I—" I start, scrambling for something, anything. "There must have been a miscommunication. Helena asked me to verify stock levels, and I?—"

"Mr. Honeyworth," Sterling interrupts, his voice cutting clean through my fumbling excuses. "I value honesty above all else in my employees. If you have a question about our operation, ask it directly. Don't fabricate reasons to investigate on your own."

My mouth goes dry. I swallow hard, forcing the words out.

"Yes, sir. I apologize."

He studies me for a long, agonizing moment. I can feel his gaze raking over me, heavy and knowing, and I fight the instinct to squirm under it.

"Your work has been exemplary so far," Sterling says at last, each word measured. "I

would hate to see that record tarnished by inappropriate curiosity."

The way he says it—low, deliberate—makes my cheeks burn hot with shame. He knows. He knows exactly what I was doing. And worse, he knows exactly why.

"It won't happen again, sir," I manage.

Sterling watches me a second longer, then gives a single sharp nod. "See that it doesn't. That will be all."

I don't breathe again until I'm out of his office, the door clicking shut behind me. I duck into the nearest bathroom, gripping the edges of the sink, staring at my reflection like it might offer me answers. My face is pale, my eyes wide, my mouth pulled tight in a line of pure, helpless panic.

What the hell am I doing?

Risking my job, my reputation, my entire future—for what? A fantasy? A craving that can never be satisfied? I splash cold water on my face, but it does nothing to douse the images already burning into the backs of my eyelids.

Sterling's body, straining and sweating. The thick swell of his knot. The sounds he made—raw, primal, beautiful. The memory is a brand, seared deep into my bones. I can't scrub it away. I don't even want to. Even as I lean against the sink, breathing hard, trying to pull myself together, I know the truth.

If I see the opportunity again, If there's even a sliver of a chance— I won't stop myself. Because those stolen minutes watching Sterling Johnson, helpless and wild and beautiful, felt more real than anything else in my life. And no amount of guilt will ever be enough to erase that hunger now.

* * *

The afternoon passes in a blur of fluorescent lights and clinical terminology. Dr. Kim—a brisk, no-nonsense human woman in her forties—leads me through a crash course in minotaur reproductive health, her voice crisp and practiced as she explains the protocols for quality checks on recent collections.

I try—really try—to stay focused as she outlines the parameters they monitor: motility, volume, hormone levels. I nod in all the right places, scribble dutiful notes onto my clipboard, but my mind keeps betraying me. Keeps wandering back to Sterling. Keeps dragging me back to the raw, breathtaking images still burned behind my eyelids.

"The bulbus glandis—what we colloquially call 'the knot'—is unique to certain species, including minotaurs," Dr. Kim says, examining a slide under a microscope. Her voice is clinical, detached. Mine is anything but.

"During arousal, specialized tissue engorges with blood, creating a swelling at the base of the penis. In ancient times, this adaptation ensured successful mating by locking partners together."

I nod again, face blank, praying to whatever gods are listening that my body doesn't betray just how interested I actually am.

"For minotaurs seeking human partners, this anatomical feature presents... challenges," she continues. "Which is why facilities like Sterling's are so essential. They provide a safe outlet for natural biological needs."

I murmur something noncommittal, storing every word, every casual factoid, like smuggling stolen treasure straight into the fevered, shameless archive of my mind.

When Dr. Kim finishes her lecture, I thank her with what I hope passes for polite professional gratitude instead of the desperate, feverish gratitude clawing inside my chest.

By the time my shift ends, I'm physically and emotionally wrung dry. The constant, suffocating tension of being around Sterling, pretending to be unaffected when all I can think about is the memory of him losing control in Room 8—it's draining in a way nothing else has ever been.

I gather my things slowly, checking my watch more times than I can justify. Nearly 6 p.m. In fifteen minutes, Sterling will slip into Room 8 again for his daily release. The thought alone sends a jolt of raw heat flashing through me.

I stand there, lingering like an idiot, fighting the sick, twisted part of myself that wants to stay. Wants to see.

No. Not after this morning's warning. Not after the way he looked at me, voice low and sharp when he said "inappropriate curiosity."

I force myself to walk to my car. Force myself to start the engine. Force myself to drive away before temptation sinks its claws deeper than it already has.

At home, I try to distract myself—flip through mindless television, shuffle playlists I can't concentrate on—but nothing helps. The scene from Room 8 keeps replaying, sharper each time. In my mind, Sterling isn't bent over the mount anymore—he's bending me over it. His huge hands locking around my hips. The heavy weight of his cock nudging against me, thick and hot. The growing swell of his knot anchoring me to him, claiming me.

I hold out for as long as I can, pretending I have some shred of dignity left. But in the end, I give up. In the shower, under the pounding hot spray, I stroke myself to a

quick, brutal climax, Sterling's name spilling from my lips before I can bite it back.

The physical release leaves me shaking, leaning against the tile wall with my head bowed. But emotionally? It doesn't touch the hunger gnawing at my insides. If anything, it makes it worse.

That night, my dreams offer no mercy. Sterling and I—twisted together on the mount, in my apartment, in impossible, filthy scenarios that leave me gasping, hard and aching with need.

I wake over and over again, tangled in sweat-soaked sheets, my cock stiff against the fabric of my boxers, my mind a whirl of shame and longing.

By morning, I feel like I haven't slept at all. Dark circles smudge under my eyes as I drag on my clothes with slow, clumsy hands. Every muscle aches. My brain hums with exhaustion and lust.

I consider calling in sick—faking a fever, blaming bad sushi—but the thought of not seeing Sterling, even from a distance, tightens something sharp and painful inside my chest. I'd rather suffer through the day, hollow and burning, than go one day without seeing him again.

* * *

The workday is a special kind of torture.

Sterling is everywhere—stopping by the front desk to check schedules, passing me in the hallways, appearing without warning in rooms I'm restocking. Each encounter leaves me flustered and breathless, struggling to pull myself back into the thin veneer of professionalism that feels like it's wearing thinner by the hour.

Marina notices, of course. She notices everything.

"Seriously, Hank," she says, glancing at me over her computer screen. "What's going on with you? You've been weird all week."

"Just... personal stuff," I mutter, avoiding her gaze.

She frowns. "Well, get it sorted. Sterling's starting to notice, and not in a good way."

The warning should send a jolt of fear down my spine. It does—sort of. But mixed with it is something worse—something hotter and sharper. The knowledge that Sterling is noticing me at all sends a thrill through my body that's nearly impossible to hide.

By Thursday afternoon, I'm in the storage room, inventorying accessories, when the door swings open without warning. I spin around, a specialized stimulator clutched in my hand—one look at the device, and my face flames hot with mortification.

Sterling stands in the doorway, his expression unreadable, one eyebrow raised in mild amusement. I hastily set the device back on the shelf like it burned me.

"Mr. Honeyworth," he says, stepping inside. His voice is even, but the room feels smaller instantly, more dangerous. "Helena mentioned you've been distracted during your shifts. Care to explain?"

My mind races for an excuse, anything plausible enough to cover the chaos boiling just beneath my skin. "I'm sorry, sir," I say. "I've been having trouble sleeping."

"So I've gathered." Sterling moves farther into the room, the door swinging shut behind him with a soft click.

The air feels heavy, claustrophobic. He's close enough now that I can smell him—musk and cedar, and something dark and uniquely him that cuts straight through every last shred of my defenses.

"Any particular reason for your... insomnia?" His voice drops slightly, rough around the edges.

Yes. You. The way your body looked bent over that mount. The sounds you made. The way your knot swelled thick and heavy, anchoring you in pleasure I had no right to witness.

"Just... stress, I suppose," I manage, hating how strained my voice sounds.

Sterling studies me for a long moment, amber eyes narrowed.

"Your performance has suffered," he says finally. "The quality of your work remains acceptable, but your attention to detail has declined."

"I apologize, sir," I say quickly. "I'll do better."

"See that you do."

He steps closer, and instinctively I back up until my spine hits the shelving behind me.

Sterling towers over me, a wall of heat and scent and restrained power. My heart kicks hard against my ribs, my palms going clammy at my sides.

"Whatever is distracting you," he says, voice low and deliberate, "deal with it. I don't tolerate personal issues affecting professional performance."

"Yes, sir," I whisper, my breath catching at his nearness.

He holds my gaze, tension vibrating between us so tightly it feels like the entire room could snap apart from it. Then—slowly, deliberately—he reaches past me, his massive arm brushing against mine. The contact is brief but searing, sending a jolt of electricity skimming over my skin.

He grabs a clipboard from the shelf just behind my head, the movement casual, calculated.

"The quarterly inventory reports," he says, his tone snapping back to brisk professionalism. "Helena needs them by tomorrow."

"Of course," I say, throat dry.

He steps back, giving me room to breathe, and for a second I sag against the shelving in pure, shaking relief.

"Good night, Mr. Honeyworth," Sterling says, heading for the door. "I trust you'll resolve whatever is keeping you awake."

When he leaves, I stay frozen, staring after him like a man watching a storm pass overhead, still too stunned to know whether he's survived it. The brush of his arm against mine feels branded into my skin. This is getting dangerous. I need to get a grip on these feelings before I do something truly, spectacularly stupid. And yet, when evening comes, when closing time creeps closer, I find myself manufacturing another reason to stay.

The quarterly reports Sterling mentioned do need cross-referencing with last quarter's data. It's a legitimate task. One that might even impress him if I do it thoroughly.

That's what I tell myself. That's the lie I cling to.

At 6:05, I'm still at my desk, pretending to be absorbed in paperwork while listening—straining—for the sound of his footsteps.

I hear his office door close. Hear the heavy tread of his boots moving down the hall toward the collection rooms. My pulse spikes, sharp and desperate. I rise quietly, clipboard clutched in my sweaty hand, and slip into the hallway.

Just one more look, I tell myself. Just to confirm what I saw. Then I'll stop.

Even as I think it, I know it's a lie. I creep toward Room 8, every step measured, silent. The door is ajar again—a sliver of invitation gleaming between frame and door.

My breath catches painfully.

I position myself carefully this time, heart thundering against my ribs, finding an angle that gives me a better view while minimizing my chance of being seen.

Through the gap, I see him.

Sterling, already undressing, his back to me. His shirt slips from his broad shoulders, revealing thick, powerful muscles, the dark fur along his spine tapering into a line I ache to trace with my fingers. He unbuckles his belt, and I hold my breath as he shoves his pants down over those massive thighs, the heavy curve of his ass stealing what little breath I have left.

Just as he starts moving toward the mount, a sudden noise shatters the charged stillness—the reception doors clanging open, the cleaning crew arriving early.

Panic seizes me.

I back away fast, heart hammering so violently I almost stumble. I round the corner just as the cleaning crew's chatter echoes down the hall, ducking out of sight. I rush back to my desk, grabbing my things with shaking hands. As I head for the exit, Miguel gives me a curious look but says nothing.

Outside, in my car, I sit gripping the steering wheel, my whole body trembling—equal parts adrenaline, terror, and bone-deep frustration. The glimpse I caught—the curve of Sterling's back, the muscles flexing beneath his fur—only feeds the fire roaring inside me.

It's not enough. Not even close.

I start the engine, already thinking ahead to tomorrow. Already searching for the next excuse, the next opportunity, the next stolen moment. This fixation is consuming me. Changing me.

And the worst part—the part that scares me more than anything else—is that I no longer care. I'll do anything, risk anything, just for the chance to see him again. And next time, I won't let anything interrupt.

Saturday arrives on the back of a thunderstorm that feels like the physical manifestation of my mind—dark, turbulent, and crackling with a dangerous, electric tension. I barely sleep. Again. My dreams are full of Sterling in various states of undress—his massive hands on my body, his cock nudging against me, the thick swell of his knot locking me in place while he moves inside me, slow and inevitable.

By Monday morning, I'm running on fumes. I arrive at Sterling's Pride twenty minutes early, hoping the drive through the storm from my apartment would clear my head. Instead, it leaves me soaked despite my umbrella, my shirt clinging uncomfortably to my skin. When Marina catches sight of me, she grimaces.

"You look like hell warmed over, Hank."

"Thanks," I mutter, running a hand through my damp hair like that'll fix anything. "The storm caught me in the parking lot."

"Not just the storm," she says, lowering her voice. "Sterling's been asking questions about you."

My heart skips hard, missing a beat. "What kind of questions?"

"How long you've been distracted. Whether you've mentioned any personal problems." She gives me a look that's somewhere between concerned and warning. "Whatever's going on, get it under control. Sterling doesn't tolerate employees who can't maintain professionalism."

The warning should make me sick with fear.

Instead, it sends a shiver of something hotter down my spine. The idea that Sterling is thinking about me—asking about me, even if it's for all the wrong reasons—makes my skin feel too tight.

"I'll handle it," I say, lying so smoothly I almost believe it myself.

The morning passes in a haze of check-ins and paperwork. The storm outside intensifies, rain battering the windows, thunder rumbling through the building like distant cannon fire. Around eleven, the lights flicker.

"Happens every time," Marina sighs, already reaching for the emergency procedures manual. "The backup generator should kick in."

And like clockwork, the facility plunges into darkness.

For one suspended heartbeat, there's absolute silence. Then the soft hum of the emergency generator kicks in, casting the building in a dim, eerie blue glow.

"Perfect," Marina mutters, grabbing the phone. "I'll call the power company."

A few minutes later, Sterling emerges from his office, flashlight in hand, the beam cutting cleanly through the half-light. The sight of him—solid, calm, in control—tightens something low in my gut.

"Status report?"

"Power outage. Backup's running emergency systems. I'm canceling appointments until further notice," Marina says.

Sterling nods, eyes already scanning the building like he's taking stock of every possible failure point. "Mr. Honeyworth, with me," he says. "We need to check the generator room and the refrigeration units. Ms. Michaels, update the clients."

I follow him down a corridor I've never been down before, deeper into the bowels of the facility. His massive frame moves easily through the narrow space, even as his shoulders brush close to both walls.

"The generator room is below ground," he explains, voice rumbling low. "Our primary concern is the refrigeration units. The stored samples represent significant investment."

We reach a heavy metal door. Sterling unlocks it, revealing a narrow stairwell disappearing into darkness.

The air grows heavier the farther we descend, the dim emergency lighting barely enough to chase away the shadows pooling at the bottom. Everything about this feels intimate in a way it shouldn't—the way his broad shoulders fill the space, the heat radiating off him in the close quarters.

At the bottom, Sterling pushes open another door into a humming room packed with machinery. The generator rumbles steadily along one wall, vibrating the floor under our feet.

"Check the temperature on the refrigeration panel," Sterling orders, jerking his chin toward a control board.

I move toward it, squinting. "Thirty-eight degrees. Holding steady."

"Good." He moves off to check another panel, leaving me standing awkwardly in the center of the room, hyper-aware of every breath he takes, every shift of his weight.

The heavy scent of him—musk, cedar, something wild—seems thicker down here. Or maybe it's just me, losing the ability to think straight.

"Everything looks stable," Sterling says after a while. "We'll check the maintenance closet for?—"

A deafening crack of thunder drowns him out, rattling the walls.

The emergency lights flicker once—twice—then blink out completely.

"Don't move," Sterling commands, his voice startlingly close. A second later, the sharp click of his flashlight cuts through the darkness, casting a narrow circle of light across the floor.

"The backup lighting system should reset," he says, scanning the room. "If not?—"

He doesn't finish. Because a red light flashes, and the sound of a bolt slipping into place is like a nail in the coffin.

Sterling drags his hand through his hair, cursing under his breath. "The power must have surged and tripped the emergency protocol. All the doors will stay locked for thirty minutes to allow time for the police to show up. Or until Marina realizes and puts in the code."

The words thirty minutes curls through the air, thick and undeniable.

My pulse thunders in my ears. I'm trapped in a small, dark room with Sterling Johnson. The man who stars in every filthy dream I've had for weeks. The man whose body I can still see when I close my eyes.

"This could take a while," Sterling says, nodding toward a battered bench against the

far wall. "Might as well make ourselves comfortable."

He sits, the bench groaning under his weight, and gestures for me to join him.

I hesitate, because every instinct in me is screaming danger. But I go anyway, settling as far from him as possible—which isn't far at all. Our shoulders are almost touching. Every breath he takes seems to vibrate against my skin.

"This is... unfortunate timing," Sterling says after a long moment.

I cling desperately to professionalism. "At least the refrigeration units are still running."

He makes a noncommittal sound, the flashlight casting strange shadows over the hard lines of his face.

Silence stretches between us, heavy and brittle. The dim hum of machinery, the faint beat of rain against concrete, the low, steady sound of his breathing, so close I can feel it.

I sit stiffly, every nerve ending on high alert, trapped in a room full of dangerous possibilities. Because no matter how hard I try to convince myself otherwise, the truth presses against my skin, hot and insistent.

If Sterling reaches for me now— If he even looks at me the wrong way— I'm going to break.

And I don't know if I'll ever be able to put myself back together again.

* * *

Minutes pass like hours.

I sit rigid beside Sterling, acutely aware of every breath he takes, the steady rise and fall of his massive chest just inches from my shoulder. His warmth radiates across the narrow space between us, his scent—musk and cedar and something darker, wilder—filling my lungs with every shaky inhale. The situation is both torturous and thrilling, every second stretching out until the silence feels ready to split open between us.

"You've been distracted lately, Mr. Honeyworth," Sterling says suddenly, his deep voice cutting through the quiet like a blade.

I jolt, scrambling for composure. "I apologize, sir. I've been... dealing with some personal matters."

Sterling makes a low, noncommittal sound, the kind that gives away nothing. "Hmm. Your work has generally been excellent. Which is why the recent decline in focus is concerning."

"I'm working on it," I promise quickly, even as part of me knows it's a lie. How could I possibly focus when he's right here, when I'm drowning in the memory of the way he looked bent over that mount?

Sterling shifts slightly on the bench, and his arm brushes mine—barely a touch, just fabric against fabric—but it's enough to send a white-hot jolt through my body, enough to make me dizzy.

"Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries is essential in our line of work," Sterling continues, his tone still perfectly neutral. "The nature of what we do requires absolute discretion. Absolute respect for privacy."

My heart hammers hard against my ribs, beating so loudly I'm surprised he can't hear it.

"I understand, sir," I manage, voice strained.

"Do you?" Sterling turns slightly toward me, the dim glow of the flashlight catching in his amber eyes. The look he gives me—steady, unblinking—feels like being pinned in place, stripped bare without a single touch. "Because sometimes," he says, voice low, deliberate, "I wonder, Mr. Honeyworth."

The air between us feels electrified, buzzing with everything unsaid. I force myself to hold his gaze, to not flinch or look away, even as every nerve screams to bolt from the room.

"I value my privacy highly," Sterling says. "As do our clients. It's the foundation of our entire operation."

"Yes, sir."

"Which is why," he continues, voice tightening almost imperceptibly, "any breach of that privacy would be taken extremely seriously."

The word breach lands between us like a spark tossed onto dry kindling. My mouth is dry. My palms sweat against the worn fabric of my pants. He knows. He's known all along.

And still, he doesn't accuse me outright. Instead, he turns his gaze back toward the far wall, toward the lazy beam of the flashlight, as if he hadn't just gutted me with a handful of quiet, pointed words.

"Just something to consider," Sterling says mildly, "as you continue your internship

with us."

The tension doesn't break. If anything, it thickens, tightening the already suffocating space between us until every breath feels like it scrapes against something raw.

We lapse into silence again, but now it's different—charged, coiled. I can feel him—his body heat, the subtle shifts of muscle under fur and clothing, the deliberate control in every breath he takes. And somehow, impossibly, I know he's just as aware of me. His presence presses against my senses, so overwhelming it leaves me trembling under my skin.

Minutes drag by. I lose track of time, of anything except the steady hum of the generator and the steady thud of my pulse in my ears.

Then, finally, Sterling speaks again, voice low and deceptively casual.

"Tell me, Mr. Honeyworth. What really drew you to Sterling's Pride?"

I blink, caught off guard by the question. "I... wanted something different," I say, stumbling over the words. "My family's been traditional farmers for generations. I needed to... break away from that."

Sterling nods, watching me with the same relentless attention he gives to inspection reports and client contracts. Waiting for more.

"And... I was curious," I add, the darkness making honesty easier. "About minotaurs. About your culture. Humans don't know very much. Not really."

"Curiosity," Sterling repeats, the word tasting different in his mouth, heavier somehow.

"Yes."

"But curiosity," he says, voice dipping lower, "should be satisfied through appropriate channels. Questions asked directly, rather than... observations made covertly."

My breath stutters in my chest. There's no mistaking his meaning now. No pretending.

Before I can even think of a response, a noise echoes from above—voices, faint at first but growing clearer.

"Mr. Johnson? Hank? Are you down there?"

Sterling rises smoothly to his feet, moving to the stairwell door. "We're here," he calls up. "We're locked in."

Marina's voice, relieved and sharp, answers. "Electric is still down, so the alarm panel isn't working. Maintenance is on the way! About twenty minutes!"

"Understood."

Sterling returns to the bench, sitting down again—closer this time. Deliberate. The few inches of space between us disappear, swallowed by the heavy, humming tension.

"It appears," Sterling says, voice pitched low enough that the crew above couldn't possibly hear, "our conversation will have to wait." He lets the words hang between us, heavy with unspoken threat—and promise. "But make no mistake, Mr. Honeyworth," he murmurs. "We will continue this discussion."

I nod, because it's the only thing I can do—because my mouth is useless, my body is

betraying me, and my mind is a riot of want and panic and bone-deep need. Sterling doesn't look at me again. He doesn't have to. His nearness is a brand against my skin, his promise a hook buried deep in my chest. I sit there in the dark, trembling in the wreckage of my own self-control, knowing with awful, exquisite certainty that when that conversation happens, I won't survive it whole. And maybe—just maybe—I don't want to.

6

Monday morning crashes into my life like a wrecking ball.

I drag myself into work running on fumes, my body sluggish, my brain foggy, my nerves already frayed before I even walk through the door. The entire weekend had been a blur of sleepless nights and fevered what-ifs, my mind constantly replaying the moments in the generator room with Sterling—the nearness of him, the weight of his voice, the quiet, terrifying promises laced between his words.

And now, after two days of imagining what could have happened if we hadn't been interrupted, I was paying the price.

Big time.

"Problems with the Rivas brothers," Marina announces the moment I step inside, her expression grim. "Both of them insisting on the same time slot this morning, despite being scheduled separately. Sterling's handling it, but he's not happy."

Of course not.

"Great," I mutter, dropping my bag at my desk. "What do you need me to do?"

"Reschedule Mr. Taurus and Dr. Bennett to accommodate the Rivas situation," she says, already tossing a stack of papers at me. "And call the supply company. They delivered the wrong formula yesterday, and Sterling is furious."

A facility full of irritable minotaurs and an already furious Sterling. Exactly the environment my shredded nerves needed.

I dive into the scheduling system, fingers fumbling over the keys, trying—desperately—to focus. The phone rings nonstop: clients upset about reschedules, suppliers trying to cover their asses, Helena barking for updates from the back office.

By ten o'clock, my head is pounding, my vision blurring around the edges. Three mistakes already—minor ones, but enough for Marina to quietly correct them and shoot me a warning glance every time.

"Pull it together," she mutters under her breath after I enter the wrong room number for the third time. "Sterling's already in a mood. Don't give him more reasons."

"I know," I say, rubbing my temples hard enough to leave marks. "Sorry. Didn't sleep well." Again.

Her look says it all: This is becoming a problem. I don't even try to argue.

Before she can say anything else, Sterling strides out of the client lounge, tension rolling off him in waves. Even from across the room, I can tell—he's pissed. Every line of his body radiates it. The younger Rivas brother trails after him, subdued and sheepish.

"Ms. Michaels," Sterling says, his voice tight and clipped, "please ensure Mr. Rivas is assigned to Room Three, not Room Five as originally noted."

"Of course, sir," Marina says smoothly.

"And Mr. Honeyworth," Sterling's gaze cuts to me, sharp as a blade, "status update on

the supply correction?"

I scramble for the papers on my desk, knocking a few to the floor in my haste. "They're sending a courier with the correct formula. Should arrive by noon. I've also rescheduled?—"

"The courier details," Sterling interrupts, holding out his hand.

I fumble faster, rifling through the scattered documents. I know I printed it out. I know I did.

"I—I just had it..." My voice sounds small, panicked.

Sterling's nostrils flare—just slightly, but enough to make my stomach twist.

"This is a simple request, Mr. Honeyworth."

"I know, sir. I'm sorry." My fingers shake as I paw through the mess. "I'll email it to you right now."

"See that you do," he says, voice clipped. "And ensure the laboratory is ready for Dr. Kim's arrival at two. She'll need to test the replacement formula immediately."

"Yes, sir."

I yank open the email program, attach the document without double-checking—just wanting the interaction to end, to fix this before I dig myself in deeper.

I click send. And the second the email whooshes out of the outbox, a sick realization slams into me. I attached the wrong file. Not the courier details. No. I attached a draft of my weekly report—a draft with personal notes scribbled all over the margins.

Notes about Sterling. Notes about his movements through the facility. Notes about which rooms he used. Patterns I'd tracked obsessively without even realizing how bad it had gotten.

My heart seizes.

"Wait—" I croak aloud, already knowing it's too late. Sterling's phone pings. He glances at the screen. His expression doesn't change.

"Thank you, Mr. Honeyworth," he says calmly. "I'll review this immediately."

And then he turns on his heel and strides toward his office, the doors swinging shut behind him with a finality that hits like a gunshot.

I sit frozen, blood draining from my face, my body locked in place by pure, overwhelming panic.

"What just happened?" Marina asks, noticing the look on my face. "You look like you're about to pass out."

"I..." I swallow thickly. "I sent the wrong attachment."

"So?" she shrugs. "Just resend the right one with an apology. Happens all the time."

No. Not this time.

Not when the document I sent reads like a stalker's manifesto.

Not when it spells out, in horrifying detail, exactly how much time I've spent watching him. Hands shaking, I resend the correct courier file with a brief apology: My apologies for the incorrect attachment. Please disregard the previous document.

The reply comes back almost instantly.

Four words.

See me in my office. Now.

My heart punches into my throat. I rise mechanically, every movement slow and clumsy, my legs barely holding me up. Marina gives me a curious glance but says nothing as I cross the reception area. I knock once on Sterling's door, my knuckles hitting the wood with a soft, trembling tap.

There's no hesitation.

"Enter."

I step inside, shutting the door behind me with a soft, final click. Sterling stands behind his desk, massive hands braced against the wood, his tablet glowing ominously in front of him. His expression is unreadable.

"Mr. Honeyworth," he says, voice dangerously calm. "Would you care to explain this?"

He turns the tablet toward me.

Highlighted on the screen are my worst mistakes, my ugliest confessions:

SJ typically uses Room 8 after closing (6:15–6:45)

No security cameras in hallway outside collection rooms

Cleaning crew comes later Tuesdays and Thursdays – opportunity?

Mortification slams into me, hot and choking. There's no defense. No possible innocent explanation.

"Sir, I can explain?—"

"Please do," Sterling says, setting the tablet down with almost surgical precision. His gaze pierces straight through me. "Because these notes read like surveillance. Planning. Deliberate attempts to observe me without my knowledge or consent."

"They're not—" I start, but the words collapse on my tongue. There's no salvaging this. No point lying when the truth is written in my own damn handwriting.

"I'm sorry," I say instead, voice shaking.

Sterling's amber eyes narrow, the faintest crack in his control bleeding through.

"Sorry you wrote them?" he asks, voice low and razor-sharp. "Or sorry I saw them?"

The question punches the breath from my lungs.

"I..." I falter. "Both, I suppose."

For a long, harrowing moment, Sterling just stares at me. The room feels like it's holding its breath. Waiting. Then—something shifts behind his eyes. Something darker. More dangerous.

"I want honesty, Mr. Honeyworth," he says, the command in his voice absolute. "Now."

And something inside me—something brittle and exhausted—shatters.

"Fine," I say, the words spilling out before I can stop them. "Yes. I've been watching you. Timing my work to stay late when you use the collection rooms. Finding reasons to pass by Room 8 after hours."

The dam bursts. I can't hold it back anymore. I don't even try.

"Because I can't stop thinking about you. About what you look like when you're not hiding behind suits and schedules. About the sounds you make when you lose control. About what it would feel like to be the one to make you lose it."

Sterling's eyes widen slightly, the barest flare of his nostrils betraying his reaction.

"Every night," I whisper, barely able to get the words out, "I go home and imagine it. You catching me. You dragging me into that room and?—"

I break off, but it's too late. The truth is already bleeding between us, raw and irretrievable.

"So yes," I finish, voice hoarse. "I've been tracking you. Watching you. And yes—" my voice cracks on the word, "I'm sorry you found out. Because now you'll fire me. And I'll never get to see if reality is even half as devastating as my fantasies."

Silence crashes down.

Sterling doesn't move. Doesn't speak.

The only sign he's even alive is the rapid, shallow rise and fall of his chest. When he finally does speak, his voice is rougher, barely leashed.

"You understand," he says, each word deliberate, "that what you're describing constitutes harassment. A violation of privacy. Grounds for immediate termination."

"I know." I meet his gaze without flinching, because there's nothing left to lose.

Sterling moves from behind the desk, and instinctively—stupidly—I take a step back.

He stops a few feet away, towering over me but making no move to close the distance.

"You're a talented employee," he says after a beat. "Your understanding of our operations is impressive. Your potential is significant."

He sounds almost... disappointed.

"And yet," he adds, voice cutting deeper, "this situation complicates everything."

I stand there, hands curled into fists at my sides, waiting for the hammer to fall.

"I should fire you," Sterling says, and the words feel like the final blow.

I nod once, numb.

"But," he continues, voice low and measured, "I am willing to consider this a first offense. A serious lapse in judgment—one that will not be repeated."

Hope flickers in my chest so violently it almost hurts. "You're not firing me?"

"Not today." His gaze pins me in place. "But understand this, Mr. Honeyworth: there will be no second chances."

He steps closer, just enough to make the air between us spark and burn.

"If I discover any further attempts to observe me," he says, "any tracking of my

movements, any breach of professional boundaries—you're gone. No references. No recommendations."

"Understood," I whisper, dizzy with relief and shame and something darker twisting in my gut.

"Additionally," Sterling says, his tone brooking no argument, "you will delete all personal notes regarding my habits. You will remain in public work areas during scheduled hours only—unless specifically instructed otherwise by myself or Helena. And you will maintain strictly professional behavior at all times."

"I will," I breathe.

He studies me for a long, unbearable moment. His amber eyes don't waver.

"I'm not unaware," he says finally, "of the... challenges interspecies attraction can present. Particularly in a workplace like ours."

The admission punches the air from my lungs.

Challenges. Attraction. My whole body goes still.

"But," Sterling continues, voice tightening, "I am in a position of authority over you. That dynamic cannot be ignored. Regardless of... mutual interest that might exist under different circumstances."

Mutual interest. The words sink into my skin like branding irons.

"I understand," I say, my voice shaking.

Sterling nods, a single sharp movement, as if locking the words into place. "Good."

He steps back, putting deliberate space between us, the fragile thread stretched tight but not broken. "You may return to your duties," he says, his voice all business again.

"Yes, sir." I turn to leave, heart pounding so hard it drowns out the hum of the office lights.

But just as I reach the door, Sterling's voice stops me.

"And Mr. Honeyworth?" I glance back over my shoulder.

"I suggest," he says, his mouth curling into something not quite a smile, "that you find healthier outlets for your curiosity about minotaur anatomy."

There's an undertone buried beneath the professionalism— something almost like regret. Or temptation.

"I'll look into that," I manage, not trusting myself to meet his gaze.

I escape his office, the door clicking shut behind me. I should feel humiliated. Ashamed. Terrified. Instead, I feel alive. Because somehow—despite everything—I still have my job. And more dangerously than that, Sterling Johnson just admitted there's something he wants, too.

* * *

The next few days pass with a quiet, suffocating kind of torture.

Sterling and I move around each other like magnets forced into opposite poles—always aware, always repelling, never touching. When we have to interact, our conversations are brief and strictly business, stripped bare of any unnecessary words. No more private meetings in his office. No more lingering updates at my desk.

Everything flows through Marina now or appears neatly in his inbox, as if distance alone could cleanse the dangerous thing we almost unleashed.

Yet even in the silence, something simmers. Sometimes, when I look up from my work, I find his gaze lingering on me, thoughtful and unguarded. Sometimes our paths cross too closely in a hallway, and the air between us tightens to the point of snapping. Once, we both reached for the same file in the storage room. Our fingers brushed, and Sterling recoiled like he'd been burned, his nostrils flaring, a low, barely audible sound escaping him before he turned sharply away.

The whole facility feels the shift. It's in the way conversations falter when we're in the same room, the way Marina glances between us with a new, wary sort of curiosity. Helena, blunt as ever, hands me a clipboard mid-inventory and asks, "What happened between you and the boss? The air crackles every time you breathe the same oxygen."

"Nothing," I lie, flipping through the supply list with forced focus. "Just a misunderstanding. Paperwork."

She snorts, clearly unconvinced. "Must've been some kind of paperwork. He's been wound tighter than a spring since Monday."

I don't argue, because there's nothing I could say that wouldn't make it worse. And besides, her words only confirm what I've already felt slithering under my skin for days—Sterling is just as affected as I am.

By Friday, the tension has twisted itself into something unbearable. Every second in the same building feels like walking a knife's edge, my body hyperaware of every shift of his weight, every flicker of his scent drifting down the corridors.

There are moments—small ones, stupid ones—where I think about quitting. Walking

away from this internship, this impossible, unraveling thing between us, before it destroys both of us completely. But the idea of never seeing him again, of cutting him out like a clean surgical wound and pretending it never happened, makes my stomach turn violently. I can't do it. I'm too far gone.

So instead, I double down on professionalism. I clock in exactly on time, clock out exactly when my shift ends. I triple-check every report. I move through the building like a ghost—silent, polished, unobtrusive. If Sterling notices, he shows no sign. He doesn't comment, doesn't correct, doesn't commend. He just watches me, sometimes too closely, sometimes not at all, as if unsure whether to pull me back or let me keep drifting out of reach.

Friday night, as I'm slipping my jacket on, I glance back over my shoulder, almost against my will. Through the sliver of his office door left ajar, I see him—sitting at his desk, staring blankly at the wood grain beneath his hands, his massive shoulders tense, his hands clenched into fists.

The sight guts me in a way I'm not ready to admit. I want to go to him. I want to fix it. I want—stupidly, selfishly—for things to go back to the way they almost were, in the dark, dangerous space between wrong choices and what we might have had.

But I force myself to turn away. The line has been drawn. The boundaries made clear. Whatever Sterling and I could have been ended the moment I confessed.

Still, as I drive home through the wet streets, the windshield wipers beating a frantic rhythm, I can't stop thinking about two words— mutual interest —and how they had hung in the air between us like an unfinished sentence.

Maybe if things were different. Maybe if I hadn't crossed every boundary first. Maybe if wanting didn't come with so many consequences. But wanting doesn't listen to reason. It gnaws at me the entire way home, a hunger with no safe place to go.

The mistake wasn't confessing.

The mistake was falling for someone I was never allowed to touch—and knowing now, with gutting certainty, that he wanted to touch me back.

Two weeks have passed since my humiliating confession to Sterling—two long, agonizing weeks of icy professionalism and careful distance that has done nothing to cool the wildfire under my skin. If anything, the tension between us has solidified into something heavier, something almost physical, filling the spaces between us whenever we're in the same room. No amount of careful avoidance can disguise it, not when I can feel it crackling in the air, thick enough to choke on.

Sterling pretends as well as he can, but sometimes, when he thinks I'm not looking, I catch him watching me. His gaze snags on me mid-task, lingering for a fraction of a second too long before snapping away with deliberate, brutal efficiency. Most telling are the moments when his eyes dip lower, no matter how hard he tries to stop them, a brief, betraying flicker toward the front of my pants. A place that has become a problem area for me lately—constant, painful, humiliating.

My body's reaction to Sterling has become its own beast, separate from logic or shame, impossible to control. No amount of cold showers or loose-fitting clothes dulls the effect. The second he enters a room, the second his voice threads into the air, low and steady and rough-edged, my cock stiffens in my pants, aching with want. When he stops at my desk to issue a quiet order, or when he passes close enough that his scent—a dark, smoky mix of musk and cedar—clings to the back of my throat, I have to scramble to cover myself with paperwork or the hem of my shirt, desperate to hide how visibly ruined I am.

It's wrecking me. Wrecking my work. Yesterday, I entered the wrong client into the system three times because Sterling stood behind me for too long, the heat of his

body sinking into my skin, his breath disturbing the hair at the back of my neck. This morning, I manage to knock over an entire filing cabinet while subtly trying to adjust myself beneath my desk, flushing scarlet as the clatter echoes through the front office.

"You okay, kid?" Helena asks, sharp-eyed as she passes by, handing me a clipboard without waiting for a response. "You look flustered."

I mumble something about sitting too long, too stiff from paperwork, but the way she looks at me says she doesn't believe a word. Thankfully, she doesn't press, because I can't explain—not without confessing that every time our boss so much as exists in the same building as me, my body reacts like I've been hardwired to crave him.

By late afternoon, I'm a mess. Physically tight and aching, emotionally frayed beyond repair, strung tighter than a wire ready to snap. Sterling has been parading potential investors through the facility all day, walking tall and authoritative in his crisp button-down shirts and rolled sleeves, the controlled power of his body on full display. Every time he passes the reception desk, his eyes flick to mine, and I swear he can see right through me—see the hunger, the desperation, the pathetic need. Worse, he can smell it. His nostrils flare slightly each time, a subtle, almost subconscious reaction that confirms every humiliating suspicion I have. He knows exactly what I'm feeling. He knows—and he leaves me to drown in it anyway.

By the time closing creeps closer, my nerves are raw, my body straining against the last threads of my restraint. I watch Sterling disappear into his office for his end-of-day routine, the same routine he has kept, without fail, even after everything between us shattered. In fifteen minutes, he will emerge, check that the facility is empty, and slip into Room 8 to take care of his needs. A private act, a necessary biological process, one I have no right to witness—and yet have seen, and cannot unsee.

I stand behind the reception desk, breathing too hard, my heart hammering, an idea

taking root in my mind. Dangerous. Reckless. Career-ending. What if, this time, I don't just watch from afar? What if I make it impossible for him to ignore me?

The rational part of my brain screams at me to stop, to think, to remember all the consequences he's warned me about. He has been explicit about boundaries. He has made it clear what would happen if I overstep again. I could lose everything. My internship. My career. Any chance of a future.

But the rest of me—the ruined, restless part—is already moving.

I can't live like this anymore, trapped in this unbearable limbo between need and professionalism, shame and hope. I am losing focus, losing sleep, losing my mind piece by piece every time he brushes past me and pretends it means nothing. Something has to give, and I am done waiting for it to happen on his terms.

Five fifty-five. Five minutes until closing.

Everyone else is gone. No clients. No cleaning crew until seven.

It's now or never.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I cross the reception area and slip into the hallway, my steps silent on the carpeted floors. Each one feels heavier than the last, pulling me deeper into something I can't undo. My hands shake. My throat burns. My erection strains uncomfortably against the confines of my pants, but I barely feel it anymore. All I can think about is him. About the look on his face when he sees me waiting there. About what he will do.

I reach Room 8.

The door looms in front of me, heavy, solid, ordinary-looking—and yet the most

dangerous thing I have ever dared approach. I press my palm against the cool metal of the handle, my heart pounding so violently it rattles my ribs. This is my last chance to turn back. To salvage what little dignity I have left. To save my future. But when I close my eyes, I don't see a future without him.

I see Sterling, his massive body braced against the collection mount, his head thrown back in pleasure, the raw, guttural sounds he tries so hard to suppress breaking free at last. And that image, seared into my brain, burns away the last of my hesitation. I need this. Need him. Need the truth of whatever lives between us, no matter how reckless or dangerous or wrong it might be. I tighten my grip on the handle, draw in a shaking breath—and push the door open.

* * *

The room is immaculate, scrubbed clean and prepared by the cleaning crew after yesterday's use. Fresh towels are stacked neatly on the counter. The collection mount gleams under the soft overhead lighting, its padded surfaces sanitized and waiting. The entertainment system hums quietly in standby mode, an indifferent sentinel to what I'm about to do. For a long moment, I just stand there, suspended at the threshold of a decision that feels bigger than anything I've ever made. My heart thrums a relentless rhythm against my ribs, my body trembling with the enormity of it.

Then, before I can think better of it, I move.

One by one, I strip away the layers that have kept me tethered to caution. My hands shake as I unbutton my shirt, the cotton sticking to the sweat beading at the small of my back. Shoes kicked off. Socks peeled away. Shirt shrugged off and dropped to the floor. Trousers sliding down trembling legs. Underwear last, the final humiliating, liberating surrender. Until I am standing naked in the sterile chill of the room, every nerve ending exposed.

My cock juts forward, aching and flushed dark with weeks of constant, gnawing need. It bobs with each ragged breath I take, leaking steadily despite the cool air, and the sight of myself like this—helpless, wanton, trembling—sends another dizzying rush of arousal through me.

I approach the mount, studying it the way I once watched Sterling use it from the shadows of my fantasies. The smooth, padded surface, the adjustable supports, the faint mechanical hum of readiness—it feels clinical and impersonal and yet somehow charged now, weighted by the knowledge of what I'm about to offer.

The equipment is designed for someone much larger than me, but the controls are intuitive. With clumsy, trembling fingers, I lower the height to accommodate my smaller frame, adjusting the angles until I think it might work. Every brush of my skin against the cool vinyl sends jolts of sensation through me, my cock throbbing with anticipation, with fear, with desperation.

Carefully, I climb onto the mount, the surface firm under my chest, the wedge lifting my hips into the air. I arrange myself deliberately—knees bent, feet nearly brushing the floor, back arched, ass raised and exposed. There's no mistaking the position. It's a presentation, an offering, an invitation so blatant it makes my cheeks burn with shame and hunger all at once.

My cock, pressed awkwardly against the mount, leaks a wet trail across the pristine padding. Some distant, rational part of me winces at the thought of contaminating the equipment meant for Sterling's use, but a darker part—hot and reckless—finds it exhilarating. The idea that he might see the mess I made, know exactly why it's there, who it's for—it sends a full-body shudder through me.

My heart races faster, hammering against the thin cage of my ribs. Sweat beads at the base of my spine, clinging to the curve of my lower back despite the room's carefully controlled temperature. I feel light-headed, stretched too thin by the magnitude of

what I'm doing, but I can't move. I can't stop. The clock on the wall ticks mercilessly onward.

6:10. Sterling will be finishing his paperwork soon.

I shift slightly, trying to relieve the pressure building in my cock, but the movement only makes it worse. My length slides against the padded surface with a friction so maddeningly sweet it drags a helpless, bitten-off sound from my throat. I press my forehead into the mount, fighting for control, willing myself to hold on.

6:12. The temptation to bolt rises, cold and frantic. I could still leave. Get dressed. Pretend none of this ever happened. But my hand moves almost without thinking, reaching for the familiar control panel built into the side of the mount. I press the button that releases the lock on the door, leaving it slightly ajar—just as I've seen Sterling do a hundred times when he thought he was alone.

An invitation. A challenge. A declaration I can't take back.

6:15. He should be arriving any minute now.

I imagine how I must look if he sees me—naked, splayed out, wanton and waiting, the door left open wide enough to broadcast my intent. There's no room for pretense. No way to spin this as an accident or misunderstanding.

I am offering myself to him, openly, shamelessly.

Either he'll accept, or he'll fire me.

6:18. Doubt gnaws at the edges of my mind, cold and cruel. Maybe he's been delayed. Maybe he left already, disgusted by what he suspects. Maybe this was never anything but a one-sided delusion and I've just destroyed my life for nothing.

I squeeze my eyes shut, pressing my forehead harder against the mount, my body rigid with tension, every second that ticks by another slash across already raw skin.

And then?—

Footsteps.

Heavy. Measured. Unmistakable. Each deliberate tread echoes down the hallway, drawing closer, vibrating through the floor and into my bones.

Sterling.

Oh God. It's too late to move, too late to hide, too late to pretend. All I can do now is wait and pray that the man I have broken every rule for won't leave me exposed and alone. The footsteps stop just outside the door. Silence falls, thick and suffocating. For a heartbeat, nothing happens. Then the door creaks wider.

My breath catches painfully in my throat as his shadow spills across the threshold, a broad silhouette framed in the narrow gap of the doorway. From my position on the mount, I can't see his face—only the powerful outline of his body, impossibly large, impossibly still, frozen there like he's deciding whether to step inside or turn away.

Every muscle in my body locks tight. I squeeze my eyes shut, my forehead pressed hard against the padded surface, my chest shuddering with the effort it takes not to move, not to plead. My cock aches where it's pressed against the mount, leaking against the vinyl, the throbbing need almost painful now, sharp and relentless.

I don't dare look at him. I don't dare breathe too loudly, or shift, or make a sound that might shatter this delicate, razor-edged moment. Seconds stretch and pull, bending under the weight of the choice hanging between us.

STERLING'S POV

The day has been interminable, every hour stretching longer than the last beneath the weight of endless investor questions, supplier excuses, and Dr. Kim's quiet concern over sample anomalies. I've kept my professional facade in place, my voice measured, my expressions neutral, but my patience has been steadily eroding beneath the surface.

And not just because of the business.

The real distraction—the one I've refused to name aloud even in the privacy of my own mind—has been Hank Honeyworth. My too-curious, too-bright, too-young human intern, with his restless hands and his eyes that linger far too long. I have tried, truly, to ignore it. Tried to maintain the appropriate boundaries expected of me. Tried to pretend I don't notice the way he stiffens when I enter a room, the way the scent of his arousal saturates the air whenever I pass too close.

But I do notice. Minotaur senses are not forgiving. I can smell his need across a crowded room. I can hear the spike of his heartbeat when my shadow falls over his desk. I can see the visible, undeniable proof of his desire no matter how quickly he tries to rearrange paperwork across his lap.

It's becoming a problem. A dangerous one.

His performance has started to slip. Today alone, I caught him entering the wrong

client information, his hands trembling as he tried to correct it under Marina's suspicious gaze. Helena has commented on his jumpiness. Even Marina, diplomatic as ever, asked if there was "something going on" between us, her voice laced with concern she tried—and failed—to disguise.

There isn't. There can't be. The professional boundaries are non-negotiable, the power dynamic is fraught, and the physical realities—well, they are not easily bridged between our species.

And yet.

As I finish the last of today's paperwork, my mind drifts to him again, unbidden. The way he watches me, those sharp green eyes barely hiding his hunger. The way he had confessed—raw and reckless—that he had been tracking me, timing his movements to coincide with mine, driven by a need he could no longer contain. The way he looked standing there in my office afterward, wrecked and desperate, waiting for a verdict I barely had the strength to deliver.

Perhaps I should have fired him that day. Perhaps I should have protected us both from what was always going to happen if I let it fester. But the truth is—I didn't want to.

I check my watch. 6:15. The building should be empty now. Time for my own daily ritual—the act of necessary biological maintenance that keeps my temper and instincts in check.

I rise from my desk, rolling my shoulders to work out the day's tension, and move through the deserted halls toward Room 8. It's my preferred space—private, isolated, safe from interruptions. A place to shed the weight of restraint, if only for a few stolen minutes.

But as I round the last corner, something stops me short. The door is ajar. A thin strip of light spills into the corridor, a sliver of illumination slicing through the otherwise dim hall. I frown, immediately alert. The cleaning crew isn't due for another forty-five minutes. All clients are gone. Staff should be clocked out.

And yet— there is a scent, faint but unmistakable, curling through the air like smoke.

Hank.

And not just Hank. Hank flushed with arousal, steeped in need so thick it punches through the sterile air and crashes straight into my lungs. I stand frozen, parsing the implications, my heart pounding slow and deliberate against my ribs. Had he stayed late to spy again? Had he disregarded every warning, every line I'd drawn, just to satisfy his obsession? The surge of anger is immediate and visceral, my hand tightening into a fist at my side.

But when I push the door wider, ready to confront him—to end this dangerous game once and for all—what I see inside renders me utterly, completely still. Hank isn't hiding. He isn't watching.

Hank is offering.

Spread out naked across the collection mount, his smaller human body arranged with shameless precision. His stomach and chest press against the padded surface, but his back arches in a silent, unmistakable invitation, ass high and exposed, his cock flushed and leaking against the mount. The door has been deliberately left ajar. The position, the timing, the scent—all of it carefully orchestrated.

Not an accident. Not a mistake.

A choice.

He looks over his shoulder, his green eyes meeting mine across the room, wide with nerves but burning with something else—something wild and desperate and willing to risk everything. The impact of the sight is like a blow to the chest, knocking the breath from my lungs.

Shock. Fury. Desire, raw and violent, roaring to the surface before I can clamp it down.

For long, endless seconds, I stand there, my massive frame blocking the doorway, my hands trembling with the force it takes not to move. Because I know—I know—if I step further into that room, there will be no going back. No excuses. No more pretending. The professional line I have so carefully maintained will shatter beneath my feet the second I touch him. And worse, I don't want to stop it. Not anymore.

* * *

The first button comes undone with a flick of my fingers, and still, Hank doesn't move.

He just stays there—naked, trembling, so fucking perfect it makes my teeth ache—his ass arched up in offering, his cock leaking across the mount like he doesn't even care who sees. Like he wants me to see. Like he's been waiting for this moment as long as I have.

I undo another button. Then another. My hands are steady, but inside, I'm a goddamn mess. Every instinct I've spent years beating into submission is screaming at me to claim him. To grab his hips, shove my cock deep inside him, knot him so full he won't even remember his own fucking name.

I could smell his arousal the second I stepped into the hallway. Now it's pouring off him in thick, dizzying waves, hitting me harder than any drug ever could. Sweet and

sharp and so fucking human, it scrapes against my self-control like sandpaper.

The shirt slides from my shoulders and drops to the floor. My chest heaves with the effort of breathing slowly, pretending like I still have a choice. Pretending like I'm not two seconds from throwing every professional boundary out the goddamn window.

Hank's eyes track every movement I make, wide and wild, pupils blown so wide I can barely see any green left. His fingers twitch where they're clenched around the edges of the mount, like he's holding himself in place by sheer force of will.

Good. Let him squirm. Let him need. Because I'm sure as hell not the only one suffering here.

My hands move to my belt, and I swear to every god still listening that if he flinches, if he even breathes wrong, I'll find the strength to walk away. The buckle clicks loose under my fingers, the leather hissing as I pull it free. I watch him closely, giving him that one last out, that one last scrap of mercy.

He doesn't move.

Not an inch.

Not when my slacks slide off my hips and puddle around my ankles. Not when I step out of them and cross the room in slow, deliberate strides. Not when I stop at the edge of the mount, so close now that the heat of his body sears my skin.

I can see every tremble in his thighs, every drop of cum leaking from his cock, every desperate shudder rolling down his spine.

And he wants this. He wants me.

"Last chance, Hank," I rasp, my voice shredded and low, the words scraping out of my throat like broken glass. "If you want to walk away—do it now."

He presses his forehead to the mount. Doesn't speak, just spreads his thighs wider. Silent. Obedient. Begging without a single fucking word.

Something inside me snaps—loud and brutal and final.

I place one massive hand on the small of his back, feeling the way he jerks under the contact, a full-body flinch like he's been touched by lightning. His skin is hot against my palm, his heart hammering so fast I can feel it through the thin line of his spine.

I brace the other hand on the mount next to his head, caging him in, lowering my face until I can breathe him in raw and unfiltered, until every desperate, reckless part of him seeps into my lungs.

"You think you know what you're asking for," I murmur, my mouth a hair's breadth from the shell of his ear. "You have no idea."

He makes a broken sound, half-moan, half-plea, grinding his hips helplessly against the mount, leaving slick smears of arousal across the vinyl.

And just like that, every rule, every line, every ounce of control I ever had?—

Gone.

Burned to ash under the heat of him. And I'm done pretending I ever had a choice.

My hands tear at the last of my clothing, too rough, too desperate, but I don't give a fuck anymore. I need to feel him. Need to ruin him. Need to mark every inch of his skin until he's nothing but mine.

I move behind him, adjusting the mount quickly, not caring how brutal my movements are, just needing him at the right height, right angle, right place to take what I'm about to give him.

When I grip his hips, he shudders under me, his whole body vibrating like he's barely holding it together.

"You have no fucking idea," I rasp, my voice wrecked, "what you've gotten yourself into."

He pushes his hips back toward me without hesitation, so trusting, so fucking perfect, and it snaps whatever thin leash I had left.

I coat my fingers with lube—fast, messy—and bring them straight to his hole, circling, pressing, feeling him jerk under the touch.

"This is what you wanted?" I growl, my chest heaving, my knot already beginning to thicken just from the feel of him. "You wanted to spread yourself open and beg for it?"

"Y-yes," he gasps, shoving himself back onto my hand like he's starving for it.

"You're gonna fucking take it," I snarl, pushing my first finger inside him without warning. His body clamps down around me, hot and impossibly tight, and the sound he makes—god, the broken little cry he gives—nearly undoes me.

I fuck him open on my fingers, relentless, feeling the desperate little tremors running through his muscles as I stretch him wider. He's leaking harder now, the slick mess of him dripping down the mount, and the scent of his need is so thick it's choking me.

"Greedy little human," I mutter, shoving a second finger inside him, making him jolt

forward with a helpless moan. "You came here begging to be ruined, didn't you?"

"Yes," he whimpers. "Please, Sterling."

I curl my fingers hard, dragging them against that bundle of nerves inside him that makes him sob for me.

"You ever been stretched like this before, Hank?" I grind out, my mouth at his ear now, my free hand gripping his hip hard enough to leave bruises. "Ever been finger-fucked by a goddamn minotaur while you hump into a fucking machine?"

He shakes his head frantically, gasping for breath, wrecked and gorgeous and so fucking mine.

"Didn't think so," I growl, adding a third finger without mercy. He cries out, arching into the touch, but doesn't pull away—he takes it, takes all of me, desperate and hungry and perfect.

"That's it," I murmur, feeling him clench and flutter around my fingers, feeling him fucking need it. "Good boy. Open up for me. Show me how badly you want to be split on my cock." The words tumble out, filthy and wild and unstoppable, because I'm gone now, lost in him, lost in the way he gasps and writhes under my hands.

"You're gonna take everything," I promise him, my knot swelling larger with every filthy sound he makes. "You're gonna stretch so fucking wide for me one day you won't even be able to close your legs afterward. You'll walk around leaking my cum for days. Everyone will know you're mine."

"Please," Hank sobs, fucking himself down onto my hand, helpless against the brutal pleasure. "Sterling, I want it—want your knot—want you to breed me?—"

The dirty plea shatters the last of my control. I slam my fingers into him harder, mercilessly fucking him open, watching the way his cock throbs and leaks and strains against the mount. His body is coiled tight, vibrating with need, his prostate swollen and begging for release.

"You're close," I growl against the nape of his neck, feeling him tremble apart under my touch. "I can feel it. You're gonna cream yourself like a desperate little slut for me, aren't you?"

"Yes," he sobs, his entire body jerking, trying to hold back because I haven't given him permission yet.

"You don't come until I say," I snarl, wrapping one massive hand around the back of his neck, pinning him down, owning him. "You'll hold it. You'll be a good boy for me."

"I'll try," he whimpers, the strain wrecking his voice.

"Not good enough," I snap, curling my fingers inside him viciously. "Beg for it. Beg to come for me."

He breaks with a ragged sob. "Please, Sterling—please let me come—please, I can't?—"

I jerk his hips down to the edge of the mount, the head of his cock now positioned at the top of collection mechanism. I slide my own cock against his, pushing deep into the machine, moaning as it starts up, suckling us. I'm so thick now the collection mechanism can barely take it, my knot stretching the opening brutally tight, nearly strangling the head of Hank's cock.

"Fuck," he pants, his entire body shaking, his hips humping the mount, desperate for

friction.

"Look at me," I order, and when he lifts his head to the mirror, I see it: his face wrecked, mouth open, eyes wild and glassy, sweat dripping down his flushed skin. Mine. All fucking mine.

"Now," I growl, my voice pure, broken gravel. "Come for me. Now."

He explodes with a strangled cry, hips bucking wildly as he spills himself into the intake, thick and hot and endless. His body milks my fingers, spasming so hard I feel it all the way up my arm.

The sight—the scent—the desperate, broken way he comes because of me—rips my own orgasm from me with brutal, punishing force. I roar his name, slamming my hips forward, knotting deep inside the collection mount as I pump rope after rope of cum into the machine, my vision going white around the edges.

The orgasm crashes through me so hard I can't see straight. For a moment, all I can do is hold onto him, breathing like I've been dragged under by a riptide. My knot throbs brutally inside the collection mount, milking the last shuddering pulses of pleasure from our bodies.

But it's not enough. I don't know if it will ever be enough.

Hank is sprawled across the mount, trembling and wrecked, his soft little gasps still catching in his throat like he's too stunned to process it. His sweat-slick skin glows under the harsh fluorescents, every inch of him marked with my hands, my scent.

Mine.

I drag in a ragged breath, push up onto my elbows, and pull him upright by the waist,

flipping him around to face me. He makes a soft, broken sound, pliant and trusting as I adjust the mount, raising it higher until we're face to face.

And then—fuck it all—I crush my mouth to his.

It's not careful. It's not sweet. It's devastation, the kiss deep and brutal and claiming, teeth clashing, tongues tangling. He moans into it—helpless, desperate—and his hands scrabble at my shoulders, clutching for something solid while he melts against me. His cock, still flushed and leaking from the first round, stirs back to life between us, pressing hot and needy against my stomach.

I break the kiss, panting harshly against his swollen lips. "Still hungry, Hank?"

He nods frantically, grinding himself against my abs like he can't help it, greedy little fucker that he is.

Good.

Because I'm not done with him. Not even close.

I push him back onto the mount, spreading his legs wide, his leaking cock jutting up into the air, begging to be sucked. He shudders, moaning when he understands my intention. I line myself up and thrust into the collection mount again, the entrance already a mess of my earlier release and Hank's, the slick, obscene squelch of it making my cock jerk hard inside the tight channel.

God, the thought that it's both of us coating the inside of the device—that I'm thrusting into a mess we made together—sends a savage thrill through me.

I find a rhythm, fucking the mount in slow, brutal thrusts, every drag of the tight sleeve milking more desperate little sounds from my throat. I reach between his

trembling legs and wrap my fist around his cock in one smooth, filthy motion.

Hank sobs, his hips jerking helplessly as I squeeze tight, my fingers curling around the flushed head. I groan as I watch as his cock disappears inside my fist, his hands flying to the mount like he needs to hold himself in place.

I don't give him a chance to recover. I slide a slick finger back to his hole, pressing past the tight ring of muscle, feeling him clamp down around me even as he tries to push back, greedy for more.

He's still loose from the brutal stretch of earlier, but not by much. His body grips my finger desperately, a hot, trembling vise that makes my cock throb harder inside the mount. I work him open again as I suck him off, my tongue swirling, my finger pressing deep until I find that sweet spot inside him—the one that makes him whimper and twitch, his cock jumping against my tongue.

I add a second finger, scissoring him open while jerk him off, squeezing tighter with each pass. He's making such pretty sounds now, high and broken, fucked-out and desperate, grinding his hips helplessly against my hand.

"You're going to come for me again," I rasp, sliding my fingers deep enough to make him see stars. "I want your cum spilling all over my hand, Hank. And then I'm going to fuck this machine like it's your tight little ass."

He sobs my name, his whole body shuddering on the edge.

I curl my fingers against his prostate one more time, hard and relentless, and twist my hand over him, increasing my pace.

He comes with a hoarse cry, jerking so hard he nearly bucks off the mount, his cock pulsing hot streams of cum into the air and over my knuckles. I groan, my gaze glued

to his face, obsessed with how devastatingly erotic it is when he loses control. I milk him through it while my cock pounds into the mount, the pressure building again until it's unbearable.

The moment he starts to sag, boneless and broken over the mount, I let myself go.

I slam deep into the slick, messy machine and knot hard, the thick swell locking me in tight as I flood it again, the obscene sound of it mixing with the filthy squelch of our mingled releases.

When it's over, I collapse against him, panting against the sweat-slick skin of his abdomen, still locked inside the machine, still buried so deep in the haze of him I can't tell where I end and he begins.

I press a kiss to the hollow of his throat—an instinct, a claim, a promise—and finally, finally force myself to pull away.

Gradually, the intensity drains out of my muscles, leaving behind a raw, aching satisfaction. The knot throbs as it begins its slow retreat, loosening enough for me to pull away from the equipment with careful, deliberate motions.

Hank doesn't move. He's still sprawled across the mount, wrecked and panting, his body shining with sweat, his skin marked up from my hands. Thoroughly used. Utterly ruined. Perfect.

The sight of him like that hits me in the chest so hard I almost stagger. Pride. Hunger. A fierce, gut-twisting concern. And the gut-punch realization that we just crossed a line I can't uncross. I drag my pants on with hands that aren't as steady as I want them to be.

"We need to talk," I rasp, voice rough from more than just the physical aftermath. "In

my office. Ten minutes."

Hank nods, still blinking slowly, dazed and blissed-out and making no move to cover himself.

"That was—" he starts, voice cracked.

"We'll discuss it," I cut him off sharply. If I let him finish that sentence—if I let him say something sweet and reckless—I'm going to end up bending him over the nearest surface and making this mistake permanent.

"Clean up," I murmur. "Meet me in my office."

I don't wait for a reply. I bolt. One second longer in that room, and professionalism won't just be dead—it'll be buried six feet under and pissing off every goddamn client we've ever had.

I haul myself into my office, slam the door behind me, and breathe. Fuck. I scrub both hands down my face, trying to shake off the pounding in my veins.

By the time Hank knocks, I've shoved every wild, reckless impulse down deep enough I can pretend I'm composed.

"Enter," I call, positioning myself behind my desk—putting cold, solid wood between me and temptation.

He steps inside, and my carefully constructed armor almost shatters. He looks... Flushed. Wrecked. Fucking gorgeous. The wild tension that's been leaking off him for weeks is gone. In its place is a quiet, dangerous certainty that sinks its claws into me.

"Sit," I say, jerking my chin toward the chair.

He lowers himself into it gingerly, and that little wince—God help me, that little wince—is a brand across my brain, lighting me up all over again with the memory of exactly how deep my fingers were inside him not fifteen minutes ago. I lock it down. Barely.

"What happened in that room," I start, keeping my voice as professional as I can while my blood still pounds in my ears, "changes everything. And nothing."

Hank arches one perfect eyebrow. "That's contradictory."

I snort, sharp and humorless. "Welcome to my life right now."

I lean forward, knuckles whitening on the desk.

"Professionally, nothing changes. During work hours, in front of clients and staff, I am your boss, and you are my intern. Full stop. No favoritism. No flirting. No slip-ups. No exceptions."

"I understand," Hank says quickly, his posture straightening, his voice level.

"Do you?" I pin him with a look. "Because if this gets out—if even a hint of what we did leaks—this facility is done. My reputation? Shredded. Yours too. And don't kid yourself: the fact that it's an interspecies relationship will make it ten times worse."

"I said I understand," Hank repeats, and there's a stubborn steel behind the words now. "I'm not going to jeopardize your business. Or my future. I can handle it."

God. He means it. He has no idea what he's stepping into, and he still means it.

"Good." My chest loosens a fraction, but I'm not done.

"And now for the other side," I say, voice dropping. "If—and I mean if—we pursue this outside work hours, we need rules. Clear ones."

"Like what?" he asks, leaning forward, fearless.

I stare at him, all lit up and burning for me, and every molecule in my body howls to tear the desk out of the way and let him climb me like a tree.

Instead, I set the rules.

"First," I say, voice rough, "consent and communication. Always. No assumptions. No games. You say the word, it stops. Every time."

Hank nods immediately. "Agreed."

"Second." I let my voice dip lower, warning in every syllable. "We take it slow. Especially physically. You are not built for what I'm carrying."

His pupils blow wide at the edge of my words.

"You mean the knot," he says, like it's the most natural thing in the world to talk about.

My cock twitches so hard it hurts. "Among other things," I say, gritting my teeth. "I'm three and a half times your size, Hank. What feels like gentle to me could rip you apart if we aren't careful. And yes—the knot is a unique consideration."

I watch him soak up every word, hunger blazing across his face.

"You'll need prep," I tell him bluntly. "A lot of it. Stretching. Conditioning. Months of it, probably, before you can even think about taking me fully."

Instead of blanching, Hank leans in further, green eyes bright and hungry. "I want it," he says, voice like gravel. "Whatever it takes."

And God help me— I believe him.

I lean forward across the desk, dropping my voice, making damn sure he feels the weight of what I'm about to say. "When my knot is fully expanded, it creates a lock that can't be broken until it goes down on its own. Could be fifteen minutes. Could be closer to half an hour. And if we try for full penetration without months of prep..." I let the silence sit there. Heavy. "It won't just hurt. It could tear you. Hospitalize you."

His reaction isn't fear. It's fascination. It's a fresh rush of arousal.

"How long exactly does it take to prepare properly?" Hank asks, like we're discussing gym memberships instead of the logistics of getting knotted by a goddamn minotaur.

The question punches the air right out of my lungs.

"That... depends." I clear my throat, forcing my brain to stay on topic and not on the mental slideshow of all the ways I could stretch him. "Weeks. Months. Longer, if we're smart about it."

"And you've done it before?" His voice is steady. Curious. Not scared.

I hesitate. Honesty's the only option if we're doing this at all. "Yeah. Twice." I lean back in my chair, feeling the sting of old memories. "One ended before we got that far. She took one look and ran the other way. The other... we rushed it. He ended up in the hospital."

Hank absorbs it, his face open, serious—but not backing down. "I want to try," he says simply. "When we're ready. When it's safe."

His directness should be terrifying. Instead, it lights something molten under my skin.

"That kind of eagerness is exactly how people get hurt," I bite out, harsher than I mean to. "This isn't a fantasy, Hank. It's real anatomy. Real consequences."

"I know," he says, voice even. "I'm not stupid. I'm just not going to sit here and pretend I'm not interested." His mouth curves, slow and lethal. "Your size. Your strength. Your knot. It's part of why I can't stop thinking about you. Since that first night I watched you using the mount."

His words slam into me, vivid and raw, sharper than any dirty fantasy I've had in weeks. I grip the edge of the desk hard enough to make it creak.

"Your interest is noted," I say, fighting to keep my voice dry and businesslike. "But none of that changes the physical realities we have to respect."

"Of course not," Hank says easily, like he's agreeing to a pizza topping instead of months of body training to take a minotaur's knot. "But it does mean," he adds, flashing me a look so hungry it physically hurts, "that I'll do whatever it takes to feel you rutting into my ass."

Fuck me.

I clear my throat hard, desperate to pull the conversation back from the edge before we both do something monumentally stupid.

"Third boundary," I snap, needing structure like a drowning man needs a rope. "This stays private. No gossip. No slips. No one at the facility, no one outside it, finds out."

Period."

He nods immediately, like he'd already decided that hours ago. "Agreed. I don't exactly have a big social circle here anyway. My family's still back in Iowa."

That flicker of loneliness under the words hits me harder than it should. I shove it down.

"Fourth," I continue, holding his gaze. "Either of us can end this at any time. No guilt. No retaliation. You'll still finish your internship. Still get a glowing recommendation, if you earn it."

"Fair," Hank agrees without missing a beat. "Though..." He leans in just slightly, that slow smile tugging at his mouth again. "I can't imagine wanting to stop when we've barely started."

The smile punches me straight in the gut. This kid—this brave, reckless, impossible human—has no idea what he's playing with. Or maybe he does. Maybe that's the whole fucking point.

"Fifth and final boundary," I growl. "Weekly check-ins. Full honesty. If either of us has a problem, we deal with it immediately. No pretending everything's fine while it festers."

"Weekly," Hank echoes, nodding. "Got it."

I narrow my eyes. "You want to add anything?"

He thinks for a second, then—because he's Hank, because he's got more guts than sense—he says, "Yeah. One thing." He meets my eyes dead-on. No fear. No games. "Honesty. About everything." His voice drops. "What you want. What you need."

What you're afraid of. No protecting me. No pretending you don't want something when you do."

The words hit me harder than anything else he's said tonight. Harder than hearing my knot doesn't scare him. Harder than seeing him spread out on the mount, offering himself like a fucking gift.

Honesty. About everything.

I nod once, slow and deliberate. "Agreed."

A heavy silence stretches between us. The tension between what we just did—and what we could still do if we weren't both barely clinging to control—fills the space so thick I can taste it.

Hank tilts his head, that wicked, wrecked little smile still ghosting across his face.

"So," he says casually, like he hasn't just turned my entire fucking world inside out, "what happens now?"

A good question. The kind that doesn't have a safe answer. We've crossed a line that can't be uncrossed. Built a goddamn bridge across it. Set fire to both sides for good measure.

"Now," I say, checking my watch because I need something—anything—to anchor me, "you go home. It's nearly seven. The cleaning crew will be here any minute, and I don't need them walking into... this." My voice is too rough, too raw, but it's the best I can manage.

"Tomorrow," I add, "you come back on time. You act normal. Professional. We keep it clean."

"And after hours?" he presses, his voice low, his green eyes locked onto mine like he's already peeling away all the excuses I'm barely holding together.

I exhale slowly, the words burning my throat on the way out. "This weekend. Saturday night. My house. Away from this place, away from the goddamn rules. We'll talk about next steps there."

The smile that lights up his face nearly undoes me. Bright. Unapologetic. It's the kind of smile that says he knows exactly how dangerous this is—and he's already made peace with it. Hell, he's eager for it.

"I'd like that," he says simply.

"Then it's settled." I stand, the scrape of the chair loud in the heavy silence. "I'll text you the address."

Hank gets up too, moving stiffly—wincing just enough to make my mind flash hot with the memory of what I did to him an hour ago. What he begged me for.

I look away before I embarrass myself, before I drag him back across the desk and undo every single rule we just made.

He hesitates near the door, caught somewhere between old habits and new promises. "Good night, Mr. Johnson," he says, all fake formality, that cocky little smile twitching at the corners of his mouth like he knows exactly how wrecked I am.

"Good night, Mr. Honeyworth," I answer, matching his tone with a dryness I don't feel.

He leaves, and the second the door clicks shut behind him, I sit down hard in my chair, breathing like I've just run a marathon uphill.

What the fuck have I done? Crossed lines I swore I never would. Risked my business, my reputation, my sanity—for a temptation I told myself I could handle. Spoiler alert: I can't.

I scrub a hand over my face, forcing myself to gather my things, move through the familiar motions of closing down the office. But the whole time, all I can see is Hank. Laid out beneath me, raw and panting, looking at me like I'm something worth burning for. Looking at my knot like he wants to worship it instead of fear it.

It's reckless. It's dangerous. It's everything I haven't let myself feel in

Saturday hits like a punch straight to the chest. Anticipation, nerves, excitement—all tangled into one messy, vibrating knot in my stomach.

Our first real date. Away from the fluorescent lights and sterile hallways of Sterling's Pride. Away from the smell of disinfectant and professionalism and denial.

I change clothes three times. First outfit—too formal, like I'm interviewing for CEO of "Please Fuck Me, Sir Industries." Second—too casual, like I'm meeting a friend to watch football and definitely not fantasizing about being split open by my boss's knot. Finally, I land on dark jeans and the forest green button-down Helena once said made my eyes look "less like a kicked puppy."

I check the clock for the fifth time. Still forty minutes to go. I'm going to combust. Full self-immolation. Headlines tomorrow: "Local Intern Dies of Horny Anticipation."

Work this week has been... brutal. Sterling's been a damn wall—professional, composed, distant like I hadn't had his massive fingers stretching me open two days ago. No lingering looks. No accidental brushes of his hand against mine. No fucking mercy.

But I catch him slipping. The way his nostrils flare when I walk by too close. The tiny, sharp inhalations when I hand him documents. The way his entire body subtly tenses like he's trying not to pin me against the nearest flat surface and make a goddamn example out of me.

And I know. Tonight isn't going to be professional. It's going to be inevitable.

When I pull into his driveway, my stomach does an Olympic-level somersault. Sterling's house is nothing like I expected. Tucked back behind thick trees, modest, built sturdy like everything else about him. The door swings open before I can knock a second time. Sterling fills the frame like some dark, terrible promise—deep blue shirt clinging to his chest, sleeves rolled just enough to expose strong forearms I can't stop staring at.

"Hank," he says, voice low, measured. "Right on time."

"Your directions were perfect," I manage, stepping inside, already half-drunk on the smell of him. Cedar, leather, something wilder underneath. The scent that ruins me.

The door clicks shut behind me, sealing me in with a seven-foot-tall walking fantasy and a growing list of extremely bad decisions.

There's this weird hesitation between us—do we shake hands? Hug? Dry-hump against the wall? Sterling solves it by keeping an almost painful amount of distance, leading me to the living room where he gestures at a human-sized chair like he's seating a guest at a diplomatic summit instead of his intern turned not-so-secret fantasy.

"Would you like a drink before dinner?" Formal. Controlled. Like he didn't practically knot me two nights ago.

I blink at him. "Sterling," I say, not sitting, not moving, heart pounding hard enough to echo in my ears, "are we seriously going to pretend this isn't monumentally fucking weird?"

His amber eyes widen a fraction. And then—then—a slow, reluctant smile curves his

mouth. Real. Honest. Devastating.

"Thank you," he rumbles, voice dipping into that low register that fries my brain. "I was attempting... normalcy. Clearly, I need practice."

"You think?" I grin, the tension cracking open between us. And God, when he laughs, it's low and rough and almost shy. Like it surprises him too.

"Okay," I say, stepping closer, fueled by adrenaline and a healthy dose of 'fuck it.'
"Let's start over."

I stick out my hand, deadpan. "Hi. I'm Hank. I work for you. You sucked me off while you fucked a piece of medical-grade sex furniture. And now we're on a date."

Sterling stares at me for one beat. Two. Then full-body laughter shakes him—deep, rumbling, fucking beautiful. He runs a hand over his mouth like he's trying to hide it, but it's no use.

"Hello, Hank," he says when he recovers, voice warm enough to melt steel. "I'm Sterling. I'm your boss. I caught you spying on me like a goddamn pervert. And instead of firing you, I made you come so hard you forgot your own name. I'm surprisingly well, thank you for asking."

I burst out laughing—the tension shattering between us like a cracked window finally giving way. The air feels lighter. Charged, still—but lighter.

Sterling crosses the room, hands me a glass of wine, and—on purpose this time—lets his fingers brush mine. A slow, deliberate touch that sends a lightning strike of heat straight through my body.

Sterling's voice is low and sure as he says, "I've prepared dinner." He leads the way

into a dining room that, like the rest of the house, seems built to contain him—and somehow still feel warm instead of intimidating. The table is already set, one end with place settings designed for his size, the other fitted perfectly for someone human. For me.

"Nothing fancy," he adds, a little stiff, like he's not used to hosting guests he's also desperate to fuck, "but I find cooking therapeutic."

I blink at him. "You cook?"

He throws me a dry look over his shoulder. "What, did you imagine I graze in fields?"

Heat scorches up my neck so fast it feels like someone dumped boiling water down my collar. "No! I just... you seem so busy. I figured you'd have a private chef or... you know, some fancy meal subscription that sends grass-fed everything to your door."

Sterling's mouth twitches—just barely—but it feels like a private victory. "I enjoy the process," he says, matter-of-fact, placing plates in front of us. "The control. The transformation. Taking something raw and making it into something better."

The words thud low in my chest, way too close to what I've been fantasizing about since the first second I met him.

The meal is... fucking incredible. Perfectly seared chicken, roasted vegetables drizzled with what I can only describe as sex in oil form, and bread so crusty and warm I want to cry. The conversation flows easier than it has all week. Maybe it's the wine. Maybe it's the privacy. Maybe it's the fact that he's not pretending not to look at my mouth anymore.

I find out he double-majored in Agricultural Science and Kinetics (minotaur rugby

team captain, because of course he was), that he almost bought a vineyard before deciding on opening Sterling's Pride. He finds out I grew up on a traditional farm in Iowa, perpetually disappointing every male relative I have by preferring books to beer and poetry to tractors.

"Is that why you applied for the internship?" Sterling asks, setting down two heavy mugs of coffee and sliding a plate of poached pears toward me. "To get away from all that?"

"Partly," I say, twirling my spoon, aware of his eyes following every move. "I wanted something different. But I'm not here just to escape. I care about the work. About building something that's... sustainable. Ethical. Connected to the land, but not tied down by it the way my family always was."

His gaze softens, something raw and real flashing in his amber eyes. "Most applicants," he says quietly, "are either... titillated by the nature of our work or detached enough to pretend it doesn't affect them. Your honesty is..." He trails off, and for the first time, Sterling Johnson—the most controlled man I've ever met—seems almost shy. "It's refreshing," he finishes, voice rougher than before.

By the time we finish dinner, the air between us is thick enough to bite through. Every accidental brush of fingers feels like a fucking live wire. Every glance lasts a second too long. When Sterling stands, pushing back his massive chair, the tension finally snaps.

"Would you like to see the rest of the house?" he asks, voice pitched low, like he's offering me something way dirtier than a tour.

"Yeah," I say, the word catching rough in my throat.

He leads me through a wide hallway lined with photos—family, friends, a few

landscapes—but I barely register any of it because he's there in front of me, broad back stretching the seams of his shirt, the clean line of his neck begging to be kissed. And then he opens a door at the end of the hall, revealing the bedroom. Huge bed. Heavy wood frame. Crisp dark sheets that look criminally inviting.

My mouth goes dry. The bed is built for someone his size—and suddenly, all I can imagine is what it would look like with me in it. Small. Caged in. Taken apart.

Sterling catches the look on my face, and for a second—just a second—his jaw tightens, his hands flexing at his sides like he's fighting some violent instinct. "Not tonight," he says roughly. "When I said we would take this slow, I meant it."

Relief and disappointment hit me like twin punches. I nod, swallowing thickly. "Then why show me the bedroom?" I ask, voice embarrassingly wrecked.

He steps closer, so close I can feel the heat radiating off his skin, and says, in a voice that curls around my spine like smoke: "Context."

I blink. "Context?"

Sterling leans down, breath whispering against the shell of my ear.

"I want you to understand what you're working toward. What preparation will eventually make possible."

Jesus fucking Christ. I'm about to melt into a puddle right here on the floor.

"And tonight?" I rasp, barely able to get the words out. "What happens tonight?"

Sterling straightens slowly, towering over me, smug and in absolute fucking control. He glances at his watch like we're not standing six inches apart with enough sexual

tension to power the East Coast.

"Tonight," he says, voice pure sin, "we go back to the facility."

"What?" I blink, thrown totally off balance. "Why?"

"Because," Sterling says, stepping back toward the door, giving me just enough space to chase him, "there's something very specific I want to do to you."

He pauses—gives me a look that is nothing short of feral—and adds, "And I need equipment you're already... familiar with."

* * *

The warm suction wraps around my cock, pulling and stroking with maddening slowness, just enough stimulation to keep me panting without giving me even a whisper of relief. Behind me, Sterling's gloved fingers spread my ass wider, deliberate, inspecting, teasing.

"Perfect," he murmurs, almost like he's talking to himself. His bare palm settles low on my spine, heavy, claiming.

And then he presses in.

One slick finger first, slow and unrelenting, breaching me with steady pressure that has me gasping into the padded mount. It's not enough to hurt—just enough to make my entire body clench around him, desperate for more, desperate for anything.

"You're so damn tight," Sterling growls, his voice vibrating down my spine. "I'm going to have to take my time breaking you open."

Another finger joins the first, the stretch sharper now. My cock jerks helplessly against the suction, leaking, aching for permission to let go that doesn't come.

"You like this," he says, twisting his fingers inside me. "Being stretched slow, used slow. You want to come so bad you can't think straight."

I make a broken, pleading sound in the back of my throat, hips twitching despite myself.

Sterling presses harder on my lower back, pinning me down. "Don't you dare," he bites out. "Not until I say."

I whimper, squeezing my eyes shut, every muscle straining to obey even as the pleasure threatens to wreck me.

Sterling's fingers pump slow and deep, scissoring inside me, rubbing over a spot that makes me see white behind my eyelids.

"This is just the start," he mutters, voice wrecked and filthy. "You think this is hard, Hank? Wait until I've got you open enough for more. Wait until you're begging me for it."

The warm suction on my cock increases just slightly, enough to make my whole body light up, desperate and frantic.

"Please," I gasp, not even sure what I'm begging for anymore. Relief? Permission? More?

Sterling answers by withdrawing his fingers slowly, leaving me gasping at the sudden emptiness—and then replacing them with something thicker, cooler, pressing against my entrance.

A vibrator. Bigger than his fingers. Smaller than him. Slick and ruthless. He pushes it in inch by inch, stretching me wider, making my toes curl against the mount.

"Good," he growls, easing it deeper. "Taking it like you're meant for this."

I can't help the desperate moan that rips from me. The vibration, the unbearable pleasure of being filled and restrained all at once—it's overwhelming. I can feel the suction trying to milk my cock, my orgasm crouching just out of reach, poised to explode if I so much as think about it too hard.

Sterling leans over me, his breath hot against my ear. "You don't come until I decide you've earned it," he rasps. "You want to come? You earn it with obedience. With patience. With this sweet little hole stretched open for me."

I nod frantically, the toy nudging deeper, the suction building.

He growls low and dark. "Good boy."

My whole body shudders at the praise, at the weight of his control pressing down on me. His lubricated finger teases around my rim, where I'm stretched around the vibrator, circling slow, patient, maddening. Not breaching. Not giving. Just hovering there, keeping me strung so tight I feel like I'm vibrating apart.

And then, just when I'm about to sob from the tension, he pushes inside.

It's not rough—not yet—but it's relentless, the slow invasion making my entire body tense and clench around him. The familiar burn of being stretched blooms low and deep, sharp enough to make my vision blur for a second.

Sterling works me methodically, the way a craftsman molds clay—careful, unhurried, devastating. All while the mount's gentle suction strokes my cock, coaxing, teasing,

denying—the perfect cruel rhythm that keeps me trembling at the edge without ever tipping over.

Every time I get close—so close I can taste it—he pulls back. Withdraws completely, leaving me hollow and desperate, leaking onto the padded surface, chest heaving.

"Sterling, please," I choke out eventually, my voice hoarse, body wrecked with need. "I can't—please?—"

"What you need," he says, voice so low it scrapes across my skin, "and what you want... are not the same fucking thing."

I swear I can feel him smirking behind me. The scent of his arousal floods the room—heavy, musky, sweet—and it punches straight into my bloodstream, making me even dizzy, even harder. From the cabinet, he retrieves something slick and dark—a plug, wide at the base, brutally tapered. The sight alone nearly makes me lose control.

"Relax for me," Sterling murmurs, slicking it with lube before pressing the blunt tip against my entrance. His other hand strokes a slow line down my back, steadying, claiming.

The pressure builds, steady and merciless, until I feel my body start to give. There's a burning stretch, a gasp I can't hold back—and then the widest part slips inside, making me cry out, hips bucking helplessly against the mount.

I clamp down around the narrower neck instinctively, locking the plug deep inside. The fullness is obscene, overwhelming, almost too much—and then he adjusts the angle, and the damn thing grinds against my prostate.

White-hot pleasure explodes through me, a full-body shudder I can't control.

"Good boy," Sterling rumbles, his voice pure fucking sin. "That's it. Breathe through it."

"F-full," I stammer, lost.

He chuckles, dark and low. "That plug's less than half the size of my knot. Just imagine how much more you'll have to stretch."

The thought makes me whimper—half terror, half desperate, aching need.

Sterling steps back, and the mount shuts down with a soft hiss. I whimper at the loss, twisting to look at him.

And freeze.

He's undressing slowly, peeling the fabric away from his body one deliberate motion at a time, like he has all the time in the world to wreck me. His chest, broad and powerful, furred and heaving. His arms, thick and veined. His cock—already flushed dark, hanging heavy between his massive thighs.

Every inch of him says danger. Every inch of me wants to be wrecked by it.

He crosses the room in three strides and lifts me clean off the mount like I'm weightless. The plug shifts deep inside me with the movement, and I moan, clutching at his forearms instinctively.

"On your back," he orders, voice gravel-rough. He sets me back onto the mount, adjusting it with quick, efficient movements until I'm spread open, bare, completely at his mercy.

"Legs wide, Hank," he murmurs, gripping my thighs in his massive hands and

pushing them open even further. "Let me see all of you."

I obey, helpless under his gaze.

He positions himself at the opening, his cock feeding into the collection mechanism—but his eyes stay locked on me, hot and hungry.

And then, without warning, Sterling lowers his head between my legs.

The first swipe of his tongue over my aching cock tears a sound from me that doesn't even sound human—raw, broken, desperate.

I never expected this. Never imagined he'd taste me while pleasuring himself. That he'd use the mount for his own relief while wrecking me with nothing but his mouth.

The suction starts up again, low and persistent, just as Sterling seals his lips around the head of my cock and sucks. My entire body bows off the mount with a shout, the plug pressing even deeper inside me.

"Holy—Sterling—" I gasp, barely coherent, the sensations crashing over me too fast, too hard.

He hums around my cock, the vibration making me shake, gripping my thighs tighter as if to say, Stay open. Stay mine. And somewhere in the fog of heat and want, I realize he's not just stretching my body tonight. He's breaking me apart to remake me as his. Piece by desperate, trembling piece.

The dual assault of his mouth and the relentless stretch inside me short-circuits my brain. Sterling sets a brutal rhythm—thrusting deep into the mount, hips rocking steadily—while his mouth works me over with obscene skill, tongue flicking, teasing, sucking me so deep my eyes roll back.

Every thrust jostles the plug, grinding it against my prostate like a live wire buried deep inside me, sending jolts of raw, electric pleasure through my entire body. It's too much. It's not enough. I'm trapped somewhere between heaven and hell, writhing, panting, held wide open by his massive hands like he owns me.

And he does. God, he does.

I manage to lift my head enough to see him between my legs—Sterling's broad, muscled body working like a machine, his hips snapping forward, the thick column of his cock swelling visibly, the base thickening, knot forming right before my eyes.

"Sterling," I gasp, fingers scrabbling at the mount's surface like I might fly apart without something to hold onto. "I can't—I'm gonna?—"

He pulls back just enough to growl against the flushed, leaking head of my cock, voice low and ruined, "Not yet." The words vibrate through me, making my entire body tighten, clench, ache.

He takes me deeper again, mouth sealing tight around me, and that's it—that's it. I'm gone, losing the fragile grip I have left.

"I—I can't—Sterling—please?—!"

His mouth lifts barely an inch, breath hot against my cock. "Now," he orders, rough and final.

The command detonates something inside me. I come with a shout, my entire body locking up as pleasure tears through me—raw, overwhelming, like it's been bottled up for weeks and finally, finally, shatters free.

Sterling doesn't stop. He swallows me, every thick pulse, one hand keeping my thighs

spread, the other squeezing my balls with every shuddering aftershock.

I'm still reeling when he groans—low and deep and primal—and drives into the mount one last time. His whole massive body goes rigid, the knot at the base of his cock swelling impossibly larger, locking him into the machine as he comes with brutal force.

The sight of it—of him—wrecked because of me—burns itself into my memory, searing and permanent.

For long, breathless moments, we don't move. The only sounds are our harsh breathing, the soft whir of the cooling system, the faint suction of the mount easing off as the mechanisms begin to shut down.

Sterling is the first to move. He gently, carefully, eases the plug from my body with a low, approving sound when I whimper at the loss.

"You took it better than I expected," he murmurs, voice rough with afterglow.

Before I can answer, he scoops me up—strong arms cradling me against his chest like I'm something precious instead of something he just absolutely wrecked—and carries me across the room to a cushioned bench.

Still cradling me with one hand, he pulls a warm towel from a cabinet and begins to clean me with slow, deliberate care. Every pass of the towel is gentle, reverent, like he's memorizing every inch of me he touches.

It guts me, somehow, the tenderness that follows the brutality.

"You did good," Sterling murmurs against my temple, his lips brushing over my sweat-soaked hair in a kiss so soft I almost miss it.

"This... this was just the beginning, wasn't it?" I manage, my voice wrecked, my body boneless against him.

Sterling pulls back just enough to look down at me, his amber eyes molten and steady. "Yeah," he says, voice thick with something that sounds dangerously close to promise. "Just the beginning."

The next two weeks settle into a rhythm we pretend is normal—daytime restraint, nighttime ruin. During business hours, Sterling barely looks at me. Formal nods. Measured conversation. If you didn't know better, you'd think we were just a boss and his intern, not two people who spent nights stripping each other down to skin and sound. But after the last door locks and the security lights hum to life, the whole world tilts.

We've fallen into a pattern—three nights a week, meeting after hours at the facility. Sterling had framed it as practical: "My home isn't equipped with the specialized tools your preparation requires. Here, we have privacy. Precision." I'd nodded, like that was the part I was worried about—the tools. The privacy. Not the way he watched me. Not the way he touched me.

Tonight is our sixth meeting. I should be used to it by now—the careful prep, the methodical escalation, the way Sterling scrubs down the room until it smells like clinical soap and something underneath it, something hot and male and dangerous.

"You're progressing well," Sterling says, his voice that perfect mix of professional and fucked-up hungry as he presses against the plug I've been wearing for the past hour. We're in Room 7 tonight. Different setup. More restraints bolted to the walls. More surfaces designed for... endurance. Exploration.

"The body," he says, tugging the plug free with obscene slowness, "has remarkable capacity for adaptation when approached methodically." If his voice were any cooler, I might believe him. But the heat burning behind his amber eyes gives him away.

Barely leashed. Barely breathing.

He believes in control. I'm starting to hate it.

"I think I'm ready for something larger," I rasp, shameless, bending over and spreading my ass cheeks like I'm presenting myself for inspection—because I am.

Sterling's nostrils flare. His thick fingers twitch against the discarded plug. For one charged second, I swear he might lose it, just take—but then his mouth tightens into a firm line.

"Patience," he grits out, even as his own body betrays him. "Rushing leads to setbacks."

I know better than to argue. Sterling has this whole roadmap in his head—every step calculated, every session building in intensity. But still. Still, I burn for it.

"Lie down," he orders, his voice rougher now, slipping a little from clinical toward desperate. He helps me onto the padded bench, shifting my legs apart until I'm wide open, heart hammering in my throat.

Sterling starts slow—kissing me like a man starved, massive hands tracing every inch of my chest, teasing my nipples until they're tight and aching. I clutch fistfuls of his thick, soft fur, tugging the way I know makes him rumble deep in his chest, a sound that vibrates through my bones.

"I've prepared something different for tonight," he growls against my neck, teeth grazing my skin just enough to sting, just enough to make my cock twitch helplessly.

He leads me toward the modified collection mount—a monster of a machine fitted with new attachments and panels I don't recognize. "On your back. Legs spread."

I obey, trembling with anticipation.

Sterling moves with a predator's focus, activating something behind me. A low hum starts beneath my spine, a thrum that vibrates through the padded surface.

"This model has massage capabilities," he explains, casual as if my heart isn't about to jackhammer out of my chest. "Originally for rehabilitating minotaurs with lumbar injuries. But adaptable for more... stimulating purposes."

The vibration deepens, buzzing up through my back and hips, loosening everything. Making me soft and open in ways I didn't know were possible.

Sterling slicks his fingers and starts prepping me again—each touch more sure, more demanding. The intrusion burns and soothes at the same time, my body pulsing around the slow stretch.

"Relax," he murmurs. "Let it happen. Let me happen."

I try. God, I try. The combination of the vibrations and Sterling's relentless patience works me open inch by devastating inch, until he slides the larger plug against me. It's thicker. Heavier. A slow, splitting stretch that knocks the air right out of me. I clutch the sides of the mount, knuckles white, thighs trembling.

"Breathe through it," he coaches, low and urgent. "You're doing so well. Your body wants this."

I gasp as the widest part finally slips inside, the fullness so obscene, so overwhelming, I nearly sob from it. Sterling shifts the angle, and suddenly the plug grinds against my prostate.

My entire world detonates.

I arch off the mount, helpless. Stranded between pain and pleasure so sharp it feels like dying.

"Too much?" he asks, voice strained.

I shake my head frantically, panting, lost to the intensity. "No. Please—don't stop."

Sterling's control snaps, just a little. His hands fist against the edge of the bench like he's physically restraining himself. The outline of his cock is straining brutally against his pants, almost painful-looking. Still, he holds back. Still, he makes me wait.

And I'm starting to realize—maybe this was never about preparation. Maybe this is Sterling's form of worship. Methodical. Merciless. A slow, agonizing devotion to tearing me apart in the most beautiful way possible.

The combination of the plug's relentless fullness and the mount's steady, insidious vibrations has me fully hard and leaking in minutes. I can't stop twitching, gasping, aching for something more. Sterling watches, breathing rough, nostrils flaring, his fists clenched like he's holding himself together with pure determination and prayer. He hasn't even stripped yet. He's just standing there, towering over me, watching me come apart like it's his fucking job.

"I want to taste you," I blurt, the need ripping out of me before I can think to stop it. "Please, Sterling. Let me?—"

"That's not part of tonight's progression," he bites out, voice ragged, strained like he's choking on his own restraint.

"Please," I beg, desperate, ruthless. I know him now—I know his weakness. Directness. Want. "I've been thinking about it constantly. Imagining how you'd feel in

my mouth. How you'd taste."

Sterling's pupils blow wide, swallowing up the amber. His breathing goes wrecked. "Hank?—"

Before he can summon another flimsy objection, I slide off the mount, the plug pressing hard against my prostate and stealing a moan from my throat as I drop to my knees in front of him. The pressure is maddening. Electric. Every nerve ending strung out and howling.

"This is not—" Sterling grits out, but his words die when my hand closes over the massive bulge straining his pants. A brutal, involuntary growl tears from his chest, and fuck, it's the hottest sound I've ever heard in my life.

"Let me," I whisper, looking up at him, already working his belt loose with trembling fingers. "I need this."

Something shatters behind his eyes. With a guttural sound of surrender, Sterling nods—tiny, reluctant—and I tear his zipper down like a starving man. His cock springs free, thick and heavy, the base already swelling into the start of a knot. My mouth waters at the sight of him—far bigger than any human, thick-veined and flushed dark.

I wrap my hand around him first, testing the heat, the impossible silkiness stretched over steel. Sterling's thighs tense hard beneath my touch, muscles bunching like he's one breath away from grabbing me and wrecking me.

When I lean forward and flick my tongue over the leaking tip, he hisses a sound between pain and ecstasy.

The taste is sharp. Salty. Mine. It punches straight to my cock.

I work my mouth down his length, taking as much as I can, stroking the rest. He's too big to take all at once, but I give him everything I've got—hollowing my cheeks, swallowing around the head.

Above me, Sterling's control fractures. His big hands hover at his sides, shaking like he's fighting the urge to grab my head and fuck deeper.

One more look up at him—one more desperate, filthy whimper from my throat—and he loses it.

"Enough," he snarls, voice breaking, yanking me up off my knees like I weigh nothing. Before I can blink, he spins me around and shoves me against the nearest wall. Hard enough that the impact rattles my bones, punches the air from my lungs.

His massive body cages mine, heat rolling off him in waves. His breath is a ragged growl against my ear.

"You think you know what you want? What I want?" His hand clamps around the back of my neck, pinning me. I gasp, arching into him without meaning to. Needing him like fucking oxygen. "I've been holding back for weeks. Treating you like something breakable."

"Sterling—" I choke out, half-pleading, half-lost.

"Shut up," he snaps, and it's not cold—it's raw. Feral. It's the hottest fucking thing I've ever heard.

"Tonight, you do exactly what I say." He releases me suddenly, stepping back, ripping his shirt off and shoving his pants down with savage, impatient movements.

Sterling, fully naked in the low light, is obscene. A wall of muscle and thick fur and

pulsing need.

"Get the lube," he orders, voice dropping into something lethal. "Now."

I stumble to obey, dizzy from the headrush of want.

"You want to know what I really want?" he growls, stalking to the mount, planting his hands wide on the frame but not entering it yet. His body shudders, impatient, wild.

"I want you inside me while I fuck this mount. I want to feel you losing your mind, trying to keep up." He looks over his shoulder at me, mouth twisted in something dark and wicked. "I'm going to use your cock like a fucking toy, intern. Think you can handle that?"

The words detonate inside me, white-hot. My cock jerks against my stomach, leaking helplessly.

"But—are you sure?" I gasp, lube bottle clattering from my hand.

Sterling laughs, low and sharp and merciless. "Little human worried about hurting me?" he mocks, baring sharp teeth in a feral grin. "Trust me, Hank. You couldn't hurt me if you tried."

He spreads his legs wider, lowering his massive hips to a more accessible height. His hole is right there—taut, dark, perfect.

"Two fingers. Lots of lube," he snarls. "And don't waste my fucking time being gentle."

The degradation hits me like a drug. Shame. Lust. Worship. All of it.

I slick my fingers until they're dripping and press against his entrance harder than I would have dared if he hadn't told me not to be gentle. He grunts, low and approving, grinding back against the pressure. Sterling doesn't want careful. He wants wrecked. And I'm going to give it to him.

"That's it," he growls, voice rough with satisfaction as my fingers breach him easily, heat clenching around me like a fist. "Fuck, that's it. Been thinking about this all week. Imagining your cock inside me while I wreck this mount."

The confession hits me like a gut punch. Sterling—so controlled, so clinical—had been secretly wanting this. Needing it. A groan rips out of me. I push a third finger in without waiting for permission, and the low, guttural sound Sterling makes is nothing short of filthy.

"You've been holding out on me," I manage, voice wrecked with want. "All that careful progression bullshit?—"

"For you," Sterling snaps, shoving back against my hand like he can't get enough. "Your fragile little human body needs slow prep. Me?" His breath hitches into a half-growl. "I can take whatever I fucking want."

Before I can answer, he reaches back, grabs my wrist, and jerks it toward his body with a sound between a moan and a hiss as my knuckles slip past the tight rim of his hole and disappear inside his ass. I nearly come right then, watching his sphincter pulse around my wrist, like his body has its own language for more.

"Enough," he snarls, pulling my hand out of his ass. "Get your cock in me. Now."

I'm shaking with the force of it—the command, the hunger—but I line myself up without hesitation, both hands clamping onto his thick hips, absurdly small against him. I push forward, the blunt head of my cock breaching his heat—and we both

moan like we've been starved for this.

"Fuck," Sterling growls, reaching back blindly to grab my thigh and drag me deeper, forcing me in until I'm fully seated inside him. "Harder," he snarls, hips grinding. "I'm not a delicate fucking flower."

Something inside me snaps. I drive into him with everything I have, pounding up into the impossible heat of him, gasping at how he takes me—like he was made for it. Sterling slams his hand down on the mount's controls, and the machine shudders to life, vibrating, pulling at him, matching the brutal rhythm we're setting.

Sterling braces himself fully against the mount now, his massive body moving like a force of nature—thrusting forward into the machine, dragging back and spearing himself onto me. Over and over. Harder. Rougher. A brutal, endless rhythm.

"That's it," he grits out, sweat slicking his fur, his muscles flexing under my hands. "Use me. Make yourself fucking useful for once."

The degradation burns through me—shame and lust and exhilaration braided into something filthy and perfect. I give up trying to control it. I grab his hips harder, fingers digging into thick muscle, chasing the rhythm he sets.

"Touch my knot," Sterling orders, voice a harsh rasp. "Feel it."

I fumble a hand around his hip, down to where his cock is buried inside the mount. My fingers brush the thick base—and holy fuck. It's already swelling, heavy and throbbing against my palm.

"Is this what you wanted?" Sterling growls, head dropping low, breath coming in broken pants. "Have you been jerking yourself off to the thought of my knot splitting you open? Stretching you until you can't think straight?"

"Yes," I gasp, so far gone in the heat of it I can't even pretend otherwise.

Sterling laughs, a wrecked, savage sound that doesn't carry an ounce of mercy. "Such a hungry little slut," he taunts, hips snapping back into me with brutal force. "Couldn't stop staring. Couldn't fucking breathe without thinking about getting wrecked on my cock."

His hand snakes back again, fisting in my hair, dragging me forward until my face is smashed against the sweaty, heaving expanse of his back. His scent is everywhere—salt and heat and pure male.

"Bite me," he snarls, voice vibrating against my teeth. "Mark me."

I don't even hesitate. I sink my teeth into his back, hard enough to leave a mark, hard enough to taste salt and flesh. Sterling roars—a full-bodied, primal sound—and his entire body jerks under me, his rhythm collapsing into something rough and frantic and unstoppable.

"Fuck yes," he groans. "Harder. Both. Everything. Give it to me."

And I do. I drive into him with every ounce of strength I have left, every inch of my body burning, every nerve ending on fire. Sterling's knot swells larger, tighter, as his body clamps down around my cock, and I know—I know—he's right there on the edge of losing it.

I clamp my teeth into thick muscle of his shoulder, one hand groping down to grab the fully swollen knot locked in the mount. It's huge. Obscene. And the way it throbs under my fingers—God, it's too much.

Physically, I'm the one inside him. But that's a lie we're both telling ourselves. Sterling controls everything—pace, power, pleasure. He's using me the way he uses

the mount—ruthless, selfish, unstoppable—and I love it so much it feels like I'm dying from it.

"I'm close," I gasp, teeth dragging free of his skin, mouth still flooded with the taste of him. Sweat. Salt. Iron.

"You don't come until I say," Sterling growls, voice a wrecked snarl, hand locking around my hip with bruising force. His thrusts get messy, frantic, his massive body trembling under me. His knot bulges impossibly thick against the mount, locking him in place. Every muscle in his back bunches and quivers under my chest.

"Fill me with your cum," he demands, raw and breaking, "I want to feel your pathetic little load hot and wet inside me while I empty myself into this fucking machine. NOW."

The command shatters me. I drive into him one last desperate time, crying out as my orgasm explodes through me—white-hot, devastating, the kind that leaves you hollowed out and wrecked inside your own skin.

Sterling roars—a wild, primal sound that shakes the walls—and his whole body jerks, shudders, holds, pinned between me and the machine as he comes, thick and endless, draining himself into the mount even as I spill into him.

For a long, dizzy moment, we stay locked like that—joined, shaking, breathing like we just survived a war. I don't even know where my body ends and his begins.

Eventually, Sterling's knot deflates enough for him to pull free from the mount with a wet, obscene sound. He turns immediately—huge arms wrapping around me—and hauls me against his chest with a roughness that feels almost desperate.

"You did good," he mutters, voice hoarse, lips brushing the sweat-damp hair at my

temple. His hand—still massive, still calloused—smooths my hair where he'd grabbed it before. His touch is clumsy, almost uncertain, but gentle. It punches harder than anything else tonight.

I look up at him, dazed, searching his face for the cold regret I half-expect.

But there's nothing cold there. Just satisfaction. And something hotter. Warmer. Softer.

"That wasn't in the progression plan," I rasp, still trying to get enough air into my lungs.

"Fuck the plan," Sterling growls, low and savage. "Sometimes I get tired of being so goddamn responsible all the time."

My legs finally give out, and Sterling catches me with ease, carrying me over to the cushioned bench like I'm weightless. He sets me down carefully, like I'm breakable again—even after he just broke me wide open. I watch through heavy-lidded eyes as he fetches a clean cloth, wiping me down first, then himself, his hands trembling just slightly with leftover adrenaline. It feels... intimate. Too much. Too good.

He sinks down beside me, exhaling like the last of his rage has burned out of him.

"You're frustrated with my restraint," he says finally, voice softer now. Clinical. But the edge of hunger is still there, simmering under the surface.

"Sometimes," I admit, raw honesty scraping up my throat. "I get it. I do. But—" I swallow hard. "I want more. I want to taste your cum as it slides down my throat. I want to feel you. Not just between my thighs. Inside."

The words hang between us, vulnerable and aching and messy.

Sterling studies me for a long moment, the golden ring of his eyes glowing low in the dim light. There's no anger there. No mockery.

Only heat. Only want.

"Your eagerness," he says, slow and measured, "is both flattering... and concerning."

He brushes his thumb over my cheekbone, tracing it like he's memorizing me.

"This isn't a race, Hank," he murmurs. "Every step has to be careful. Has to be right."

"I know," I whisper. "Knowing doesn't make it easier."

Sterling pulls me against his chest again, cradling me in the massive, indestructible shelter of his body. His heartbeat pounds against my ear—strong and steady and grounding.

"The wanting," he says, voice roughened by more than just exhaustion, "is mutual. Don't ever doubt that."

The admission soothes something restless inside me—some wild, clawing thing that's been pacing my ribs for weeks. For now, this slow, careful exploration will have to be enough. Even as my body aches for more. Even as my mind spins out reckless, fevered dreams of everything—of being split apart and filled. Of being marked and claimed so thoroughly that there's no space left inside me that isn't his.

The tension's been building for days, coiling tighter and tighter inside me like a spring about to snap. Sterling's meticulous progression plan—once something that reassured me, made me feel safe—now feels like some slow, exquisite form of torture. Especially after that night in the collection room, when he finally let go, when I saw what he looks like when he's not busy being careful.

And now he expects me to go back to steps? To schedules? I can't. I won't.

When I show up at his house for our weekly dinner, the air between us feels charged, electric. Sterling's gone all out—perfectly cooked salmon, roasted vegetables, a bottle of wine breathing on the table like we're starring in some domestic fantasy.

And for a while, I pretend. We talk about work. Shared interests. His newest project. My latest hobbies. But underneath it all, resentment simmers, a slow boil I can't tamp down. When Sterling leans back in his chair, fork abandoned, and starts explaining the "next phase" of his precious intimacy schedule, the dam inside me finally breaks.

"I can't do this anymore," I snap, setting down my wineglass harder than I mean to, the sharp clink echoing too loud in the quiet room.

Sterling's golden eyes narrow, just slightly. "The progression is necessary for your safety," he says, even, measured, like he can logic away the growing wildfire inside me.

"Is it?" I shoot back, voice rising. "Or is it just another excuse for you to stay in

control?"

Something flickers in his expression—fast, fleeting—but I see it. A hit.

"You had no problem losing control when I was inside you," I say, standing now because sitting feels impossible, like my skin's too tight. "No concern for progression then."

His nostrils flare—his only tell—but he doesn't move, doesn't argue. "That was different," he says, voice low.

"How?" I demand. "Because you decided when and how it was okay? Because you're the one who gets to set all the rules?"

I pace, too wired, too raw to stay still. "I'm not some fragile fucking thing that's going to break if you touch me wrong. I've been preparing. Researching. Training my body, Sterling. I'm ready for more. I want more."

Sterling rises slowly, and it's like watching a mountain unfold itself—intimidating in ways he probably doesn't even mean to be. But there's no aggression in it. Only weight. History. Fear.

"You think research," he says tightly, "and a few late-night practice sessions qualify you to make that call?"

His voice cracks at the edges, and suddenly I see it: He's not angry. He's terrified. "You have no idea what you're asking for," he finishes, voice almost a whisper.

"Then tell me," I say, stepping closer, heart pounding so hard it hurts. "Stop being cryptic. Stop treating me like a fucking patient. Talk to me like someone you want. Like someone you trust."

For a second, he just stares at me. And then his face hardens, like he's bracing for impact.

"You want honesty?" he asks, and his voice is a dangerous, broken thing now. "Fine."

He exhales, shoulders sagging, looking suddenly—not like a powerful minotaur who could wreck me without trying—but like a man carrying something so heavy it's crushed him down to the bone.

"The last human I was with ended up in the hospital," he says, flat and unflinching. "Because we rushed. Because he said he was ready. Because I believed him."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut.

"Tearing," he says quietly, staring somewhere over my shoulder. "Internal injuries. Emergency surgery." A pause. A breath. "He survived." Another pause, longer. "But we never spoke again."

Silence drops between us, thick and suffocating. I can barely breathe.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, voice wrecked. "Sterling, I—I didn't realize it was that bad."

"I didn't tell you," he says, finally turning toward me, the full force of his guilt and shame laid bare. "I should have." He rakes a massive hand through his hair, frustration rolling off him in waves. "I should've explained. Instead of just... imposing rules."

"Then tell me now," I say, gentler, reaching for him, my hand so small against his broad chest. "All of it."

For a moment, he hesitates—like he's still deciding if he deserves to be forgiven.

Then, slowly, heavily, he lets me guide him to the couch. He sits, elbows braced on his knees, head bowed. And for the first time since we met, I see him completely. Not the boss. Not the minotaur. Just a man—frightened and furious with himself for needing someone he could hurt.

I sit down beside him, our knees brushing. I don't say anything. I don't push.

I just wait.

And slowly—slowly—he begins to talk.

His voice is low and rough, like dragging barbed wire from his throat. He tells me about the researcher three years ago—the slow burn of attraction, the way caution frayed into recklessness, the final, awful moment when it all went wrong.

"When my knot expanded too quickly," he says, staring down at our hands, "he tore inside. Badly. He needed surgery. Weeks of recovery."

I squeeze his fingers, trying to anchor him—to tell him I'm still here, still listening.

"But the worst part..." Sterling's voice tightens, his massive shoulders hunching inward, "was the way he looked at me afterward. Like I was a monster. Like I'd meant to hurt him."

"You're not a monster," I say, fierce and certain, even as my voice wobbles. "You're a different species. You have different needs. That doesn't make you dangerous."

His amber eyes lift to mine—and Jesus, the wreckage there nearly undoes me.

"Doesn't it?" he says, quiet and broken. "You've seen me lose control, Hank. You've seen what I become when desire takes over." He exhales shakily. "If that happened

while I was inside you..."

I reach out without thinking, threading my fingers through his, both of my hands swallowed by his huge, callused palm. The size difference should intimidate me. Instead, it feels... right. Safe.

"I trust you," I whisper. "I know you wouldn't hurt me."

He shakes his head slightly, stubborn even now. "Intention means nothing if the outcome is the same."

"Then we're careful," I say. "But Sterling—" I lean closer, heart pounding so hard I feel it in my teeth. "There has to be a middle ground between recklessness and this—" I gesture helplessly between us. "This glacial torture you're putting us through."

Sterling studies me like he's trying to map every inch of my soul.

"Such as?" he finally asks.

I take a breath. Fuck it. No fear. No shame.

"Such as letting me suck you off. I want to taste you," I say, the words burning out of me in a rush.

His eyebrows lift, startled.

"You've been so focused on preparing me to take your knot eventually," I continue, voice shaking with how much I mean it, "that we're skipping everything else. Skipping the ways we could still be close without the same risks."

Sterling tilts his head, considering me with that maddening calm. "You want me to come in your mouth," he says, and it isn't a question.

"Yes," I say—no hesitation now. "God, yes."

He goes still—prey-still. Only the faint change in his breathing gives him away.

"And how," he says carefully, "do you propose we manage that?"

I don't flinch. I don't back down. I've thought about this. Obsessively.

"I'd kneel," I say, pulse pounding in my ears. "You'd stand. You'd have full control over depth, movement—everything."

He's listening now, really listening, muscles taut with tension.

"Your hands would stay at your sides," I continue. "No grabbing my head. No pushing deeper." I swallow hard, throat dry. "We'd establish signals—clear ones. You stop the second I tap your thigh twice."

Sterling's nostrils flare. His pupils blow wide. A low rumble shivers in his chest, rattling through the space between us.

"You've been thinking about this," he says, rough as gravel.

"Constantly," I confess, voice barely above a whisper. "It's driving me insane—not knowing how you taste. Not knowing what sounds you'd make when I take you down my throat."

His chest rises and falls, heavy and uneven. He looks like he's caught between running and taking me apart right here on the floor.

"You'd be challenged," I acknowledge, squeezing his hand. "But you'd manage. Because you care about me."

The rumble in his chest deepens. Possessive. Hungry.

And then, after a heartbeat of brutal silence, he leans in—his forehead nearly touching mine—and says, voice low and dangerous:

"Show me."

I blink, stunned. "What?"

"Show me," Sterling repeats, every word a dare. "How you would do it. Where you would kneel. How you would signal me."

He releases my hand, slowly, deliberately—giving me the choice to back down.

But I don't. I won't.

Heart hammering against my ribs, I push my chair back and slide to my knees on the hardwood floor. The air feels thicker down here, hotter. Sterling's scent—salt, musk, something dark and mouth-watering—wraps around me, dizzying.

I lift my chin, meeting his eyes steadily. "Here," I say, voice trembling but sure. "This is where I'd be."

Sterling's hands clench on his thighs—white-knuckled. But he doesn't touch me. Not yet.

"If I needed you to stop," I say, reaching out and tapping his thigh twice, firm and clear, "this would be the signal."

He stares down at me like he's starving—like I'm something he's spent a lifetime denying himself.

"And right now," I whisper, feeling the charge between us snap tight, "I'm not stopping."

Then, with deliberate, almost reverent movements, Sterling reaches for his belt. My breath catches painfully in my throat.

"Does this mean—?" I start, voice breaking.

"It means we try," he says, his voice so deep it vibrates against my chest. "With all precautions." A beat. "And we stop immediately if anything feels wrong."

I nod, too fast, too eager. My mouth is already watering by the time he frees himself, and fuck—even half-hard, he's massive. Thick, veined, heavy. The base of his cock already wider, swelling with the early signs of the knot he's been so damn careful about.

"Remember," Sterling says roughly, eyes molten, locked on mine. "Tap twice. I'll be watching."

"I remember," I breathe.

And then— I lean forward, reverent, trembling with need.

The first taste of him hits me like a drug—musky, salty, a little sweet, uniquely him. I start slow, licking over the head, circling the slit, savoring the weight and heat of him on my tongue.

Sterling stays absolutely still at first, except for his breathing, which gets heavier with

every pass of my tongue.

"Yes," he groans, voice wrecked. "Just like that. God, just like that."

Emboldened, I take him deeper, sliding my mouth down his shaft, one hand stroking what won't fit. My own cock is leaking, aching, straining painfully against my pants.

"Hank," Sterling warns, low and guttural, as I fumble my free hand down to free myself. "That wasn't part of the plan."

I pull off him just long enough to rasp, "I can't help it. Need to touch myself while I taste you."

A growl shudders through his chest, but he doesn't stop me. Doesn't even pretend he can.

I take him back into my mouth, working him with slow, hungry determination, my hand matching the rhythm on my own cock.

"Fuck," Sterling snarls, hands clenching on his thighs, voice losing all its polish. "Your mouth. So fucking hot. So perfect. Can't?—"

His thighs tremble under my touch, restraint bleeding out of him by the second.

"I want to grab your hair," he groans, so desperate he sounds wrecked. "Want to fuck your throat. Want to feel you gagging on me. Want to see tears streaming down your face."

I moan around him, the filthy words lighting up something molten inside me.

"But I won't," Sterling grits out, muscles locking rigid. "Won't risk you. Won't lose

control."

I pull back just enough to pant, "I trust you. You can touch. Just... don't push."

The second my mouth closes around him again, his massive hand tangles in my hair—gentle, trembling slightly, just there, anchoring us both.

The weight of his touch. The raw, guttural sounds tearing from his throat. The taste of him leaking onto my tongue. It's too much. Not enough.

"I can smell you," Sterling snarls, nostrils flaring. "Smell how close you are just from having me in your mouth. So fucking desperate."

His filthy encouragement wrecks me. I suck harder, take him deeper, my hand jerking frantically between my legs.

"Hank," Sterling grits out, voice barely human now, "I'm close. The knot?—"

I feel it—swelling thick and hot against my fingers, the base of his cock throbbing where I stroke him. Rather than retreat, I focus on the head, the most sensitive parts, sliding my hand firmly around the growing knot, milking him.

"Fuck!" Sterling roars, hips jerking once despite himself before he locks down hard, every muscle trembling with the effort to stay still. "Your hand— your fucking mouth —can't?—"

The filthy words pour out of him now, ragged and raw.

"Want to fill you. Stuff your throat. Mark you from the inside out so you never fucking forget who you belong to."

I relax and he pushes deeper until his knot is touching my lips and the head of his cock is inching down the back of my throat. I moan helplessly around him, the vibration sending him over the edge.

Sterling shudders, roars, comes—thick, hot pulses flooding my mouth, forcing me to swallow around him. And that's it—that's all it takes.

My own orgasm detonates through me—violent, messy, unstoppable—spilling over my hand and stomach as I choke on his release, tears streaming down my cheeks from the sheer overwhelming intensity.

Sterling recovers first—still shaking, still not steady—but reaching for tissues with a tenderness that guts me. He kneels beside me, wiping my face gently, reverently, as if he's afraid to hurt me now. His touch is so soft, it's almost painful after the intensity of what we just survived.

"Are you all right?" he asks, voice hoarse, breath still ragged.

I laugh, a soft, shaky thing, feeling more powerful—more alive—than I have in my entire fucking life. "I'm perfect," I whisper, smiling up at him, my lips still swollen, my body still trembling. "That was perfect."

Sterling lets out a breath—something between a laugh and a groan—and hauls me carefully to my feet. My legs wobble, and he catches me without even thinking, pulling me down onto the couch beside him.

His arm wraps around my shoulders, warm and massive, anchoring me to his chest. I press my ear against him, listening to the wild drumbeat of his heart as it slowly, slowly returns to something like normal.

We sit like that for a while, wrapped up in each other, the silence between us thick

with things we don't need to say aloud yet.

Finally, Sterling speaks, voice low and raw against the top of my head. "You were right," he admits, like it costs him something but he needs me to know anyway. "There's a middle ground to be found."

Hope sparks in my chest, wild and foolish and unstoppable.

"Does that mean..." I start, tilting my head to look up at him, "you'll reconsider the pace of our progression?"

Sterling hums—a deep, rumbling sound I can feel vibrating through his chest. His big hand strokes slowly through my hair, gentle now, soothing, nothing like the desperate grip from before.

"It means..." he says carefully, "I'll stop treating the plan like scripture. We'll adapt. Based on trust. Based on readiness."

It's not a complete surrender. It's not a reckless rush forward. But it's real. And it's enough.

For now.

"Thank you," I whisper, voice thick, "for trusting me. For telling me what happened. For being vulnerable."

Sterling's arms tighten around me briefly—one of those silent, wordless answers he's better at giving than speaking. "And thank you," he murmurs back, rough and sincere, "for pushing me when I needed it. For seeing me... even when I'm a fucking mess."

We stay curled together on the couch, our bodies pressed close, our breathing finally

slowing into something steady. The storm between us has passed, and left something softer in its place. Stronger. Because tonight wasn't really about the physical boundaries we crossed. It wasn't about the taste of him on my tongue, or the feel of his knot swelling under my hand, or even the way we made each other shatter.

It was about this. This messy, clumsy, broken-open trust. This choice to keep choosing each other—even when it's terrifying. Whatever challenges still wait for us—whatever lines we have yet to cross— We'll face them together.

Slow when we need to be. Fearless when it matters most. And always, always honest.

The real breakthrough tonight wasn't physical at all. It was us.

The rumors start like cracks spiderwebbing through glass—small, almost invisible at first. A conversation that snaps shut when I walk into a room. A glance, too quick to be casual. Helena's sharp, assessing eyes following me down the hall. If I hadn't already been hyperaware of every brush of Sterling's hand, every lingering glance, every unspoken thing trembling between us, I might have missed it.

"They suspect something," I tell Sterling during our weekly dinner, my appetite a distant memory.

His fork stills halfway to his mouth. "I've noticed," he admits, setting it down with a quiet clink. "Marina asked yesterday if I was 'mentoring' you outside of work hours."

The way he says "mentoring" leaves no doubt about the subtext. Not about professional development. About fucking.

"What did you tell her?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even.

"That your professional growth is important to me." He sighs, raking a hand through his hair. "It's not technically a lie."

Technically. If by professional growth he means the growth of my cock. In his hand. In his mouth. In his ass.

The deception hangs there between us like a weight neither of us wants to touch. Truth and lies, twisted so tightly together I'm not sure we could untangle them now

even if we wanted to.

Our relationship has only deepened over the past weeks—emotionally, after Sterling ripped himself open and showed me the wreckage he carried; physically, after he started relaxing the rigid, clinical boundaries he used to shield us both. And still, here we are. Treading water over a fault line.

"Is it a problem?" I ask quietly. "Us?"

Sterling's jaw tightens. His expression hardens in that way I've come to recognize—masking panic with cold calculation.

"It's complicated," he says, defaulting to the phrase he uses when the truth hurts too much to name. "Perception matters. If clients think I'm engaging in inappropriate behavior with an employee, it could damage the facility's reputation. It could damage everything."

"Inappropriate behavior," I repeat, bitterness cutting through my chest like glass. "Is that what you think this is?"

Sterling reaches across the table, covering my hand with his. His palm is warm, steady, grounding. "You know it's more than that," he says, voice rough. "But the power imbalance is real. The ethical concerns are real. It's why I've been so careful. Why I have to be careful."

"I get it," I say. And I do. Intellectually. But emotionally? Emotionally it feels like being asked to split myself in two—one half cold and professional at work, the other half burning alive every time he looks at me.

"So what do we do?" I ask, my voice smaller than I mean it to be.

"Be more careful," Sterling says firmly. "At least until your internship ends. Three more months."

Three months. Ninety days. A hundred sleepless nights.

The thought tightens something inside my chest painfully.

Before I can say anything else—before I can ask the question neither of us has dared voice—Sterling's phone buzzes. His face shutters immediately, slipping into that impenetrable, professional calm he wears like armor.

He answers with a terse "Sterling here," listens for a minute, then ends the call with a grim expression.

"What is it?" I ask, dread already curdling in my stomach.

"United States Department of Creatures." His voice is clipped, too controlled. "Surprise inspection. Tomorrow."

My heart stumbles. "Is that... bad?"

"We're fully compliant," Sterling says. "We have nothing to hide."

But the way his mouth tightens tells me everything I need to know. Compliance isn't the problem. Perception is.

"Inspectors interview staff," he continues. "Review logs. Observe procedures. We need to be perfect. Professional."

The unspoken warning hits harder than any shouted order ever could. No looks. No slips. No mistakes.

* * *

The next morning, the facility hums with a tense, brittle energy, sharp as static before a lightning strike. When I arrive, Marina's already at her desk, hair pulled back into a severe bun, wearing what I privately call her "battle blouse"—stark white, starched to within an inch of its life.

"Inspectors," she says without preamble, catching my glance. "Two of them. USDC. In with Sterling now."

My stomach twists into knots. "What exactly are they looking for?"

"Compliance." She ticks items off on her fingers. "Health codes. Biohazard protocols. Ethical treatment standards." She leans in, lowering her voice. "But really? They're fishing. Looking for anything that smells even a little wrong."

Great. Exactly what we need. Government officials digging for dirt at the exact moment Sterling and I are balancing on the knife-edge of an ethical violation.

I swallow hard, plaster on my best neutral face, and head for the staff lounge to wait my turn. Every step feels heavy. Every heartbeat too loud. Today isn't just about inspections. It's about survival.

The inspectors emerge from Sterling's office minutes later—a severe-looking woman with steel-gray hair and a younger man whose face seems permanently carved into an expression of suspicion.

Sterling follows close behind them, his professional mask locked firmly in place, his posture relaxed but controlled, every inch the competent, unflappable business owner.

"This is Hank Honeyworth, our intern," Sterling says, introducing me with polite

detachment, his voice pitched at exactly the right level of cordial formality. Not cold. Not warm. Just... appropriate.

I rise and shake their hands, careful to meet their eyes and keep my grip professional, feeling the burn of Sterling's absence like a shadow at my back even though he stands only a few feet away.

"Pleased to meet you," I say, my voice steady even as something tight coils low in my gut.

"We'll want to speak with you later," Inspector Watson informs me, her gaze sharp and unblinking, like she's already peeling back layers I didn't know I had. "For now, please continue your regular duties while we observe."

I nod, offering a neutral smile, and turn back toward the floor, feeling their eyes linger a moment longer than necessary, weighing, assessing, filing away.

The rest of the day becomes an exercise in brutal, exhausting control.

Every interaction between Sterling and me is reduced to clinical efficiency—no lingering looks, no brushes of contact, no familiarity. He addresses me with the distant politeness reserved for staff, and I answer him the same way, burying everything too big, too bright, too dangerous to be seen under layers of rehearsed professionalism.

And yet, the more we pretend indifference, the sharper my awareness of him becomes, until every nerve feels raw with the effort of not looking too long, not standing too close, not giving anything away.

By midday, I can barely breathe around the tension coiling in my chest, my body reacting to his proximity the way it always does now, helpless and hungry despite the

sterile choreography we're forced to perform.

After lunch, it's my turn.

Inspector Reyes leads me down a side corridor into a small conference room that feels both too cramped and too exposed, the fluorescent lights overhead buzzing faintly like a warning. I sit across from him, hands folded neatly in my lap, heart hammering against my ribs so hard it almost hurts.

"How long have you been working here, Mr. Honeyworth?" Reyes asks, not looking up from his tablet.

"Months," I stammer. "I'd have to look at my calendar to tell you how many."

"And how would you describe the working environment?" The question is asked casually enough, but something about the way he leans back in his chair makes my stomach twist.

"Professional. Educational." I don't let my voice falter. "Mr. Johnson maintains very high standards for all aspects of the operation."

"Including staff interactions?" he presses, his gaze flicking up to meet mine.

I force myself not to flinch. "Especially staff interactions," I say evenly. "We handle sensitive biological materials and serve a diverse clientele. Professionalism is non-negotiable."

He hums noncommittally, tapping something into his tablet, and launches into a series of rapid-fire questions about training procedures, safety protocols, client handling standards—nothing directly accusatory, but each one sharp-edged enough that I have to grip the sides of my chair to keep myself anchored.

Maybe it's paranoia. Maybe it's guilt. Maybe it's just the weight of everything Sterling and I haven't said out loud pressing down on me harder with every word.

"One final question," Reyes says, setting his tablet aside and studying me with the calm, clinical disinterest of someone inspecting a specimen under glass. "Do you feel comfortable reporting any concerns about facility operations or staff conduct to Mr. Johnson?"

"Absolutely," I say without hesitation, because this, at least, is true. "Mr. Johnson has always made it clear that ethical standards and staff well-being are his highest priorities." I hold Reyes's gaze as I say it, not blinking, not looking away, not giving him even an inch of doubt to sink his teeth into.

When he nods and dismisses me with a polite thank you, I stand carefully, my knees weaker than I'd like to admit, and walk out of the room without glancing back.

And even though Sterling is nowhere in sight, even though I can't hear his voice or feel the weight of his stare, I know—somehow—that he's waiting for me. And that he's proud.

* * *

After the interview, I throw myself back into my duties, pretending that my nerves aren't shredded, that I'm not still hearing Inspector Reyes's even voice circling in my head like a hunting hawk. The inspection drags through the afternoon, a slow, meticulous unraveling of our entire operation—every record combed through, every procedure scrutinized, every conversation weighed for hidden faults.

Sterling and I maintain our careful distance, speaking only when necessary, keeping our movements clean, impersonal, cold. And still, with every passing hour, the tension between us thickens, stretching tight and fraying at the edges.

By late afternoon, I'm practically vibrating with it, so tightly wound it feels like my skin might split open. When Helena flags me down and asks me to grab more supplies from the storage closet, I don't hesitate—I seize the excuse like a drowning man grabbing at a life preserver.

The supply closet is blessedly quiet, shielded from watchful eyes, the heavy metal shelves and boxes of inventory muffling the distant noise of the facility. I lean against a shelf, dragging in a shaking breath, trying to bleed off the pressure coiled under my ribs.

The door creaks open behind me. I turn, expecting Helena. Instead—Sterling. He fills the doorway, his massive frame blocking out the light behind him, and his expression— God, his expression is a wrecking ball.

Tension and hunger and barely controlled need roil in his amber eyes.

"Five minutes," he says, voice pitched low and rough as gravel as he slips inside, closing the door with a soft, decisive click. "The inspectors are with Dr. Kim. Going over lab records."

Before I can say a word, he's on me—crossing the space between us in two steps, fisting his hands in my shirt and hauling me into a kiss so hungry it nearly buckles my knees. Nine hours of enforced distance, of polite words and practiced professionalism, crack open between us like a dam breaking, drowning me in him.

"This is insane," I gasp when he finally lets me breathe, my hands scrabbling at his sides, desperate for more. "If they find us?—"

"They won't," Sterling growls, already working my belt loose with skilled, urgent fingers. "Couldn't wait. Need to touch you. Need it so fucking bad."

The danger only sharpens everything—the heat, the hunger, the reckless, vibrating need that's been building inside me since this morning.

Sterling spins me around, pressing me chest-first against the shelving unit, his hands greedy and rough as they slip under my shirt, sliding over my ribs, claiming every inch of exposed skin like it's his by right.

"We have to be quick," he murmurs against the back of my neck, his voice sending a shiver all the way down my spine. "And quiet."

I nod frantically, my breath coming in short, shallow gasps, as he shoves my pants down just enough to bare me. The cool air hits my overheated skin, but then Sterling's big hand wraps around my cock, stroking once, twice, enough to make my whole body jerk helplessly.

While his other hand... It's moving. Searching.

"Look what we have here," he says, a wicked edge to his voice that makes my knees threaten to give out. I glance sideways just in time to see him holding up one of the facility's sanitized beginner vibrators, sleek and slim and clinically innocuous—at least, until Sterling's mouth curves into a slow, predatory smile.

"Sterling," I hiss, half scandalized, half wrecked with want. "That's inventory!"

"Sanitized inventory," he counters, and before I can say another word, he lifts it to his mouth, dragging it between his lips, coating it thoroughly with saliva.

My cock twitches hard in his hand. I'm already gone, and he knows it.

Sterling brings the slicked toy down between my legs, his touch deliberate, the first press of it against my entrance making me gasp—a soft, involuntary sound that he

catches instantly, clamping a big, callused hand over my mouth.

"Quiet," he growls against my ear, voice low and vibrating with authority. "Unless you want to explain this to the inspectors."

The vibrator circles my rim, slow and teasing, and I arch against him helplessly, every instinct screaming to push back, to take more, to be filled.

Sterling's breath is hot on the side of my neck as he presses the tip harder against me, slow and unyielding, slipping inside with maddening care.

My whole body clenches around it, desperate and greedy, and the hand gripping my cock tightens slightly—just enough to remind me who's in control here.

Just enough to tell me he's barely holding on, too.

The danger of discovery should terrify me. It should have me pulling away, fixing my clothes, slamming the brakes on the reckless hunger Sterling unleashes with every touch.

Instead, it sharpens everything—every nerve ending, every ragged breath, every desperate, shameful need thrumming through me as Sterling works the vibrator deeper with slow, devastating precision, his other hand stroking my cock with ruthless, perfect rhythm.

The dual stimulation is almost unbearable, my body burning hotter with every pass of the toy, every stroke of his palm, the pleasure ratcheting higher and higher until it feels like my skin might split from it.

"You have no idea," Sterling growls against my ear, his voice a wrecked snarl barely leashed to human language, "how hard it's been today. Watching you. Smelling you.

Knowing exactly what you want and not being able to take it."

His words slam into me, sharp and filthy and perfect, throwing gasoline on a fire that was already spiraling out of control.

The vibrator presses harder against that spot inside me that makes my vision gray out at the edges, Sterling's hand on my cock matching the rhythm exactly, every movement deliberate and devastating.

"Sterling—" I gasp against his palm, my body jerking, hips stuttering forward helplessly. "I'm gonna?—"

A noise freezes us both.

Footsteps. Voices—Helena and one of the inspectors, their conversation too clear, too close. My heart stops cold as the doorknob rattles softly, turning. Sterling doesn't stop. He doesn't even hesitate.

Outside, Helena's voice saves us, redirecting with perfect calm: "The main supply room has more complete records. This is just overflow storage."

The footsteps move away, fading, and the second they're gone—I shatter.

The orgasm rips through me like a shot fired through glass, violent and immediate, my whole body locking tight as wave after wave of release crashes over me. Sterling works me through it with agonizing thoroughness, drawing every last pulse from my body until I'm sagging against him, trembling with overstimulation.

Carefully, with the same reverent precision he showed when he first touched me, Sterling withdraws the vibrator, setting it aside without a word. He turns me around with gentle strength, pulling me against his chest, one massive hand stroking down

my back in soothing, grounding circles while my heartbeat stutters back toward something almost survivable.

"That," I finally manage, voice wrecked and breathless against his chest, "was too close."

Sterling's amber eyes are still molten with hunger—unfulfilled, barely contained—but he makes no move to seek his own pleasure, no demand for more. Only a low, rumbling growl of regret deep in his throat.

"Too close," he agrees grimly. "We shouldn't have risked it."

Reality crashes back in—hard and cold—cutting through the haze of release as I straighten my clothes with shaking hands, wincing when my pants brush too hard against oversensitized skin.

"How much longer?" I ask, my voice still rough.

"They'll finish today," Sterling says, raking a hand through his dark fur with visible effort to regain his composure, "but Inspector Watson mentioned they might have follow-up questions tomorrow. We need to be careful until they're gone."

I nod, swallowing the bitter taste of disappointment even as my body still aches for him. "I'll go out first," I say quietly, already moving toward the door. "Give it a few minutes before you follow."

Just as I reach for the handle, Sterling catches my wrist—strong but not rough, the touch electrifying in its tenderness after everything we just did.

"I have a business dinner with potential investors tonight," he says, and there's something almost apologetic in the way his thumb brushes lightly over the inside of

my wrist. "Raincheck for tomorrow?"

The disappointment hits sharper than I expect, blooming deep in my chest, but I force a small smile and nod. Because I understand. I do. Even without the inspections, Sterling's life is bigger than just us. And I can't—won't—jeopardize that.

"Tomorrow," I promise, squeezing his fingers once before slipping out the door and back into the too-bright hallway, every nerve still humming with the memory of his hands on my body.

Tomorrow feels like a lifetime away.

But for him, I'll wait.

* * *

The rest of the day passes in a blur of inspections and interviews, my nerves stretched thin as paper, every smile and every answer carefully measured until I feel hollow inside. By the time the inspectors finally leave, promising to return briefly tomorrow for exit interviews with Sterling and Helena, it feels like the facility itself exhales in relief.

I'm gathering my things, ready to slip away before anything else can demand my fractured attention, when Helena appears beside my desk. Her face is drawn tighter than usual, her mouth pressed into a grim line that makes something cold and uneasy unfurl in my stomach.

"A word, Hank? In private," she says, her tone leaving no room for argument, and I follow her without protest to her small, cluttered office. She closes the door behind us and studies me for a long moment, her eyes sharp but not unkind, as if weighing whatever she's about to say against something heavier than anger.

"You're sleeping with him, aren't you?" she says finally, her voice direct, her words cutting clean through any illusion that I might have had time to prepare.

Denial rises instinctively, quick and stupid, but something in her expression halts it before it ever leaves my lips. She isn't accusing me. She isn't disgusted. She looks... concerned. And somehow, that's worse.

"It's complicated," I say after a beat, hearing how hollow it sounds even as it leaves my mouth.

Helena sighs, a sound that seems to drain some of the strength from her shoulders, and for the first time since I've known her, she looks tired in a way that has nothing to do with work.

"It always is," she murmurs, sitting heavily in her chair. "I've worked for Sterling since he opened this place. I've seen him build it from nothing. And I respect him more than almost anyone. But this—" she gestures vaguely between us, the invisible thread that connects me to Sterling and will not be unwound, "this is dangerous. For both of you."

"We're being careful," I say, but the words falter under the weight of her gaze, brittle and thin even to my own ears.

Helena raises an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Are you? The supply closet today wasn't exactly subtle."

Heat flashes through me, burning high and sick, and I duck my head even as the words tumble out. "You knew?"

"I've been married thirty years," she says dryly, her mouth curving into something that might have been a smile in a different conversation. "I know what two people

sneaking off for a quickie look like. I redirected the inspector, but I won't always be there to cover for you."

Shame and gratitude crash into me at once, leaving me raw and unsteady. "Thank you," I manage, my voice rough around the edges. "For not... for not exposing us."

Helena shakes her head, her expression softening just a little, enough to let me see the bone-deep worry underneath. "I'm not doing it for you," she says. "I'm doing it for Sterling. For this facility. He's built something important here—something that helps people, that matters. I won't see it damaged because two people couldn't keep their hands off each other."

The truth of it stings in ways I don't want to examine too closely, but I don't argue, because deep down, I know she's right. Sterling has built something here that's bigger than either of us, something fragile in its own way, something that could be crushed under the weight of rumor and scrutiny faster than either of us want to believe.

"What happens between Sterling and me," I say carefully, forcing the words out, "it's private. It doesn't affect our work."

"Maybe not," Helena concedes after a long moment. "But perception matters, Hank. Especially when you're handling clients who are trusting this facility with parts of themselves they don't show anyone else. If they start doubting us, even for a second, it doesn't matter how well you both do your jobs. It'll already be too late."

She leans forward, fixing me with a look that strips away every defense I thought I had left. "I'm not judging you. But inside these walls? During work hours? You need to be smarter. Both of you."

"I understand," I say, and I mean it. "We will be. I promise."

Helena studies me for another long, weighted moment, and when she speaks again, her voice is softer, carrying something almost like sadness. "He cares about you," she says, not as a question, but a certainty laid bare between us.

I nod, unable to trust myself to say anything else.

"Don't make him choose," she says, her voice barely above a whisper now. "Between you and everything he's built."

Her words follow me out of the building and into the night, heavy as chains I can't shake off. The drive home is a blur of headlights and dark thoughts, my hands tight on the steering wheel, my mind too full to focus on the road.

Helena is right. Every risk we've taken, every reckless moment, has consequences we can't outrun forever. The rumors among the staff, the inspectors sniffing around, the imbalance of power we keep pretending we can navigate without consequences—it all matters. It always did. And yet, even knowing the risks, even feeling them settling into my bones like cold water, I can't bring myself to wish any of it away. Because what we're building together—the trust, the vulnerability, the impossible, undeniable connection—feels bigger than the risks. Feels worth it.

The real question, the one I haven't dared ask until now, is whether Sterling feels the same way. Whether what we have is strong enough to survive not just desire, not just secrecy, but scrutiny. Whether it can stand when everything we've been hiding finally demands to be seen.

The text message arrives while I'm reviewing client schedules with Marina, a casual buzz against my thigh that somehow manages to set my whole body on edge.

Surprise! In town for agriculture conference. Dinner tonight? Dad.

My stomach drops so fast I have to grip the edge of my chair to keep from visibly reacting. In all the months I've been here—living in Oregon, working at Sterling's Pride—my father has never once mentioned visiting. Our phone calls have become increasingly strained with each passing week, the silences between us stretching longer as it became clear that my internship wasn't just some temporary detour from the traditional farming path he mapped out for me before I could even walk.

"Everything okay?" Marina asks, her voice light but edged with concern as she notices my expression.

"My father's in town," I say, forcing the words out around the stone lodged in my throat. "Wants to have dinner."

"That's nice," she says brightly, clearly confused by my reaction, her smile faltering when I don't return it.

If only she knew.

My father—Charles Honeyworth, fourth-generation Midwestern farmer and self-proclaimed guardian of "real agriculture"—has barely tolerated my career choices up

until now. When I announced I would be interning at a minotaur biological collection facility, he didn't speak to me for almost a month. The only reason he hadn't officially disowned me was my mother's intervention, coupled with my desperate promise that this experience would somehow make me more valuable to the family business. A lie that has grown heavier and harder to carry with every month I stay here.

I tap out a brief confirmation text, suggesting a neutral steakhouse downtown—public enough to discourage a scene, traditional enough to avoid another lecture about my "unnatural career path"—and spend the rest of the day trapped in a fog of rising panic. I drift through meetings, nodding at the right moments but absorbing none of it, my hands fumbling over routine tasks until I catch Sterling watching me across the conference table with a furrowed brow.

By the time we meet for our afternoon check-in, I'm too tightly wound to pretend anymore.

"Is something wrong?" Sterling asks, the moment we're alone in his office, his voice pitched low despite the closed door.

"My father's in town," I say, trying to sound casual and failing miserably. "Agricultural conference. Wants dinner tonight."

Sterling's expression doesn't change much—his professional mask still firmly in place—but there's a subtle shift around his eyes that tells me he understands exactly what I'm not saying.

"Ah," he says quietly. "The traditional farmer who doesn't approve of your choice of internship."

"That's putting it mildly," I mutter, sinking into the chair opposite his desk, my hands twisting in my lap. "Last time we talked, he referred to minotaurs as 'those creatures'."

and suggested the entire industry was 'unnatural interference with proper animal husbandry.'"

Sterling's nostrils flare slightly—the only visible sign that the words affect him—but his voice remains calm when he says, "How can I help?"

The offer startles me so much I almost laugh. "There's nothing to be done," I say, shaking my head. "I'll have an uncomfortable dinner, listen to him pressure me about coming back to Iowa, and hopefully survive the evening without a public argument."

Sterling studies me for a long moment, his amber eyes steady and thoughtful in a way that makes it hard to hold his gaze. Finally, he says, "Text me the restaurant and time. I might stop by."

I stare at him, horrified. "What? No! That would make everything worse."

"Trust me," Sterling says, and though his tone is gentle, it leaves no room for debate. "I've dealt with people like your father before."

Before I can argue further, there's a sharp knock at the door, and Helena's voice calling about a supplier issue that demands Sterling's immediate attention. He rises, already shifting back into the role of business owner, and I'm left gathering my things, the knot in my stomach tightening, my mind spinning faster with the possibility I hadn't considered until now—not just surviving a conversation with my father. But surviving if Sterling and my father meet each other face to face.

* * *

The dinner starts exactly as I expected: awkward, strained, and brimming with tension so thick I feel it scraping under my skin.

My father—a tall, weathered man with sun-reddened skin and calloused hands earned through decades of honest, backbreaking work—greets me with a stiff hug that feels more like a formality than affection. No sooner have we sat down and opened our menus than he launches straight into the same commentary I've been hearing, in one form or another, since the day I left Iowa.

"You've worked there long enough," he mutters, flipping through the steakhouse menu with clear disapproval. "Months wasted that could've been spent learning real farming."

I take a deep breath, anchoring myself against the familiar frustration rising in my chest, determined not to let this spiral into an argument five minutes into dinner.

"It's not wasted, Dad," I say, keeping my voice level. "I'm learning valuable business management skills. Skills that apply to any agricultural operation."

He snorts, low and derisive. "Nothing about what they do there applies to honest work. Collecting... materials... from those creatures." The way he says it—creatures—makes my jaw tighten.

"They're called minotaurs," I remind him, trying to keep my tone patient even as my stomach churns. "And they're sentient beings. Not livestock."

My father sets the menu down with a heavy thud, the muscles in his jaw working as he glares at me across the table. "Don't start with that liberal college nonsense," he warns, his voice sharp enough to draw a few glances from neighboring tables. "Next thing you'll be telling me they deserve the same rights as humans."

"They do have the same rights," I say, the words spilling out before I can stop them, too exhausted and too angry to pretend otherwise. "They've had them for decades."

His mouth opens, ready to launch into whatever prejudiced tirade he's been saving up for months, when a shadow falls over our table, cutting him off mid-breath.

I glance up—and there's Sterling.

Dressed in an impeccably tailored suit that softens the sheer size of him without hiding it, standing with the kind of quiet, unshakable authority that immediately shifts the gravity of the entire room.

"Mr. Honeyworth," Sterling says smoothly, extending one large, steady hand. "Sterling Johnson. I hope you don't mind the intrusion. When Hank mentioned you were in town for the Agricultural Innovation Conference, I wanted to introduce myself."

My father stiffens, visibly caught off guard, but years of business dealings kick in faster than his prejudice can catch up. He rises halfway out of his seat and shakes Sterling's hand—reluctantly, but without open hostility.

"Charles Honeyworth," he says, the words clipped.

"May I join you briefly?" Sterling asks, gesturing to the empty chair opposite me, his voice all smooth professionalism. Without waiting for a response, he sits, managing—through sheer force of presence—to fold his massive frame into the seat without looking out of place, as if this was always his table, always his meeting.

"I've been meaning to thank you personally," Sterling continues, smiling the kind of smile that belongs to boardrooms and congressional hearings and hostile takeovers. "For allowing Hank to join our team. His contributions have been exceptional."

I sit frozen, somewhere between mortified and fiercely, stupidly proud.

My father looks between us, his expression twisting as he tries to reconcile what he sees—a massive, composed, professional minotaur—against everything he believes he knows.

"You're the... owner?" he says finally, suspicion clear in every syllable.

"Sterling's Pride Agricultural Services," Sterling confirms with a nod. "I founded it six years ago. We're pioneering sustainable approaches to specialized biological collection, which is rapidly transforming both pharmaceutical applications and artificial insemination techniques for traditional farming."

The strategic mention of farming hooks my father's attention, his body leaning forward almost despite himself.

"What applications?" he asks, his voice cautious now, as if realizing that dismissing Sterling outright might not be so easy.

Sterling doesn't even blink. "We've improved bovine artificial insemination success rates by nearly twenty percent using refined collection protocols derived from minotaur biological studies. We're also working with pharmaceutical companies on the extraction of natural regenerative compounds, which are already showing promise in veterinary medicine—and will likely have human applications within the next five years."

He says it all in one smooth, unhurried breath, laying out the facts without embellishment, without apology, letting the quiet weight of progress and profit do the talking for him.

My father frowns, struggling to refute something so clinical, so concrete. For the first time since I sat down, he looks unsure.

Sterling turns slightly toward me, as if just remembering I'm there, his hand brushing my forearm under the table—light, quick, a spark that grounds me so fast I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from reacting.

"Hank's been instrumental in refining our client management systems," Sterling says, his tone warm but perfectly professional. "He's shown remarkable leadership potential. I expect him to take on a senior operations role within the year."

I blink at him, stunned. He's never said that out loud before. Never promised me anything. And now he's offering it—right here, in front of my father—as if it's already decided.

My father grunts, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, clearly recalibrating. Maybe for the first time in his life, he's realizing I'm not just playing house out here on the west coast. I'm building something. Something he doesn't control. Something he can't tear down with a few sharp words about tradition and proper work.

For the next twenty minutes, I sit in stunned amazement, barely touching my food, as Sterling methodically dismantles my father's prejudice—not through confrontation or outrage, but with pure, clinical business acumen.

He speaks easily about sophisticated extraction techniques, details pharmaceutical contracts with a calm authority that even my father can't dismiss, and, most impressively, outlines a newly finalized partnership with several traditional cattle operations. The hormonal compounds derived from minotaur donations, Sterling explains, have already led to a measurable increase in successful insemination rates in high-value breeding stock.

That last point hits home harder than any philosophical argument could have. My father—who has spent decades perfecting his own prize cattle lines—leans forward despite himself, drawn in by the tangible proof that what Sterling represents isn't just

sustainable or ethical, but profitable. Useful.

By the time Sterling glances at his watch and excuses himself for another engagement, my father is still visibly grappling with the conversation—but the contempt he walked in carrying like a shield has been temporarily set aside, replaced by reluctant, grudging respect.

"Your boss seems... competent," he admits, gruffly, like the words cost him something.

"He's brilliant," I reply, careful to keep my tone professionally appreciative rather than personally admiring, even though the truth burns on my tongue. Brilliant doesn't even begin to cover it. "The facility is state-of-the-art," I add. "Everything is ethically managed, with full consent and compensation. Sterling's built something... important."

My father grunts noncommittally, but I can see it—the way he keeps glancing toward the door Sterling disappeared through, the way his jaw tightens not with anger now, but thought. Sterling's impact lingers like the echo of a struck bell, undeniable and impossible to ignore.

The rest of dinner passes with far less tension, though my father still finds moments to lob a few comments about me eventually "coming to my senses" and returning to "real farming." I deflect them easily enough with vague, noncommittal replies, my mind elsewhere, still caught in the aftershocks of what just happened.

When we part outside the restaurant with another awkward hug, my father promises to call after his conference ends. I watch him walk away, feeling a complicated knot of emotions—relief that the evening is finally over, pride that I stood my ground without fighting, and a deep, bone-deep awe at the way Sterling had known exactly what I needed without me even having to ask.

Standing there under the flickering streetlights, I pull out my phone and text him, fingers still shaking a little:

Thank you. That went better than expected.

The reply comes almost immediately, and when I see the words, my breath catches in my throat:

Meet me at the facility if you'd like. I imagine you could use some stress relief after that encounter.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, I pull into the empty parking lot, the familiar weight of anticipation settling low in my gut as I spot Sterling's SUV parked alone near the entrance. The rest of the lot is deserted, the facility dark and silent except for the faint glow of security lights.

I find him in Room 8, our usual space tucked away in the quieter wing of the facility. He's already there, sleeves rolled to his forearms, his suit jacket draped carefully over the back of a chair.

"Your father is exactly as you described him," Sterling says without preamble as he adjusts settings on the wall panel. "Traditionalist. Narrow-minded. But not entirely unreachable."

I step inside, letting the door click softly shut behind me, drawn to him like gravity itself. "The farming applications were a stroke of genius," I say, moving closer. "He actually seemed... impressed by the end."

"People like your father respond to practical benefits," Sterling says, still focused on

the adjustments he's making, his voice calm, clinical. "Abstract concepts like equality or ethics mean little compared to increased profit margins."

The cynicism in his tone is accurate, and it stings a little, even though I know better than to argue. For all his flaws, Charles Honeyworth is still my father, still the man whose approval I spent most of my life chasing.

"Thank you," I say quietly, crossing the final few steps until I'm close enough to touch him, needing it more than I realized until this moment. "For being civil. I know his attitude toward minotaurs is... offensive."

"I've encountered worse," Sterling says, glancing over his shoulder at me, the faintest curve of a smile tugging at his mouth. "What matters is that he saw you. In a professional context. Recognized your value in this operation."

His words carry more weight than the surface meaning allows—acknowledging not just my professional growth, but the line we're so carefully maintaining between public image and private reality. The distinction matters. Helena's warning is still fresh in my mind.

But standing here, so close I can feel the heat radiating off him, all I want right now is to forget the rest of the world entirely.

"Still," I murmur, reaching out, my hand finding the crisp line of his shirt at his waist, "it was stressful."

Sterling's expression shifts immediately, something deeper darkening in his amber eyes as he turns fully toward me, his hand finding my waist and drawing me into the solid wall of his chest. The contact steals the breath from my lungs. All the tension I hadn't even realized I was carrying begins to bleed out of me, siphoned away by the sure, grounding weight of his body against mine.

"Which is why I suggested meeting here," Sterling says, his voice dropping to a low, steady rumble that slides over my skin like a touch. "I thought we both could use some... release."

His hands tighten slightly at my hips, anchoring me, and the heat rolling off his body wraps around me like a second skin, making it impossible to think of anything but him—his hands, his mouth, the things he can do to me when we're finally alone, free to touch without fear.

"What did you have in mind?" I ask, my voice already breathless, my head tipping back automatically to meet his gaze, the familiar scent of him—salt, musk, something darker and uniquely Sterling—clouding my senses.

Sterling's smile sharpens into something predatory and unmistakably possessive as he leans down, his mouth brushing against my ear in a whisper that sends a full-body shiver racing down my spine.

"Something slow," he murmurs, his breath hot against my skin. "Something thorough." His expression transforms in front of me, shedding the last layers of restraint he usually wears like armor. Something feral surges up behind his amber eyes, something hungry, something dangerous, and when he speaks, his voice is a wrecked growl that sends a shudder straight down my spine.

"Something I've been dying to try with you," he says, low and raw. "Something that'll make you forget your own fucking name."

"Yes," I breathe, without hesitation, my body answering before my mind can catch up. "Anything."

A low, almost threatening rumble vibrates from his chest, the sound of a predator finally giving himself permission to feast. "Strip," Sterling commands, stepping back

to watch me with that same consuming intensity. "Now."

I scramble to obey, fingers fumbling over buttons in my haste, skin burning under the heat of his gaze as every piece of clothing falls away. His nostrils flare, the scent of my arousal hanging thick in the air, and he drinks it in like it feeds something primal inside him.

"On the mount," he orders, voice sharp with need. "Face down, ass up. The way I like you."

I don't hesitate. I can't hesitate. I clamber onto the padded mount, my cock already painfully hard, every nerve screaming for him, for this. Behind me, I hear the snap of latex gloves, the obscenely wet sound of lube being poured, and the slow, deliberate rustle of Sterling preparing to wreck me.

"Been thinking about this all fucking day," Sterling rumbles, moving closer, his voice dropping into that lethal register that makes my whole body melt. "Watching you squirm through meetings. Smelling your stress, your need. Knowing you were wound so tight worrying about your daddy coming to town." He pauses, letting the words sink in, then adds with a dark smile, "Picturing how I'd fuck all that anxiety right out of you."

His fingers find me without warning, two slick, thick digits pressing inside, sinking deep with a stretch that makes me gasp against the mount. There's no tentative testing, no slow easing in—Sterling knows exactly what I can take, knows how I've trained my body for this, how I've been aching for it.

"Look at you," he growls approvingly, working me open with steady, relentless movements. "Greedy little hole just swallowing my fingers. You've been practicing like I told you to, haven't you?"

"Yes," I gasp, pushing back against his hand without shame. "Every night. Just like you said."

"Good boy," Sterling purrs, the praise dark and velvety, right before he slides a third thick finger inside, stretching me deliciously wide. The burn is intense, but the pleasure is sharper, blinding, addictive.

"Because tonight," he continues, voice rough with restraint, "I'm done with all the careful shit. Tonight, I'm giving you what we've both been dying for."

My breath catches, my pulse thundering as the full weight of what he's saying hits me.

"You mean?—?"

"I'm going to fuck you, Hank," Sterling says bluntly, the filthy simplicity of it sending a jolt straight to my cock. "Not just fingers. Not just toys. My cock. Inside you. Not the whole thing—you're not ready for my knot yet—but enough you'll feel it every time you sit down tomorrow"

The possessive edge in his voice shatters something inside me, strips me down to the raw, shaking need I've been trying to hold back for months.

"Please," I beg, all pride gone, everything boiled down to a single, desperate want. "Please, I need it. Need you."

Sterling withdraws his fingers, the sudden emptiness making me whimper, and I hear the soft rasp of his zipper, the heavy sound of fabric falling.

"Remember what we discussed," he says, and despite the brutal edge of his need, the seriousness is still there, threading through his voice. "I won't knot you. Not tonight."

But you will tell me if anything hurts. Anything at all."

"I promise," I pant, desperate, aching. "I'll tell you. Just—please?—"

The blunt head of his cock presses against me, hot and slick and so much larger than anything I've taken before. He doesn't shove. He eases forward, the pressure steady and overwhelming, a breathtaking invasion that steals the air from my lungs.

"Fuck," Sterling hisses as the head finally breaches me, forcing its way through the tight, desperate grip of my body. "You feel even better than I fucking dreamed. So goddamn tight—squeezing me like you were fucking made for it. Every night I fucked the mount, every time I came thinking about splitting you open—" he drives in deeper, "—this is what I wanted. You. Ruined on my cock. Begging for more."

I choke out a moan, fingers clutching the handles as my body adjusts around him, the fullness almost unbearable but so good, the stretch just shy of too much. Sterling pauses, letting me adjust, massive hands gripping my hips like twin brands.

"More," I whisper, desperate, pushing back against him. "I can take more."

"Greedy little slut," he growls, the filthy words making me clench around him. "So desperate for minotaur cock you can't even wait."

He inches deeper, slow and devastating, each thrust a deliberate stretch that borders perfectly between pleasure and exquisite, maddening pain. When he's about halfway inside, he stops, rumbling deep with satisfaction.

"This is as deep as we go tonight," he says, adjusting his stance slightly, bracing himself. "Any more and we risk the knot. But this—" He pulls back, almost slipping free, then drives in again with devastating precision, "—this I can work with."

I cry out, my whole body shuddering at the sheer force of him, the drag and grind of that massive cock stretching me in ways I never knew I needed. He establishes a brutal, relentless rhythm, every thrust controlled but devastating, his hips slamming into me with a force that would've terrified me months ago—now it just lights me up from the inside out, leaves me gasping, shaking, begging for more.

"Look at you taking it," he growls, voice roughened beyond recognition with pleasure and hunger. "My little human fuck toy stuffed full of minotaur cock. What would your daddy think if he could see you now?"

The forbidden thrill of his words crashes through me, hotter and sharper than anything physical, every filthy syllable sinking straight to the place where want and shame and love have all twisted together into something unstoppable.

I'm already so close it hurts.

Sterling must feel it—the frantic clench of my body, the wild, desperate sounds tearing from my throat—because one of his massive hands wraps around my cock, stroking me in counterpoint to the ruthless drive of his hips.

But when I start to come apart, when my body bucks helplessly into his hand, he squeezes just hard enough to cut me off, holding me cruelly at the edge.

"Don't you dare come yet," he commands, his voice a vicious snarl against my spine. "Not until I say. Not until I've had my fucking fill of your perfect, greedy ass."

"Sterling, please—" I sob, wrecked, trembling, hanging on the razor's edge of release. "I can't—I need?—"

"What you need," he snarls, his pace slamming harder, faster, almost frenzied, "is to be filled properly. I've been so fucking patient with you. So careful. So fucking

responsible. Tonight I just want to ruin you. Want to pump you so full you taste me at the back of your throat."

I feel it then—feel the beginning of his knot swelling at the base of his cock, thickening as he struggles to hold himself back.

Sterling feels it too. He immediately adjusts his depth, careful not to slip too deep, careful not to risk locking us together before we're ready—but the way he growls tells me exactly how much he wants it.

"Soon," he promises darkly, hips grinding with brutal precision. "Soon I'll knot you properly. Hold you down and stuff that fat knot inside you until you're screaming. Lock us together while I empty load after load into you."

His voice drops lower, filthier, dragging a broken, helpless whimper from me.

"Would you like that?" he breathes. "Being stuffed so full you can't even move? Being my personal collection device?"

"Yes," I admit, shameless and shaking, the words torn from the deepest part of me. "Yes, Sterling—want it—want all of you?—"

Something in Sterling breaks.

His rhythm falters, his breathing shattering into ragged growls, and before I can even blink, he withdraws from me with a sudden, jarring emptiness.

I whimper at the loss, confused and desperate, until I feel his hands grip me, flipping me onto my back with terrifying ease. He looms over me, massive, panting, his cock glistening with lube and precum, his pupils blown wide until his amber eyes are almost black.

"I want to see your face," he growls, positioning himself between my trembling legs. "Want to watch you fall apart when I fuck you."

He pushes back into me with one smooth, devastating stroke, and the new angle—God, the new angle hits places inside me I didn't even know existed, sending my vision spinning into stars.

Sterling braces his arms on either side of my head, creating a cage of muscle and fur around me, shielding me, claiming me.

"Look at me," he commands, and when I do—when our eyes lock—something inside me surrenders completely.

"See what you do to me," he growls. "See what happens when a minotaur claims what's his."

The possessive snarl, the relentless grind of his cock against my prostate, the way his body surrounds me— It's too much.

"Sterling—" I gasp, voice cracking. "I'm—I'm going to?—"

"Do it," he orders, voice shredded with his own restraint. "Come on my cock. Now."

I shatter.

Release tears through me with cataclysmic force, my body convulsing around him, clenching tight and desperate as pleasure obliterates every thought, every fear, every piece of control I had left. I hear myself sobbing his name, feel the way my come splashes hot across my own stomach and chest, lost in the haze of pleasure so intense it feels like I might drown in it.

Through it all, Sterling is right there, roaring his own climax as he jerks out of me just in time, his massive cock pulsing, spilling hot, endless jets across my skin. He fists his swelling knot in one huge hand, milking himself, marking me with his release until I'm soaked, dripping, branded.

"Mine," he snarls, the word raw and vicious as he leans down, dragging his mouth over my neck, my jaw, my wrecked, panting lips. "You're fucking mine."

* * *

For long moments afterward, we remain where we are, tangled together in the heavy silence, both of us breathing hard, still tethered by the lingering echoes of what just happened.

As awareness slowly returns, I watch Sterling's expression shift—the raw, feral hunger receding, the careful control slipping back into place like a cloak, though his amber eyes remain dark, heavy with satisfaction.

"Are you all right?" he asks, voice gentler now, rough at the edges, as he reaches for a stack of tissues.

"Better than all right," I manage, my laugh weak and broken with leftover pleasure, my body still tingling with the aftershocks he tore from me. "That was... unexpected."

Sterling's mouth quirks in a rare, almost boyish smile, a flash of something unguarded that makes my heart skip. "I occasionally tire of my own restraint," he says dryly, though there's a quiet warmth behind the words.

"Feel free to tire of it more often," I suggest, grinning when I catch the deeper rumble of his chuckle, the vibration shivering through his massive chest like a low, private thunder.

With a careful efficiency that never feels clinical, Sterling cleans both of us, his hands gentle as he checks me over for any signs of pain or discomfort. Finding none, he helps me sit up, his touch lingering longer than strictly necessary, a silent reassurance I didn't know I needed until it was offered.

"I'm impressed," he says quietly, adjusting his clothing with his usual impeccable precision, though there's something softer about him now. "With how well you handled that. With how much you've grown."

"I know we still have a long way to go," I say, still floating somewhere just above the surface of my body, my muscles loose and warm and sated. "But this felt like a pretty amazing start."

Sterling's expression softens further as he brushes a stray lock of hair from my forehead, his thumb lingering against my temple with a tenderness that almost undoes me more than the rough claiming ever could.

"You did well with your father tonight, too," he says, his voice dropping into something quieter, something more personal. "Standing your ground without losing your respect for him. That's not easy."

The mention of my father pulls me slightly out of the dreamlike haze, the reality of tomorrow creeping back in.

"I still have breakfast with him before his speech," I admit, not quite managing to keep the apprehension out of my voice.

"You'll manage admirably," Sterling says, smoothing my clothes into place with the same steady hands that had so recently torn me apart. "Just as you did tonight."

We move around the room together after that, cleaning up, resetting the equipment,

putting everything back exactly where it belongs, the silence between us comfortable now, stitched together with something stronger than anything we started with.

As I follow him toward the door, my body pleasantly sore in all the right ways, I realize Sterling is right. Despite everything—the shock of my father's visit, the strain of facing old prejudices head-on—tonight has been a breakthrough in ways I never expected. Not just with my family. Not just with my body. But with Sterling. With us.

As Sterling arms the security system, his massive frame blocking the harsh fluorescent light, I catch myself smiling—real, aching, helpless—because tomorrow, when I sit across from my father and pretend everything is normal, every shift of my body, every sore, aching reminder, will tell a very different truth.

Sometimes, the most significant changes happen when you least expect them.

And sometimes, they come in forms far more satisfying—and far more permanent—than you ever dared to imagine.

I'm alone in the reception area, finishing up the month's appointment logs, when the front door swings open, letting in a blast of cold air that cuts straight through the facility's usual warmth. I glance up automatically, professional smile already in place, but the sight that meets me stalls it on my lips. A minotaur I've never seen before steps inside, towering even by their standards, with sleek black fur polished to a mirror shine and horns capped with what looks like platinum. His tailored suit screams wealth and precision, but it's the cold, calculated gleam in his ice blue eyes that sets every instinct I have on edge.

"May I help you?" I ask, slipping smoothly into my trained front-desk voice even as something uneasy prickles along the back of my neck.

The minotaur doesn't move closer, simply studies me as if weighing my existence and finding it irrelevant. "Terrence Blackwood," he says, the words clipped, his presence radiating the kind of entitled authority that makes my skin crawl. "I'm here to see Sterling."

I don't move, don't flinch, even though everything about this man sets off silent alarms inside me. "Do you have an appointment, Mr. Blackwood?" I ask, careful to keep my voice perfectly neutral.

"I don't need one." His nostrils flare slightly as he scents the air, the invasive gesture only deepening my discomfort. "Tell Sterling that Blackwood Biological is here. He'll make time."

The name clicks instantly—Blackwood Biological. Sterling's biggest competitor. I remember the disdain in Sterling's voice when he first mentioned them during my first week here, how he described their cutthroat tactics and soulless efficiency. My stomach tightens.

"One moment," I say, reaching for the phone. Sterling answers on the first ring. The moment I mention Blackwood's name, there is a pause, a long, tense beat before he sighs.

"Send him back," Sterling says at last, voice clipped and weary. "And Hank? Stay on high alert. Terrence never shows up unannounced unless he's planning something."

I hang up and turn back to Blackwood with a practiced smile, even though my heart has started to beat a little faster. "Mr. Johnson will see you now. His office is?—"

"I know where it is," Blackwood cuts me off without even glancing my way. He strides past the desk with a heavy, deliberate grace that feels more like a predator stalking prey than a businessman visiting a rival.

I watch him disappear down the hallway, tension knotting between my shoulder blades so tightly it hurts. Something about this feels wrong. Very wrong. I try to focus on my work, but after five minutes of staring blankly at the computer screen, I can't take it anymore.

The coffee pot in the break room just happens to be empty, and Sterling's office just happens to be on the way. If I walk very slowly past his slightly open door with an empty carafe in my hands, that's no one's business but mine.

As I approach, Blackwood's voice carries clearly into the hallway, smooth and oiled with the kind of confidence that comes from too much power and too little conscience.

"—just being practical, Sterling," he is saying. "Your little operation is charming, but the industry is changing. It's time to consider the offer."

I slow even further, heart thudding heavily in my chest.

"My answer remains the same as it was six months ago," Sterling replies, his voice sharp and colder than I have ever heard it. "Sterling's Pride is not for sale."

"The offer has increased by fifteen percent," Blackwood says, as though Sterling hasn't spoken at all. "That's more than generous, given the... complications that have arisen."

The knot in my stomach twists violently.

"What complications?" Sterling demands, suspicion edging every word.

Blackwood chuckles—a low, smug sound that makes my skin crawl. "Come now," he says. "Did you think it wouldn't get noticed? The human employee you're fucking? That's quite the liability you've created."

I nearly drop the carafe. The world tilts under my feet. My heart pounds so loudly I'm sure they can hear it through the door.

How? How could he know? We have been so careful.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sterling says, but there's a new tightness in his voice now, a tension that wasn't there before.

"Please." Blackwood's tone is thick with condescension. "I have three separate sources confirming after-hours visits. Collection rooms being used for... purposes beyond their intended function. Very unprofessional, Sterling. I wonder what your

clients would think if they knew."

I stand frozen in the hallway, every nerve screaming, the carafe digging painfully into my palm. This is bad. This is exactly what Helena warned us about.

"Are you threatening me?" Sterling's voice has dropped into a low, dangerous rumble, full of restrained violence.

"I'm offering you an exit strategy," Blackwood says smoothly, his words sliding like a knife between ribs. "Take the deal. Walk away with your reputation intact. And your little human toy can finish his internship somewhere more... appropriate."

The breath punches out of me. I stumble forward blindly, forcing my feet to carry me to the break room before either of them can see the devastation written all over my face. They know. Someone has been watching us. Reporting back to Blackwood. And now our relationship—the thing we have protected so fiercely, the thing that has come to mean more to me than anything—could destroy everything Sterling has built.

And worst of all, deep down, I know exactly who they will blame.

* * *

The rest of the day passes in a blur of anxiety. Sterling remains locked in his office after Blackwood leaves, canceling his afternoon appointments without explanation. When I text him, asking if he's okay, the only reply I get is one word: Later.

By closing time, I'm a wreck. My nerves are frayed to the breaking point, my stomach twisted into knots, and every footstep down the hallway sounds like it might be Sterling coming to deliver some final, devastating verdict. When the last client leaves and Marina disappears out the door with a cheerful wave I can barely return, Sterling finally emerges from his office.

"My place. Twenty minutes," he says, voice flat and neutral as he passes my desk without slowing. The drive to Sterling's house feels endless. Every red light stretches into forever. Every mile drags like an accusation.

When I finally arrive, I find him in the kitchen, a glass of something dark and amber in his massive hand, his expression thunderous.

"How much did you hear?" he asks without preamble, not even turning to look at me.

"Enough," I say, stepping into the kitchen but keeping a careful distance. "Blackwood knows about us. He's using it as leverage."

Sterling drains the glass in one long pull, setting it down with a controlled thud that makes the granite counter vibrate. "Three sources," he says grimly. "Three people inside my facility, reporting our activities. People I trusted."

"Who?" I ask, even though I'm not sure I want to hear the answer.

"I have suspicions," Sterling says. "But no proof."

I step closer, reaching out, desperate for any kind of contact—but Sterling moves away before I can touch him, putting deliberate space between us. The rejection hits harder than a slap.

"You're ending this," I say, the words scraping out of my throat like broken glass. "Aren't you?"

"It's the logical solution," Sterling says stiffly, staring somewhere over my shoulder. "The internship ends in six weeks. You'll receive an exemplary recommendation. We part ways professionally. The rumors die without new evidence to feed them."

His clinical assessment of what we have—what we are—hits like a physical blow.

"That's it?" I say, voice cracking. "After everything?"

"It's the responsible choice," he says, still refusing to meet my eyes.

"Fuck responsibility!" The words explode out of me louder than I intend, sharp and furious. "You're going to let Blackwood win? Let him manipulate you with threats?"

Sterling's nostrils flare, and for a second, I think I see something raw flash across his face before he shoves it down again.

"This isn't about winning," he says tightly. "It's about protecting what's important."

"And I'm not important?" I ask, hating the way the vulnerability bleeds into my voice, hating how small it makes me sound.

"You have a career ahead of you, Hank," Sterling says, finally looking at me, his amber eyes burning with something I can't name. "A reputation to build. Being known as the intern who slept with his minotaur boss isn't going to help."

"I don't care about that!" I shoot back, stepping closer, not giving him room to retreat again.

"You should," he says, jaw tight. "This was always temporary. A mistake I allowed to continue too long."

The word mistake cuts deeper than anything else he could have said.

"You don't mean that," I say, my voice low, furious, desperate.

"It's the truth," Sterling says, turning away, his massive shoulders rigid. "I crossed lines I shouldn't have crossed. Let desire override professional judgment. It ends now, before further damage occurs."

"No," I say, stepping in front of him, refusing to let him hide behind logic and professionalism and fear. "No. Look me in the eye. Tell me you don't care about me. Tell me that what we've shared meant nothing. Say it to my face."

Sterling's jaw tightens so hard I can see the muscles flex in his neck. His fists clench at his sides. For a long moment, he says nothing.

And then, quietly, he says, "What I feel is irrelevant."

"It's the only thing that matters!" I shout, the dam finally breaking. "Blackwood can threaten whatever he wants. Your clients trust you because of you, Sterling, not because of some bullshit illusion of moral superiority. They're not going to leave because of rumors. They come because you care. Because you built something real."

"You underestimate how fast a reputation can be destroyed," Sterling says, but his voice is strained now, cracking under the weight of everything he's trying so hard not to feel.

"And you underestimate how much what we have is worth fighting for!" I shout back. "At least I think it is. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's just been convenient physical release for you all along."

The accusation lands like a spark in a powder keg. Sterling rounds on me so fast I take a step back on instinct, amber eyes blazing with furious, helpless hunger.

"Convenient?" he growls, voice dropping into that low, dangerous register that still makes my whole body react even now. "You think these months of careful

restraint—of risking everything—were about convenience?"

"Then what were they about?" I demand, chest heaving, refusing to back down even as he looms over me like a thundercloud ready to break.

Sterling's control—the icy, careful wall he's kept between us since Blackwood's visit—shatters visibly, falling away piece by piece.

"They were about wanting you so badly I couldn't think straight," he snarls. "About lying awake every fucking night, imagining all the ways I want to claim you. About sitting through meetings, through client appointments, through every goddamn normal moment of my life fighting the urge to bend you over the nearest surface and show everyone exactly who you belong to."

His raw honesty steals the breath from my lungs, steals the strength from my legs. This is the real Sterling. Not the polished business owner. Not the careful professional.

"Then do it," I say, my voice barely more than a whisper.

For a beat, the world holds its breath.

Sterling stares at me, war raging behind his eyes, every muscle in his massive frame trembling with the effort of holding himself back. And then—with a low, broken growl that sounds more animal than man—he closes the distance between us in a single, devastating step.

His mouth crashes against mine with bruising force, massive hands gripping my waist hard enough to leave marks. I respond instantly, throwing my arms around his thick neck, pouring months of pent-up emotion into the kiss. Sterling lifts me effortlessly, turning to press me against the nearest wall. The impact knocks a framed photo

askew, but neither of us cares. His body pins me there, all heat and strength and desperate hunger, as his mouth devours mine with a reckless urgency that steals the breath from my lungs.

"This solves nothing," he growls against my lips, even as his hips grind against mine in a slow, brutal rhythm that makes logic a distant memory.

"I don't need solutions right now," I gasp, matching his movements, arching into him shamelessly. "I need you to stop thinking for five fucking minutes and just feel."

Something in my words shatters the last threads of his restraint. Sterling's eyes darken, molten gold and wild, as he captures my mouth again, one massive hand gripping my ass, the other cradling the back of my neck like he can't decide whether to pull me closer or crush me entirely.

He scoops me up and carries me through the house effortlessly, kicking the door of his office open with enough force to make the hinges rattle. With one sweep of his huge arm, he clears the desk—papers, a laptop, an expensive-looking tablet crashing to the floor in a clatter we both ignore. He sets me down on the empty surface, his massive frame crowding mine, his breathing ragged.

"These pants," he growls, fingers curling into the waistband of my khakis, "have been tormenting me all fucking day."

Before I can even make a sound, he tears the fabric apart with terrifying ease. The rip of the material echoes in the room, and cool air hits my exposed skin a second later, making me gasp.

"Sterling—those were?—"

"I'll buy you new ones," he snarls, jerking off my boxers and dropping to his knees

between my legs. "Right now I need to taste you."

His mouth closes over me without warning, hot and greedy, and I cry out, hands flying to his horns to brace myself as he takes me all the way to the base in one devastating stroke. I arch helplessly against the desk, overwhelmed by the sheer suddenness of it, the hunger in him swallowing me whole.

"Fuck," I choke out, half in pleasure, half in shock. "Sterling, wait—I can't?—"

He pulls back just enough to snarl, "You wanted me to stop thinking. This is what happens when I stop."

Then he's on me again, relentless, ruthless, wrecking me. There's no careful teasing, no slow seduction—just pure animal hunger, devouring rather than savoring, like he's been starved for me.

It's too much, too fast, and within seconds I'm right there on the edge, my whole body trembling, my orgasm building with terrifying speed. Sterling must feel it—the frantic tension, the way I tug weakly at his horns—because he only sucks harder, dragging filthy sounds from me that I can't control.

"Sterling," I gasp, voice breaking. "I'm gonna?—"

"Do it," he commands, the vibration of his voice sending me flying. "Give it to me. Now."

The orgasm slams into me with a violence that leaves me sobbing his name, my body convulsing helplessly as Sterling swallows every shuddering pulse. I collapse back against the desk, boneless, panting, every nerve still ringing from the force of it.

When he finally rises, his mouth glistening, his amber eyes are still burning with

undiminished hunger.

"Get dressed," he says, voice thick with promise as he snatches his car keys from the floor. "I'm taking you home."

Confusion cuts through the haze of afterglow. "What? But you didn't?—"

"This isn't over," Sterling interrupts, rough and low, but not with dismissal—with promise. "If you stay here tonight, we'll do things we're not ready for. I need time to think. To plan."

"Plan what?" I ask, awkwardly gathering the shredded remains of my pants.

Sterling tosses me a pair of sweatpants from a drawer—comically large on me, but better than nothing.

"How to destroy Terrence Blackwood without destroying us in the process."

The fierce declaration makes my heart stutter. "Then you're not ending this?"

Sterling steps close, cupping my face in one massive hand, his touch almost reverent. "I tried to convince myself it was the rational choice," he says, the roughness in his voice gutting me. "But when it comes to you, rationality is out of reach."

I lean into his palm, blinking back sudden, stupid tears. "We'll figure it out," I promise. "Together."

Sterling nods, but there's a grimness in his eyes. "We have six weeks until your internship concludes. Six weeks to neutralize Blackwood's threat without giving him more ammunition."

"And after those six weeks?" I ask, needing to hear him say it.

A slow, dangerous smile curves Sterling's mouth, and that primal hunger flares back into his eyes. "After that," he says, voice dropping to a growl, "you won't be my intern anymore. You'll just be mine."

The promise in those words sends a fresh wave of heat through me, sharp and sweet, and despite everything—despite the fear, the uncertainty, the war looming ahead—I feel something bloom fierce and unstoppable in my chest. Hope. Real hope.

The drive to my apartment is quiet, heavy with everything left unsaid. When we pull up to the curb, Sterling turns to me, his expression serious, his hand covering mine, massive and warm and unshakable.

"Be careful," he says. "Blackwood has eyes in the facility. Until we know who they are, trust no one."

I nod, understanding the gravity of it, feeling the weight settle squarely on my shoulders. "What about us?" I ask, barely above a whisper. "Do we... pause things?"

Sterling's hand tightens over mine.

"In public," he says, voice all steel, "we're nothing but professional. No mistakes. No tells."

"And in private?" I ask, already knowing the answer but needing to hear it.

"In private," Sterling says, and his voice drops into that filthy, devastating register that makes my toes curl, "I'm going to fuck you senseless whenever possible. Just with more discretion than before."

The crude promise makes my body flush all over again. I lean over the console and kiss him, savoring the lingering taste of myself on his lips, the sure, solid reality of him.

"Be ready tomorrow," Sterling murmurs against my mouth. "Meet me at The Golden Hoof after work. Room 212. We have planning to do."

The Golden Hoof—the upscale hotel across town where Sterling's more discreet business meetings sometimes happen. He's never invited me there before.

"I'll be there," I whisper, pulling away reluctantly.

As I watch Sterling's SUV disappear into the night, I realize we've crossed another threshold—one Blackwood never intended us to survive. Instead of breaking us, he's forced us to choose. To fight.

"Y our new contract," Sterling says, sliding the contract across his desk. The dark wood gleams under the morning light filtering through his office windows, and the air between us hums with a tension neither of us names out loud.

I scan the document—official Sterling's Pride letterhead, detailed job description, salary figures that make my eyes widen. "Administrative Director," I read aloud. "Reporting directly to the owner but with autonomous oversight of operations."

"It's a legitimate position," Sterling explains, unnecessarily formal, his voice even but too careful as Helena and Dr. Kim watch from the other side of the desk. "One the facility genuinely needs. Your qualifications are more than adequate, and your familiarity with our operations makes you uniquely suited to the role."

The restructuring was Sterling's idea. After weeks of strategizing against Blackwood's threats, we realized the simplest solution wasn't hiding or denying what we were — it was dismantling the ethical concerns at the root. No more internship. No more implied power imbalance. A professional relationship that could stand independently alongside our personal one without compromise.

"The board has approved it unanimously," Dr. Kim adds. As the only outside member of Sterling's advisory board, her endorsement carries significant weight. "Your work during the internship demonstrated capabilities beyond entry-level positions."

I look up from the contract to find Sterling watching me, his amber eyes deceptively neutral — but I can feel the tension radiating from him across the desk, the

importance of this moment heavy in the air. This matters to him. Not just as a solution to the Blackwood problem — but as a statement about me, about my value here, about us.

"I'd be honored," I say, reaching for the pen.

Helena snorts softly. "About time someone besides Sterling had authority around here. My cleaning staff will appreciate having someone who actually listens to their equipment requests."

It's the closest thing to approval I'm likely to get from her. Sterling's lips twitch slightly — the barest hint of a smile only I would notice — and the knot of tension in my chest loosens a little.

"Then it's settled," he says as I sign with a flourish. "Effective immediately, Mr. Honeyworth is no longer an intern but Administrative Director of Sterling's Pride. Ms. Michaels will prepare a facility-wide announcement for Monday."

Dr. Kim and Helena offer brief congratulations before excusing themselves, leaving Sterling and me alone in the office. The moment the door closes, the professional mask Sterling wears so effortlessly slips just a little, a crack in the armor that only I get to see.

"Are you really sure?" he asks, softer now, uncertainty threading through the strength of his voice. "The position is legitimate, but I don't want you accepting out of obligation."

I round the desk without hesitation, stepping closer than I ever could with others present, the air between us shifting into something heavier, more familiar. "I'm sure," I say, meaning every word. "It's the perfect solution — I get to keep working at a facility I believe in, with people I respect, doing work that matters."

"And the other benefits?" Sterling asks, and the faintest trace of that deep, rumbling undertone I know so well creeps into his voice.

"Well," I murmur, leaning up on my toes to press a quick kiss to his mouth, "now I can do this—" His breath catches as our lips meet, but I don't pull away fast enough.

Sterling's massive hand closes around my waist, anchoring me in place, and he captures my mouth in a more thorough kiss — slower, deeper, leaving me breathless by the time he finally pulls back.

"Three more days," he murmurs against my lips, the promise in his voice dark and hot. "Your official internship paperwork concludes Friday. Then we celebrate properly."

Heat curls low in my gut at the rough edge of his voice. "What did you have in mind?" I ask, already aching for it.

"I've rented a cabin," Sterling says, reluctantly releasing me as voices pass outside the office. "Private property. No neighbors for miles. Just us. The whole weekend."

The thought of forty-eight uninterrupted hours with him—no clients, no inspectors, no careful walls between us—makes my heart slam against my ribs.

"I can't wait," I whisper, breathless.

"Neither can I," Sterling admits, his expression darkening with a hunger that sends a shiver skittering down my spine. "I've been planning it for weeks."

* * *

The next three days pass in a blur of orientation meetings, paperwork, and carefully

maintained professional distance. My new position comes with an office—small, but private—and responsibilities that keep me legitimately busy. Sterling ensures our interactions remain scrupulously appropriate, his tone professional, his posture distant, his touches nonexistent. But the heat in his eyes—when no one is looking, when no one else is near—makes promises I feel burning low in my belly every time our gazes lock.

By Friday afternoon, I'm vibrating with barely-contained anticipation, the hours dragging unbearably slow. When the workday finally ends and the facility empties out, Sterling meets me in the parking lot, leaning casually against his SUV like he hasn't been wound as tightly as I have for days.

"Ready?" he asks, voice deceptively casual.

I nod, stomach flipping wildly as he opens the door of his car and buckles me in.

The cabin appears after nearly an hour's drive—not the rustic retreat I'd imagined, but a modern architectural marvel of glass and timber, perched at the edge of a secluded clearing, surrounded by nothing but towering trees and silence.

"This is... not exactly roughing it," I say as Sterling unlocks the front door with a faint huff of amusement.

He chuckles, the sound low and warm and already making me feel more intoxicated than the altitude. "I said private," he corrects, glancing back at me with a gleam in his eye. "Not primitive. I have plans that require certain amenities."

The interior is as impressive as the outside—open-concept spaces flooded with natural light, floor-to-ceiling windows framing sweeping views of the mountains, a chef's kitchen gleaming with stainless steel, and furniture clearly designed to accommodate minotaur proportions without sacrificing style.

"Bedroom's through there," Sterling says, nodding toward a hallway. His voice deepens, takes on that low, charged tone that immediately tightens something inside me. "You might want to unpack. We have dinner reservations at eight."

"Dinner?" I blink, caught off-guard. I hadn't expected to leave the cabin again once we arrived.

"At the lodge down the mountain," Sterling explains, already moving through the kitchen with easy, predatory grace. "The chef is exceptional." He pauses, then turns, and the expression on his face makes my knees weaken. "And besides," he adds, voice darkening, "I have something for you to wear."

He retrieves a small box from his bag and hands it to me with a look that leaves no room for misunderstanding. Inside, nestled in black tissue paper, is a sleek silicone plug—larger than anything we've used for preparation, but still not the size of his knot. Something meant to stretch me, to tease me, to keep me achingly aware of everything that's coming.

"During dinner?" I ask, heat rushing to my cheeks.

"Consider it an appetizer," Sterling says, voice dropping into that devastating register that makes my thighs clench helplessly. "A reminder of what awaits after we eat."

My mouth goes dry. My heart pounds so hard I'm surprised he can't hear it. I take the box with shaking hands and retreat to the bedroom to shower. The hot water eases the tension from my travel-stiff muscles, but does nothing to calm the restless, electric anticipation sparking under my skin.

When I finally emerge, towel slung low around my hips, Sterling is already waiting for me seated on the edge of the massive bed, head bowed slightly, his enormous hands resting on his thighs. Waiting. Watching. And when his eyes lift to meet mine,

there's no professional mask left at all. Only hunger. Only possession. Only us.

"Let me help you," Sterling says, patting the space beside him on the bed.

The hunger in his eyes makes my mouth go dry. I drop the towel without hesitation, the cool air rushing over my exposed skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. Beside his still fully clothed, massive form, I feel small, vulnerable—offered up.

"Lie back," Sterling rumbles, his big hands already guiding me down, spreading me out like a meal he's been starving for. "Legs up."

My face burns, but I obey, pulling my knees back, baring everything to him.

Sterling makes a low, feral noise deep in his chest—a sound more animal than man—and it vibrates straight through my bones. "Fucking beautiful," he murmurs, tracing one thick finger up the sensitive crease of my inner thigh, leaving a trail of fire behind. "I've been thinking about this all week."

He grabs a bottle of lube from the nightstand and slicks his fingers with slow, deliberate care. When the first touch brushes my entrance, I jolt, hips jerking instinctively.

"Relax," Sterling soothes, circling slow and lazy, a wicked tease.

One finger slides inside, stretching me open with steady, maddening precision. Then another joins, scissoring slightly, coaxing me wider, preparing me—but it's not enough. Not for him. Because without warning, he pulls his fingers free—and before I can even catch my breath, his mouth is on me.

"Sterling, what are you—" I try, but the words collapse into a shattered moan the second his tongue licks a broad, wet stripe across my hole.

"I need to taste you," he growls, his voice vibrating directly into the sensitive ring of muscle. The heat of it—the obscene intimacy—makes my vision blur.

His tongue is relentless. Long and thick. Slick and firm. Curling and pressing with greedy precision, plunging deep, then retreating only to swirl and flick until I'm clutching the sheets in both fists, my body wracked with desperate, helpless tremors.

It's not soft. It's not careful.

It's devastation.

Each stroke is slick, messy, filthy—his saliva mixing with the lube, his low growls vibrating through me, driving me higher, wrecking me from the inside out.

"God," I gasp, legs quaking as he works me open like he has all the time in the world, like he'll never get enough. "Sterling, please?—"

He lifts his head, chin shiny, lips wet, his amber eyes gone dark and wild. "Please what?" he rasps, voice shredded. "Please stop? Or please more?"

"More," I whimper, shameless now. "Don't stop. Please."

A slow, predatory smile spreads across his mouth—a flash of teeth and heat—and he dives back in, tongue spearing deep again, this time pushing two slick fingers alongside it.

The combination is ruinous.

He fucks me open with fingers and tongue at once, grinding against my sweetest, rawest nerves until I'm writhing helplessly under him, the lewd, wet sounds of it filling the room, obscene and perfect and so fucking good I want to scream.

By the time he finally pulls back, I'm wrecked. Trembling. Leaking across my own stomach without a single touch to my cock.

And Sterling?—

Sterling looks fucking satisfied.

"Please," I beg, "I need to come."

"Not yet," he warns, reaching for the plug like he's got all the time in the goddamn world. "I want you aching through dinner. I want you thinking about this—about me—with every goddamn bite of your meal."

He slicks the plug thoroughly, twirling it once in his hand like a goddamn weapon before pressing it against my wrecked, fluttering hole. The pressure is brutal—stretching me wide, almost too much—and my whole body arches off the mattress in instinctive, shuddering protest.

"Breathe," Sterling croons, dragging a soothing hand up my thigh, grounding me. "Push against it. Good boy. Just like that."

I bear down, and the widest part of the plug pops inside with a slippery, overwhelming stretch that knocks the air from my lungs. My body clamps down around the narrow base, my thighs twitching violently, the constant, aching fullness driving me insane.

"Perfect," Sterling purrs, rotating it just enough to brush against that devastating spot inside me, making me sob.

"Right there, is it?" he murmurs, rubbing slow circles on my thigh while the plug presses mercilessly against my prostate with every tiny shift. "Get dressed," Sterling

says suddenly, rising to his full, towering height. "I packed you slacks and a green shirt. If you can make it through dinner without begging me to take you in the restaurant bathroom..." His lips curl into a smirk that makes my knees weak. "I'll be impressed."

The challenge in his voice reignites the sharp, competitive spark between us—the tension that's been there from the start, always simmering beneath everything else. I rise carefully, adjusting to the unfamiliar fullness as I cross to the closet. The dark slacks fit perfectly, tailored to my measurements, and the forest green button-down clings just right, emphasizing the shape of my body the way Sterling likes. The plug is a constant, maddening reminder with every step, every shift of my hips, every breath.

When I join him in the living room, Sterling straightens from adjusting his cufflinks—and the look he gives me would have set me on fire if I wasn't already burning.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, his amber eyes raking over me, his nostrils flaring slightly as he catches the scent of my restrained arousal.

He's dressed to kill in a dark, custom-tailored suit, the lines clean and devastating, the breadth of his chest and shoulders barely contained by the expensive fabric.

"Shall we?" Sterling asks, offering me his arm with a wicked glint that promises this dinner is only the beginning.

* * *

The restaurant is as exclusive as Sterling promised—an upscale establishment attached to a luxury hunting lodge, designed with minotaur clientele in mind. Our private dining room features a table sized for larger frames, plush chairs, dim lighting

that casts everything in a low, intimate glow, and a discreet server who appears only when summoned.

"Wine?" Sterling asks, studying the extensive list with casual authority.

I nod, shifting slightly in my seat—and immediately biting my lip as the plug presses deeper against sensitive nerves. "Red, please," I manage.

Sterling orders without even glancing at the menu, clearly having arranged everything in advance. The server reappears moments later with a bottle, presenting it reverently. Sterling approves it with a nod, efficient and commanding even in this setting.

"To new beginnings," he says, lifting his glass, his amber eyes glinting darkly in the candlelight.

"New beginnings," I echo, my voice catching slightly as I raise my own glass. The wine is spectacular—deep, rich, complex—but I barely taste it. Not when Sterling's gaze is dragging over me like a physical touch, setting every nerve alight.

"How does it feel?" he asks, voice pitched low enough that only I can hear it.

I shift again—helpless against the instinct—and feel the plug press harder against that sweet, maddening spot inside me. "Distracting," I admit, heat rushing to my face. "Every time I move, it..."

"Good," Sterling purrs, the satisfaction in his voice so potent it makes my whole body clench. "I want you thinking about it. Thinking about what's coming later. About how thoroughly I'm going to break you."

The explicit promise sends a fresh rush of heat flooding through me, my skin prickling under the weight of his attention.

By the time our first course arrives, I'm already aching hard beneath the table, the plug a constant, insistent reminder of Sterling's control. And judging by the way his nostrils flare, and the way his pupils have swallowed nearly all the amber from his eyes, he's just as affected. He makes a show of focusing on the food, cutting into his venison with practiced ease, but his gaze keeps returning to me—lingering, hungry, dangerous.

"This is delicious," I manage, trying and failing to sound normal, my voice thinner than I'd like. "You've eaten here before?"

"Once," Sterling replies, sipping his wine with infuriating calm. "I scoped it out last weekend. Wanted to make sure it met our needs."

The thought of him planning this weekend so meticulously—inspecting the restaurant, vetting the lodge, choosing the cabin, orchestrating every moment—sends a sharp pulse of need through me, tightening everything inside me until I'm dizzy with it.

This isn't casual for him. This isn't impulsive. This matters. I matter.

The main course arrives, and the tension between us has reached unbearable heights. Sterling's breathing has deepened subtly, his control beginning to crack around the edges, and I'm no better—every tiny shift in my seat sends jolts of pleasure-tinged pressure through me, my body aching, my cock straining against the confines of my slacks.

When I finally can't take it anymore, I push back my chair carefully, standing on trembling legs.

"Excuse me," I say, my voice rough with barely restrained need. "I need to use the restroom."

Sterling's eyes track my every movement, the muscles in his jaw clenching as he nods. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to. His eyes promise everything.

I make my way carefully to the attached bathroom—a private, luxurious space with polished fixtures, dark marble, and soft lighting—and close the door behind me, my heart hammering against my ribs. I brace my hands against the sink, breathing hard, the cool stone anchoring me for a moment. The plug shifts with every tiny movement, and it's like I can still feel Sterling's hands on me, his mouth, his voice promising ruin. I catch sight of myself in the mirror—flushed, wrecked already—and swallow hard. God help me. If he comes after me now, I won't stand a chance of making it back to dinner at all.

I'm splashing cold water on my face, trying to cool the desperate need coiling tighter and tighter in my gut, when the door creaks open behind me.

Sterling fills the doorway like a fucking avalanche—huge, hungry, unstoppable—his expression stripped bare, nothing left but pure, raw need.

"Couldn't wait," he growls, stepping inside and locking the door behind him with a sharp, decisive click that sounds like a death knell for whatever thin control we had left.

Before I can even breathe, he's on me—his mouth crashing into mine, bruising and wild, swallowing my gasp as he lifts me like I weigh nothing, setting me hard on the marble counter. My legs fall open instinctively, desperate for him, desperate for more, and the heat of him presses in, undeniable, scorching through our half-peeled clothing. His cock strains against his pants, thick and hot, grinding against my stomach like a brand.

"This was supposed to wait until after dinner," Sterling groans against the side of my throat, teeth scraping hard over the sensitive skin there, making me jolt and moan.

"But watching you squirm... knowing how tight you're clenching around that plug... smelling how much you want me?—"

"I can't wait either," I gasp, fumbling desperately at his belt, my fingers clumsy with need. "Please, Sterling. Please."

We're frantic, messy, ripping at each other—buttons popping, fabric tearing, hands everywhere, greedy and shaking and fucking starving. When he finally frees us both, wrapping both massive, calloused hands around our cocks—both flushed, both leaking—the heat is devastating, nearly blinding.

The first long, slick stroke has us both groaning into each other's mouths, the sound rough and broken, vibrating through every nerve ending.

"Like this," Sterling pants against my lips, setting a brutal rhythm, dragging our lengths together, heavy and leaking and obscene. "Come with me."

Every roll of my hips grinds the plug deep inside me, sending filthy, unbearable jolts through my core. I can't stop whimpering, clutching at his thick shoulders, nails biting into muscle hard enough to bruise.

"Sterling," I choke out, wrecked and wild, "I'm gonna?—"

"Me too," he snarls, his pace brutal now, relentless, savage. "Fuck—I want to ruin you. Want to make you smell like me. Want to paint you with so much of my cum everyone will know you're mine."

The filth of it—the claim in every brutal word—shatters me. Pleasure rips through me like a lightning strike, convulsing through my whole body, pleasure so sharp and sudden I scream his name, shameless and wrecked.

Sterling follows a heartbeat later with a low, broken roar, his cock jerking against mine as he spills between us, hot and messy, smearing across our stomachs, our chests, marking me like he promised.

For long, shuddering seconds, we just exist there, bodies locked together, still grinding helplessly through the aftershocks, too strung out to move. The marble digs into the backs of my thighs, but I barely register it. The only thing I feel—the only thing I want—is him. The heat of him, the scent of us tangled together, the rightness of it down to the marrow.

Sterling recovers first—barely—grabbing a wad of paper towels with a low, rough chuckle that makes my stomach clench all over again.

"So much for waiting until after dinner," he mutters, voice wrecked with satisfaction as we wipe ourselves down, trying and failing to look even halfway decent.

"You started it," I grumble, fighting to fix the buttons he popped off my shirt.

"And I'll finish it," Sterling promises, his voice dropping to a dark, wicked rumble that makes my knees weak. "Later. When I have you naked... stretched out on my bed... plugged and leaking and begging for my cock instead of crammed up against a fucking sink."

The way he says it—possessive, inevitable, final—makes me shudder so hard my legs almost give out.

And from the look in his eyes? Yeah. Dinner's not going to save me. Nothing is.

.

We return to our table with barely concealed smiles, the server either oblivious to or

professionally ignoring the flush on my cheeks and the missing button on my shirt. The tension between us has changed—no longer a razor-wire pull of restraint, but something deeper, warmer, heavier. Like fine whiskey after the first burn. Slow. Potent. Dangerous.

Sterling keeps his massive hand on mine throughout dessert, thumb tracing idle circles across my knuckles, grounding me. The plug remains a constant, sweet torment inside me—but now it feels like a promise, not a tease.

"Do you think you're ready to take my knot tonight?" Sterling asks softly as he signs the check, his amber eyes dark with affection, with hunger, with something deeper I don't dare name yet.

I nod, feeling suddenly shy despite everything we've already shared.

Sterling helps me into my jacket, his touch lingering longer than necessary. "Nervous?" he asks as we step into the cool night air, his voice pitched low for me alone.

"A little," I admit, heart hammering against my ribs. "But in a good way."

"We'll take it slow," he promises, opening the SUV door for me like it's a ritual, something sacred. "Everything at your pace."

As I slide into the seat, his hand brushes mine—brief but deliberate—and the warmth of it stays with me the whole drive back to the cabin.

Because tonight isn't about caution anymore. It's about trust. And I'm ready.

.

The drive back to the cabin passes in a soft, golden silence, the tires humming against the asphalt, the cool night air curling through the cracked window and raising goosebumps along my arms. Our hands stay linked across the center console, Sterling's thumb dragging lazy, possessive circles over my knuckles, like he can't stand to stop touching me even for a second.

Outside, the mountains loom like shadowed titans against the deepening velvet sky, stars blooming above the trees—sharp and endless and so impossibly close it feels like we could reach out and grab them. I glance sideways at him, feel the warmth of his hand around mine, the steady weight of everything we've survived to get here—and realize just how far we've come from that first awkward meeting in his office.

From boss and intern, to something riskier. Messier.

Sterling pulls the SUV to a stop outside the cabin and kills the engine, leaving us cocooned in the thick, humming quiet of the mountains. He turns toward me, the dashboard light painting the sharp lines of his face in soft relief—and for a second, all that heat, all that hunger, melts into something so raw and tender it knocks the air from my lungs.

"Welcome home," he says, his voice low and rough and steady. "For the weekend, at least."

Home. The word lodges deep in my chest, sharp and aching and terrifyingly right. For the weekend, maybe. For now. But as I follow him inside—the night air cool against my heated skin, the steady, insistent weight of the plug still stretching me open, keeping me hot and aching and his—I can't help thinking, hoping, aching—that maybe someday it won't just be the weekend. Maybe someday, it'll be forever.

"Are you sure you're ready?" Sterling asks, his massive hand tracing slow, lazy circles across my bare back. Despite the casual tone, I can feel the tension vibrating through him, the coiled restraint simmering just beneath his steady touch.

"I've been ready for weeks," I murmur, pressing a slow kiss to the center of his broad, furred chest, feeling the way his heart kicks harder under my mouth. "You're the one who's been making us wait."

Sterling rumbles a low laugh—a sound that reverberates through my whole body—but when he speaks again, his voice is rougher, stripped down. "Caution is warranted," he says. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," I whisper, propping myself up on my elbows to meet his gaze head-on. Amber eyes—fierce and searching and heartbreakingly vulnerable, a look he saves only for me. "We've been working toward this for months," I say softly. "I trust you."

Something shifts in his expression—a softening so intense it steals the air right out of my lungs. He kisses me then—slow, deliberate, tender despite the simmering hunger thrumming through every line of his massive body.

"Shower first," Sterling murmurs against my mouth, his voice rough, almost shaking. "I'll prepare everything."

The hot water helps unknot the tension from my muscles, but it does nothing to settle the pounding of my heart. Every beat feels like a drum against my ribs, counting

down to something inevitable. Something permanent.

When I finally step out, towel slung low around my waist, the bedroom has been transformed. The lights are low and golden, throwing soft shadows across the walls. Music—slow, wordless, winding through the air like smoke—drifts from hidden speakers. The bed has been remade in deep, dark sheets, the pillows arranged with a careful precision that speaks of hours of planning, not minutes.

And on the nightstand?—

An array of supplies laid out like offerings: bottles of lubricant, water bottles within easy reach, soft towels folded with careful precision. A neat line of plugs, each one gleaming under the low light in a slow, merciless escalation of size.

It hits me harder than I expect. The proof of how seriously Sterling's taking this—how much he's thought about it. Prepared for it. Prepared for me.

"Quite the production," I tease, my voice thinner than I'd like, trying to mask the sudden flutter of nerves with humor.

Sterling looks up from where he's adjusting a pillow, his massive body gloriously naked, fur still damp from his own shower, muscles flexing under the dim light. He looks... devastating.

"This is an important night," he says simply, his voice so low and serious it sends a fresh jolt of heat straight to my core. "Come here."

I drop the towel without hesitation, my skin prickling under the intensity of his gaze, and cross the room on unsteady legs. Sterling meets me halfway, his massive hands—gentle but unyielding—guiding me into position. Flat on my back. Propped up just enough by pillows for comfort. Legs spread wide, trembling slightly.

Open. Vulnerable. His.

He kneels between my thighs, surveying me with a gaze that sharpens into something almost clinical—methodical and intent, like he's committing every inch of me to memory before he begins.

"We'll start with what's familiar," he says, squeezing a generous amount of lubricant into his palm and warming it between his hands. "Work up gradually. You tell me immediately if you need to stop. No pushing through pain. No trying to be brave. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," I blurt out automatically, the words slipping free before I can even think.

Sterling freezes—just for a second—his eyes darkening, the muscles along his shoulders rippling tight with restraint. But he doesn't call attention to it. Just nods once, slow and deliberate, before refocusing on the task at hand.

The first touch of his slicked finger is almost too careful—lazy spirals tracing my entrance, coaxing my body to soften, to open under him. And God—I do. I melt for him, my body welcoming the slow, familiar pressure without a fight.

"Good," Sterling murmurs, voice deep and approving, stroking my thigh with his free hand as he presses a little deeper. "You're relaxing beautifully."

One finger becomes two, then three—the steady, careful stretch sending little tremors rolling through my stomach, even as my cock hardens, flushed and aching against my belly without a single touch. Sterling works me open with ruthless patience, his breathing staying steady even as mine turns frantic—broken. And then—he pulls his fingers free.

I gasp at the sudden loss, but before I can even whimper a protest, he leans in—and

licks me. His tongue is hot, slick, relentless as it presses against my stretched rim, lapping me up like he's savoring it. Like he needs it.

A low, guttural sound rips out of me, my hips jolting helplessly off the bed, but Sterling only growls low in his throat and presses me down, holding me open with his huge hands, his mouth working me with obscene, devastating precision.

He doesn't just tease. He devours.

Long, deliberate strokes that have me writhing on the sheets, shaking, wrecked. Little thrusts of his tongue that push past the loosened ring, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my whole body. Dirty, wet, possessive licks that make my cock leak steadily against my stomach.

By the time he finally pulls back, I'm trembling, panting, my hole fluttering open and desperate, chasing the heat of his mouth.

Sterling sits back on his heels, looking at me like he wants to eat me alive. "Ready for the first plug?" he asks, voice dark and rough from what he just did to me.

I nod frantically, throat too tight to form words, every nerve in my body straining toward him, straining for more. He slicks the plug generously, then presses it to me—slow, firm, unrelenting—and it slips inside with a slick, practiced ease. My body welcomes it after so many weeks of training, but the stretch, the weight, the fullness still makes me gasp, my whole body arching into the sensation.

His eyes stay locked on mine, watching every flicker of pleasure flash across my face. Monitoring. Protecting. Owning.

"Perfect," he murmurs, rotating the plug just enough to make me gasp again, the pleasure sparking behind my eyes. "We'll leave this for a few minutes," he says,

smoothing a massive, soothing hand over my thigh. "Let your body adjust. Let you start aching for more."

He leans in and kisses me—slow and deep, lazy and claiming—his other hand stroking slow, maddening patterns across my chest, occasionally tweaking the plug just enough to make me shudder. Each tiny movement keeps me perched right on the trembling edge of awareness, wrecked and waiting. When he finally withdraws it, I whimper at the sudden emptiness, my hips chasing the sensation without thinking.

"Patience," Sterling soothes, voice dark and molten, already reaching for the next size. "We have all night."

The progression continues—each plug slightly larger than the last, each left inside me longer, Sterling working my body open with meticulous, almost reverent care. Between each insertion, he distracts me with slow, consuming kisses and the lazy drag of his hands over my heated skin—keeping me balanced right at the edge of pleasure without ever letting me fall.

By the fourth plug—the largest we've ever attempted—sweat gleams slick on both our bodies. Sterling's control is visibly fraying now, his breathing heavier, the powerful lines of his body tensed with restraint. His massive cock stands fully erect between us, the thick head dark and leaking, a testament to just how much effort he's expending to hold back.

"Last one," Sterling says, voice rough as gravel as he removes the fourth plug with slow, careful hands. "This is the largest I could find, not quite the size of my knot, but close. If you can take this comfortably—" He breaks off, jaw clenching. "—then we'll try the real thing."

The final plug is intimidating—thicker than my fist, longer, curved slightly to target the prostate relentlessly. The flared base is wider too, hinting at the challenge

Sterling's knot will eventually present. He coats it with generous amounts of lubricant, his hands steady even as the tension practically vibrates off him.

"Breathe," Sterling instructs, voice slipping into that commanding, grounding tone that never fails to calm me. "Bear down slightly as I push in."

The pressure is immediate and intense—a burning stretch that toes the razor edge between pleasure and pain. Sterling watches my face intently, advancing millimeter by careful millimeter, pausing every time he sees my expression tighten.

"Tell me how you feel," he demands, his big hand smoothing soothingly along my thigh even as the other remains perfectly still.

"Full," I gasp, muscles fluttering around the intrusion, fighting the instinct to tense. "But... good. Keep going."

His gaze softens for a heartbeat—something dark and hungry and impossibly tender flashing through those molten amber eyes—before he resumes. Slow, devastating pressure. Patient, inescapable stretch.

He grips my cock with his free hand, squeezing as he makes one more final, gentle push, and the plug slips completely inside, the widest part locking past the resistance, my body clenching reflexively around the narrower neck. The sensation is overwhelming—fullness beyond anything I've ever experienced, a constant, aching pressure against my prostate that leaves me dizzy with it.

"Beautiful," Sterling murmurs, voice almost reverent as he cups my thigh, his eyes devouring the sight of me stretched wide and trembling beneath him. "So fucking perfect."

He leaves it seated deep inside me for nearly twenty minutes, murmuring

encouragement, trailing slow, open-mouthed kisses across my chest, stroking my hair, distracting me with soft conversation and the occasional lazy tease of my nipples.

By the time he finally withdraws it—slow, careful, endlessly patient—I whimper at the sudden loss, my body clenching down around nothing, already aching for more. The emptiness feels violent, wrong, my hole fluttering helplessly in the cool air.

Sterling tosses the plug aside and settles back on his heels, staring down at me like a starving man faced with the only meal that could ever satisfy him.

"Look at you," he rasps, voice hoarse with tightly-leashed hunger. "All open for me. Fuck—" He drags one hand slowly down the inside of my thigh, his gaze molten and merciless. "You're winking at me, sweetheart. Begging to be ruined."

I sob under my breath, wrecked by the filthy sweetness of it—by how much I want to be ruined for him.

"You're ready," Sterling says, voice lower now, rougher with the weight of what's about to happen. "If you still want this... if you're still sure..."

I glance down at the already swollen base of his cock, but there's no hesitation left in me. Only need. Only him. I nod, my heart hammering against my ribs as Sterling positions himself carefully between my spread thighs. He lifts my hips with steady hands, adjusting the angle with a nest of pillows beneath my lower back, cradling me like something precious.

"Look at me," he says, voice firm but gentle. "Stay with me."

I meet his gaze—amber dark with tension—and hold it, anchoring myself in the fierceness of him as he presses the blunt head of his cock against my entrance. The

first touch of the blunt head of his cock against my wrecked hole steals the air from my lungs—hot, alive in a way no synthetic plug ever could be. He advances with agonizing slowness, just enough to breach the tight ring of muscle—and freezes.

"Okay?" he rasps, his voice shredded by the effort it's taking not to shove deeper.

"Yes," I breathe, blinking against the sting of the stretch as my body remembers how to yield. "More."

He pushes forward again, tiny, torturous increments, pausing after each shift, letting me adjust, giving me all the control even as I can feel him shaking with the need to claim. When he's almost to his knot, a slight, instinctive tremor of his hips sends him deeper than either of us intended.

I can't hold back the hiss of discomfort that punches out of me.

Sterling freezes instantly, every massive muscle locking down tight. "Hank?" His voice breaks on my name, pure, ragged fear lacing the sound.

"Just... wait," I gasp, breathing hard through the sudden stretch. "Just give me a second?—"

But he's already pulling back. Withdrawing completely. The loss is immediate, brutal.

"I hurt you," Sterling says, flat and broken, like the words are knives dragging out of his throat.

"No," I protest immediately, reaching for him, desperate to tether him to me before he spirals. "It wasn't pain, just... a lot. I can take it. I want this?—"

Sterling shakes his head sharply, refusing to meet my eyes. "You tensed. You

hissed." His voice is thick with self-recrimination. "You didn't even have to say it. I saw it." He moves away—retreating, protective, punishing himself—every line of his massive body pulled tight with guilt.

"Sterling," I plead, trying to catch his hand, to catch him, but he's already moving away, lowering himself stiffly onto the far side of the bed. He buries his head in his arms, his enormous frame folding inward, radiating misery.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles into the pillow, the words thick and broken. "I should have been more careful."

The sight of him—this towering, feral, powerful creature curled into himself like a kid who thinks he broke his favorite toy—wrecks me in a whole different way. Melts every trace of frustration straight out of me. Because underneath all that strength, all that dominance, he's terrified of hurting me. Terrified of losing me before he's even really had me.

And God—I love him for it.

I crawl across the bed, settling beside him, resting a careful hand against the broad expanse of his back. His fur is warm and damp, his massive body shuddering under the strain of everything he's holding back.

"Hey," I say softly. "Look at me."

Sterling turns his head just enough to meet my gaze. His amber eyes—usually so fierce—are raw now, shining with self-recrimination. "I promised I wouldn't hurt you," he says, the words gutted and broken.

"You didn't," I say firmly, stroking my hand down the thick line of his spine, feeling the muscles flinch under my touch. "It was just uncomfortable for a moment. That's

part of the process."

"There shouldn't be discomfort," he mutters stubbornly. "If I'd prepared you properly?—"

"Stop," I interrupt, sliding over him, straddling his massive thighs and forcing him to feel the heat and weight of my body. The position lets me reach the full width of his back, and I start massaging the dense muscle with slow, deliberate strokes. "You're being too hard on yourself," I murmur, kneading the thick knots of tension at his shoulders. "Maybe we just need a different position next time. One where I can control the depth and pace."

Sterling grunts—low and reluctant—but under my hands, the steel tension starts to ease. Little by little, his massive frame softens beneath me.

"That feels good," he admits after a long moment, voice muffled into the pillow.

"Good," I whisper, smiling despite the tight ache in my chest. "Just relax. Let me take care of you for a change."

Something about the shift—the reversal, the tenderness—thickens the air between us, sweet and hot and heavy. My own arousal, which had dulled during our aborted attempt, surges back with startling force.

I shift against him, letting my hardening cock drag slow, deliberate strokes along the cleft of his ass. Sterling tenses—just for a breath—then exhales, his massive body pushing subtly back into me, a silent, desperate plea.

"Would you let me?" I ask quietly, my voice rough, my hands stilling low on his back. "Like before?"

In answer, Sterling arches his back—an invitation so raw and trusting it steals the air from my lungs.

"I want to taste you first," I tell him, the words falling out in a voice I barely recognize—wrecked and filthy and so full of need it's a miracle I can still breathe.

Sterling makes a broken, helpless sound—half groan, half whimper—burying his face deeper into the pillow as I spread him open carefully, reverently. For a heartbeat, the sheer intimacy of it nearly undoes me. And then—I lean in and lick him.

Slow. Deliberate. Claiming.

The first taste of him explodes across my tongue—salty, earthy, dark—and I can't stop the desperate sound that rips from my throat. I press in harder, wetter, licking deep, claiming him from the inside out like he's something sacred and filthy all at once.

Sterling's whole body shudders violently, a deep, ragged groan vibrating out of him. His thighs tremble under my hands, his muscles flexing helplessly, his breath breaking into ragged gasps against the mattress.

"Fuck, Hank," he chokes out, voice wrecked and wild. "Your mouth... you're gonna kill me..."

Pride surges through me, hot and thick, drowning every ounce of hesitation. I lick him harder now—broad strokes mixed with savage little thrusts of my tongue, driving him insane, driving myself insane—until he's writhing, hips jerking, his massive body begging without words. When I finally pull back for air, Sterling is panting raggedly, vibrating with need.

I coat my fingers with lube, working the lube carefully into him, feeling him

yield—eager, open, wanting—to every slow, reverent push.

"You like that, don't you?" I murmur, hearing my own voice go darker, filthier. "Like me opening you up... getting you ready for my cock."

Sterling groans, pressing back against my hand.

"Yes," he growls, voice shaking. "Please, Hank. I need you."

The raw, desperate confession makes my cock ache so hard it hurts. I work him open slowly, feeling the thick, responsive clutch of his body give and flutter around my fingers, savoring every trembling gasp he can't hold back. When I finally slick myself and line up—heart hammering against my ribs—I pause, grounding both of us.

"Tell me if it's too much," I echo his earlier caution, even though my whole body is thrumming with the need to take him, to claim him, to make him mine.

Sterling just growls low in his chest and thrusts his hips back, a demand, a plea, a promise.

I press forward—and God.

The first push inside is pure, shattering heaven. Hot, tight, almost too tight. The muscles of his entrance clench down hard around the head of my cock, and I have to grit my teeth, fighting not to spill instantly. It feels like pushing into a velvet vise—hot, slick, and hungry. Every inch I gain is a battle—his body squeezing around me, fluttering, squeezing like he doesn't know if he wants to force me out or pull me deeper.

He's so big, so tight that the pressure is dizzying, a constant, maddening resistance that drags an inhumane sound from my throat. Every tiny movement sends sparks of

pleasure ricocheting up my spine, my cock throbbing with the desperate need to bury itself all the way inside him. I sink deeper, inch by trembling inch, and Sterling's whole body shudders under me—huge, unstoppable, yielding only to me.

By the time I bottom out, fully seated inside him, my whole body is shaking with the effort it takes not to move. Not to pound into him like an animal. He's breathing hard, his huge hands clawing at the sheets, the muscles of his back gleaming with sweat.

"You feel..." I choke on the words, overwhelmed. "God, Sterling. You feel fucking perfect." I run my hands reverently over the broad, sweat-slicked planes of his back, grounding both of us. Feeling him tremble. Feeling him take me.

"Move," Sterling growls, voice ragged, almost breaking. "Don't hold back. I need it."

Permission granted, I start to thrust, establishing a rhythm, each movement sending shockwaves of pleasure through both of us. Sterling meets every thrust eagerly, his massive body rocking beneath mine, the sounds he makes—deep, primal, broken—sending white-hot lightning racing up my spine.

"Up," I gasp, struggling to keep the right angle. "On your knees."

Sterling complies immediately, rising to hands and knees without dislodging me, spreading his legs wide so we're on the same level. The new position lets me drive deeper, drawing a satisfied rumble from deep in his chest. The size difference—the sheer wildness of it—only makes it hotter.

"Touch yourself," I urge, voice wrecked. "Want to feel you come while I'm inside you."

Sterling shifts his weight to one arm, his massive hand wrapping around his cock, pumping in time with my thrusts. I lean forward, reaching around to wrap my hand

around as much of his knot as I can, squeezing every time I bury my cock inside him.

"That's it," I pant, hips slamming harder, rougher. "Love watching you fall apart. Love seeing this huge, powerful body taking my cock so fucking perfectly."

Sterling's breathing breaks apart, his movements growing frantic, desperate.

"Hank," he gasps, voice dropping into that low, devastating register that vibrates straight into my bones. "Close."

"Me too," I gasp, pleasure building to a fever pitch. "Come for me, Sterling. I want to feel you fall apart with my cock buried inside you."

Sterling's hand clamps down over mine—huge, rough, desperate—his fingers threading between mine, squeezing tight like he's trying to anchor himself through the onslaught.

And then he breaks.

With a guttural, broken roar that vibrates through his entire massive frame, Sterling comes—his body seizing, shuddering under me in uncontrollable spasms. Thick, hot pulses of his release spill across the sheets, wet and messy, soaking the bed beneath us. His inner muscles clamp down around me with brutal force—tight, hot, rippling in hard, unstoppable waves—and the first violent contraction rips the air straight out of my lungs.

The sensation—being squeezed so fiercely, so possessively—tears the orgasm from me like a goddamn tidal wave. I cry out—half sob, half shout—slamming my hips deep into him one last time as I spill inside him, flooding him with everything I have, my cock throbbing wildly inside the relentless vise of his body.

Every nerve ending lights up at once—white-hot, electric—sparking through me in brutal, endless aftershocks. I feel every pulse, every contraction, every desperate, helpless squeeze of his body milking my cock, refusing to let me go. The world goes blinding around the edges—nothing but heat and breath and frantic, broken gasps tangled between us—until all that's left is the two of us, wrecked and shaking, bodies locked together in a slick, trembling knot of sweat and come and need.

We collapse together—a sweaty, gasping heap of tangled limbs, pounding hearts, and blissed-out exhaustion. When I finally slip free, slick and spent, Sterling rolls onto the other side of the bed, pulling me with him, wrapping those huge arms around me like armor, like he could somehow shield us both from the entire world.

"That was..." Sterling starts, his voice dazed and rough around the edges. He huffs out a breathless laugh against my hair. "Unexpected."

"Good unexpected?" I ask, suddenly shy again despite everything we just did.

Sterling presses a slow, reverent kiss to the top of my head. "Very good," he murmurs. "Though not what I had planned for today."

"Tomorrow," I murmur, tracing lazy, featherlight patterns across his chest. "Tomorrow we try again. My pace. My rules."

Sterling nods, the motion subtle, reverent. "I'm sorry I overreacted," he says, voice raw and thick with emotion. "The thought of hurting you?—"

"You didn't," I interrupt, pressing a kiss right over his heart, feeling the steady thrum against my lips. "And even if there's discomfort at first... it's worth it." You're worth it.

His arms tighten around me, pulling me so close it feels like he's trying to fuse us

together, like if he just holds on hard enough, nothing could ever tear us apart.

"We'll figure it out," Sterling promises, his voice low and sure, anchored in a kind of certainty that lodges deep in my chest. "Together."

We drift into a heavy, honey-thick silence, the only sounds our mingled breathing and the slowing pound of our heartbeats. Sterling presses sleepy, absent kisses to my forehead, my temple, the corner of my mouth—soft, claiming touches, like he's memorizing me with his lips.

"Sleep," he murmurs, pulling the blanket up over us with one hand, never loosening his grip with the other. "We have all weekend."

The last thought I have before sleep claims me is simple, certain: We were always meant to fit. Even when everything else said we shouldn't.

S unlight streams through the cabin's massive windows, warming my face and pulling me from a deep, heavy sleep. Sterling's massive arm is draped over my waist, anchoring me against him, his breathing slow and even against the back of my neck. The digital clock on the nightstand reads 11:37—later than I've slept in months. I shift slightly, and Sterling's arm tightens instinctively, holding me closer even as he stirs awake.

"Morning," he rumbles, voice rough and raw from sleep in a way that still sends shivers straight down my spine.

"Technically almost afternoon," I murmur, turning to face him.

His amber eyes are soft with affection, his fur adorably rumpled. It's these moments—seeing the carefully controlled businessman stripped down to something vulnerable and real—that still undo me completely.

"Hungry?" Sterling asks, stretching his massive frame, the mattress dipping and groaning beneath him.

"Starving," I admit, suddenly aware of the gnawing emptiness in my stomach. "But I don't feel like getting dressed and going out."

Sterling reaches lazily for his phone. "I'll order in, then."

* * *

Twenty minutes later, we're feasting on an obscene spread delivered discreetly to the door—fluffy omelets, buttery pastries still warm from the oven, fresh fruit that bursts sweet on the tongue, coffee strong enough to resurrect the dead.

"Open," Sterling says, holding out a strawberry between his thick fingers. I comply, letting him place it against my lips, his touch lingering just a second too long, a tease disguised as casual affection.

"Your turn," I say, plucking a piece of melon, holding it out. Sterling leans forward and takes it directly from my fingers, his teeth grazing my skin deliberately enough to make my breath catch.

The meal unfolds like that—playful, intimate, punctuated with quiet laughter and lazy conversation. We talk about nothing—the strange bird we spotted yesterday, Marina's latest round of office romance speculation, whether minotaur cuisine differs from human food traditions.

But beneath the surface, tension hums. Every accidental brush of hands, every glance that lingers a beat too long, every shift that reminds me of the way Sterling's body felt under mine yesterday, the way his knot will feel inside me today—it all builds, heavy and inevitable.

"Shower?" Sterling suggests casually as he drains the last of his coffee. His tone is light, but his eyes have darkened noticeably.

I nod, blood already starting to thrum faster in my veins, and follow him to the massive bathroom.

The shower is palatial even by minotaur standards—glass walls, multiple heads spraying hot water from every direction, a wide stone bench built into one side. Sterling adjusts the temperature, stepping back to let me enter first. The hot spray hits

my skin and I groan softly, tilting my face up into it, letting the tension start to melt away.

When I open my eyes again, Sterling is watching me.

Not politely. Not casually.

Hunger, naked and unhidden, blazes in his gaze. He stands in the doorway, massive and still, the sight of him blocking most of the light, making him seem even larger.

"Let me," he says, reaching for the soap.

I nod, throat too dry to speak.

Sterling steps into the shower behind me, the space somehow shrinking under the sheer force of his presence. He works the lather over my shoulders first, his massive hands achingly gentle, massaging the suds into my skin like I'm something precious, something breakable.

He takes his time, slow and methodical—across my chest, down my arms, around to my back. When his fingers slide lower, lathering my hips, my thighs, my ass, I can't stop the sharp intake of breath. Sterling hums approvingly, fingertips teasing without rushing, without expectation, building a slow, simmering heat in my core.

When he turns me under the spray to rinse away the soap, I'm already half-hard, my cock stirring helplessly just from his hands, his attention. When I glance down, Sterling's own arousal is unmistakable—even half-hard, he's impressive, thick and heavy between his powerful thighs.

"My turn," I say, voice rough as I take the soap from his hands.

Sterling rumbles his approval, tilting his head back under the water, baring himself to me completely. I work the lather into his thick fur, paying reverent attention to the places I know he's sensitive—the base of his horns, the hollow of his throat, the faint line where fur gives way to bare, smoother skin along his lower abdomen. He shudders slightly under my hands, not from cold—but from the simple, overwhelming act of being touched. Of being cared for.

By the time I'm kneeling at his feet, steam curling around us like a living thing, we've dropped every last pretense that this was about getting clean. Sterling's cock is fully, gloriously hard, brushing against my cheek, my shoulder, heavy and hot, like he's daring me to acknowledge it. Like he knows I'm already aching for him.

When I finally give in—wrapping both hands around the thick, velvet heat of him—he groans, the sound ripping out of him raw, echoing off the shower walls like a thunderclap. I lap up the drop of precum with my tongue, my eyes rolling back as his taste explodes in my mouth, white hot need racing along my nerve endings.

"I need you, Sterling," I rasp, looking up at him through the swirling haze of steam, voice wrecked and begging. "Here. Now."

His face tightens—desire crashing against caution—but it only takes a beat before he's reaching for the waterproof lube we'd stashed on the caddy like two idiots pretending we wouldn't end up here. "Turn around," he growls, voice so deep it vibrates straight down my spine. "Hands on the wall."

My whole body shudders at the command. I obey instantly, palms flattening against the slick tile, the hot spray pounding against my shoulders while Sterling moves behind me—solid, inevitable. When his fingers press against me—slick, sure, devastating—I gasp, rocking back instinctively. One finger. Then two. Then three—working me open with a brutal patience that borders on cruelty.

"Good," he mutters, low and rough, like gravel dragged across silk. "So fucking good for me."

By the time he pulls his fingers free, I'm shaking—empty, desperate, my whole body vibrating with the need to be filled again. And then—the blunt, demanding head of his cock presses against me, thick and unyielding, a slow, merciless threat. He pushes into me with excruciating slowness, and my fingernails scrape helplessly against the tile. Every inch feels like a brand, a stretch so intense it has my whole body clenching, burning, breaking open around him.

"Breathe," he reminds me, dragging a huge, steady hand down the curve of my spine. "Relax."

Easy for him to say. I'm split open around him, trembling, my vision sparking at the edges from the sheer overwhelming pressure—from the way he fills me, stretches me, leaves no room for anything but him. When he's halfway inside, I can't stop myself—I shove back, desperate, reckless, needing more, needing all of him.

Sterling hisses through his teeth, his hands clamping down hard on my hips, so tight I know I'll feel the bruises tomorrow. "Careful," he grits out, voice so wrecked it barely sounds human.

"You feel so fucking good," I pant, shameless and gone. "More. Please, Sterling. Please."

His self-control is terrifying—a brutal, beautiful thing. He gives me another inch, then sets a rhythm that's maddening—shallow thrusts that tease and torment, keeping me strung out, trembling, desperate, every nerve screaming for more. I try to push back again but Sterling stops me still with a low, guttural growl that rolls through my body like thunder, making my knees almost buckle.

"Patience," he snarls, voice shredded and shaking. "You'll take it all when you're ready. Not a second before."

I can feel it happening—the thick base of him swelling slowly, the beginnings of the knot taking shape deep inside me. My heart slams against my ribs, panic and desire warring in my blood. My whole body throbs with the need to be claimed, to be locked, to be owned so deeply there's no going back. But Sterling curses under his breath—a raw, vicious sound—and pulls out, the sudden emptiness so sharp it almost rips a sob from my throat.

"Too close," he rasps, bracing one hand against the wall, his other hand fisting the base of his cock. "Can't risk it."

Before I can beg—because I would, dignity be damned—he spins me around and crushes his mouth to mine, all teeth and tongue and furious restraint snapping. He lifts me like I weigh nothing, pinning me between his body and the wall, my legs locking around his hips on instinct.

"Hold on," he growls, guiding himself back inside me in one powerful, devastating thrust that punches the air from my lungs but stops just short of what I need the most.

This angle—God, this angle—lets him control everything. He slams into that sweet, shattering spot inside me with relentless precision, fucking me with a raw, feral need that rips the moans from my throat.

"Sterling, I need all of you," I gasp, wrecked and begging without even knowing what I'm begging for.

He presses his forehead against mine, breathing raggedly, fucking me deep, fucking me sure.

"Look at you," he growls, voice vibrating against my mouth. "Taking my cock so goddamn perfectly. You were made for this. Made for me."

The words—his words—shatter something inside me. I feel myself tightening, teetering right on the edge. He knows. Of course he knows. He wraps one big hand around my cock, stroking in ruthless counterpoint to his thrusts, then squeezes—just enough to hold me back.

"Not yet," he snarls, voice guttural, almost broken with how close he is. "Not fucking yet." He braces his forehead against my shoulder, his whole body trembling, fighting for control. "I want you to come with me," he growls, grinding deep, slow circles inside me. "I want to feel you squeezing down around my knot—tight, desperate, milking me while I'm locked inside you." His voice drops, raw and filthy, like he's painting a picture just for me. "I want to feel you fall apart with my cock buried so deep you can't tell where you end and I begin. I want to feel your tight little ass fluttering around me—so sweet, so fucking wrecked it'll feel like heaven when I split you open and stuff you full."

He thrusts shallowly, making me sob, making me tremble on the edge.

"You're gonna make me come so deep you'll feel it for days," he snarls against my throat, biting hard enough to leave a mark. "Gonna knot you so tight you won't even think about anyone else. Only me. Only this."

It takes everything in me not to sob with frustration when he pulls out, the sudden emptiness so sharp it leaves me gasping. He lowers me carefully—almost tenderly—back onto my shaky feet, but the wild, feral burn in his amber eyes promises this isn't over.

Not even close.

He shuts off the water with a sharp twist of his wrist, grabbing towels with hands that tremble around the edges—not from fear. Not from hesitation. From the sheer, brutal effort of holding himself back. And he never once takes his eyes off me. Not for a second.

We towel each other dry with the urgency of two people seconds from combusting, hands slipping, fumbling, neither of us caring about thoroughness. Sterling's knot has faded enough not to be dangerous yet, but his cock is still massive and angry hard, curving up against the thick planes of his stomach, the sight alone making my mouth dry out.

I'm still dragging the towel through my hair when Sterling presses into me, steering me backward with a single-mindedness that leaves no room for doubt. He herds me out of the bathroom, across the cool wood floors of the bedroom, straight toward the giant wall of windows overlooking nothing but wild, untamed forest.

The glass is ice against my bare back, the shocking cold making me gasp—and Sterling's heat pressing against my front nearly buckles my knees. He spins me roughly to face the window, crowding against me, massive chest to my back, kicking my legs apart with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Sterling—" I gasp, heart hammering, the sudden exposure making adrenaline spike through my veins. "Someone could?—"

"No one for miles," he cuts me off, voice dark and sure, one hand already gripping my hip, the other reaching between us.

I feel him spit—rough, crude, feral—and for a moment, shock roots me to the spot. Sterling, always meticulous, careful... gone. Stripped down to instinct. To need. And then he's pushing inside me—deep, deliberate, greedy—and my hands slap against the glass, searching for purchase as my whole body lurches forward from the force of

it.

"Fuck," I pant, forehead thudding against the cold window, the burn and stretch sending sparks through my bloodstream.

"Mine," Sterling snarls against my ear, grinding deeper, setting a brutal rhythm that has my cock dragging against the glass with every thrust, the sensation dizzying, devastating. "Waited too long for this. Too fucking long."

His words come in a low, relentless stream now—dirty, possessive, wrecked—things I've never heard fall from his mouth before, promises about how deep he'll fuck me, how many times he'll make me come, how good I feel split open around him.

It's messy and rough and so desperately, achingly tender that it makes my chest squeeze painfully tight. I'm seconds away from falling apart, untouched and grinding against the window, when Sterling yanks out, spinning me with a snarl of frustration and hunger.

I barely catch my breath before he drops to his knees in front of me—Sterling, proud and powerful, on his goddamn knees—and swallows my cock like it's the only thing he's ever wanted. I choke on a broken moan, fingers tangling helplessly in the thick fur of his hair, trying and failing not to fuck his mouth.

"Sterling—" I rasp, hips jerking, desperate. "Close?—"

He pulls back just in time, lips swollen, chest heaving. His hands, those massive hands, frame my thighs like a brand.

"Not yet," he growls, voice so wrecked it barely sounds human. "I want you to come when I'm locked inside you. When there's no fucking escape."

I nearly come from those words alone.

Sterling stands and backs toward the bed, lying down with a controlled grace that does nothing to hide the raw need in his body. His cock stands proud against his stomach, thick and pulsing, slick with desire.

He sprawls across the bed like a king—waiting, offering everything—and looks at me like I'm the only thing he's ever needed.

"Your choice," he says hoarsely, amber eyes burning into mine. "Your pace. Your control."

This—this—is what we talked about yesterday. Me on top. Me choosing how much to take. Me deciding if I can handle it when his knot swells. The air between us vibrates with electricity. With trust. With want so thick it's almost unbearable.

I grab the lube from the nightstand, squeezing a generous amount into my palm. I warm it between my hands—God help me, I want this to be good for us—and smooth it over his cock in long, tight strokes. Sterling's jaw clenches. His whole body tenses, muscles bunching and flexing under his skin, his hands fisting the sheets. I crawl onto the bed, straddling his hips, heart hammering so hard I can hear it over my own ragged breathing.

"Watch me," I command, voice shaking but certain, locking my gaze to his. "Watch me take all of you."

His answering growl is pure, molten hunger.

As I line myself up, bracing my hands on his chest, I realize—this is it. This is the moment I stop surviving him and start claiming him right back. I lower myself onto him slowly, fighting every instinct that screams for more, faster, now. The broad head

of his cock presses against my entrance—and when it breaches me, the gasp that punches from my lungs matches the broken sound that rips from Sterling's chest, like we're already tied together at the soul and just now realizing it.

The position gives me the reins—my choice, my pace, my pain and pleasure—and I cling to that fragile thread of control like it's the only thing keeping me from disintegrating. Another inch. And another. Each brutal stretch sharp and sweet, burning through me until my whole body feels like it's vibrating apart.

"Beautiful," Sterling rasps, voice shredded with need, his massive hands bracketing my hips—not pushing, not pulling—just there, steady, shaking, mine. "You're perfect, baby. So fucking perfect for me."

Every word brands itself into my skin. I take him deeper, trembling, the new angle letting me adjust—but still, he's almost too much. Stretching me wider than I thought possible, forcing my body to learn him in real time, nerve ending by nerve ending.

And then I feel it. The beginning swell of his knot, thickening at the base of his cock, pressing against me with slow, merciless insistence. The fullness makes my head spin. My body clenches down around him reflexively, desperate and panicked and starving all at once. I freeze, breathing hard, the edge of pain and pleasure blurring into something that feels holy.

"We can stop here," Sterling offers, voice raw, barely restrained, like it's killing him to even say the words. "This is already?—"

"No," I cut him off, shaking, fierce, riding the edge of sanity. "I want all of you. Want your knot. Want you locked inside me. Want you to lose control."

The sound he makes is half-snarl, half-plea, ripping out of him like it physically hurts to hold back. His grip tightens around my hips—just the slightest warning—but he

doesn't force me. He lets me choose. I start moving, shallow, deliberate rolls of my hips, working myself down on him inch by brutal inch, dragging him deeper into my body until the stretch feels like it's going to tear me apart.

Sterling watches me like he's starving—like he's memorizing every flicker of pleasure, every shattered gasp, every desperate shudder that crosses my face.

"That's it," he murmurs, voice sinking so low it feels like it vibrates inside my bones. "Working yourself open for me. Stretching that tight little hole around my cock. Taking what you need."

Each filthy word cuts through the fog in my head, sharpening everything, fanning the fire burning under my skin hotter, brighter. When the widest part of his knot starts to breach me, the stretch rips a strangled cry from my throat—brutal, overwhelming, hovering right at the jagged edge of too much.

"Breathe," Sterling soothes, wrapping one massive hand around my leaking cock with devastating gentleness. "Relax for me. Let your body open up and take what's meant for you. You can do this, Hank. You were made for this."

I cling to the feeling of his hand—pleasure and grounding and ownership all at once—and focus on the slow, aching slide of him inside me. My body fights it. Then it yields. The knot slips inside in one long, impossible, world-ending moment, and I collapse against his chest, stunned and shaking, locked around him so tightly I can't tell where he ends and I begin.

Sterling lets out a roar of pure, broken pleasure, burying his face against my throat, his breath coming in wrecked, desperate gasps. "Fuck—so good—so fucking perfect—" he growls, voice torn from somewhere deep and primal as his knot grows to its full size, locking inside me like a brand, a bond, a fucking claim.

"Don't move," I gasp, overwhelmed, muscles fluttering helplessly around the obscene stretch. "Just—just give me a second?—"

Sterling trembles under me with the effort of staying still, his arms locked around me like a vice, his hand still stroking me with slow, reverent pressure, keeping me tethered when everything inside me feels like it's about to detonate.

Little by little, the shock fades—and then I start to move. Not up, not off—because that's impossible now. But tiny, grinding rocks of my hips, squeezing and massaging his knot with every desperate shift.

Every tiny movement wrecks me. Pleasure crashes through my body in wild, helpless bolts, the knot grinding mercilessly against my prostate until I'm shaking, gasping, my vision sparking at the edges.

"Fuck," Sterling growls, voice wrecked and shaking, his hips fighting not to rut up into me. "You're milking my knot—squeezing me so fucking tight it feels like you're gonna rip the come right out of my balls."

His praise slams into me harder than any thrust. I lose myself in it—moving faster, grinding harder, desperate for more, chasing the edge like it's the only thing keeping me alive.

"Mine," Sterling snarls, crashing his mouth against mine in a brutal, claiming kiss—teeth scraping, tongue fucking into me like he owns every breath I take. "Taking my knot like you were fucking built for it—made to lock around me, trap me inside you, milk me dry until there's nothing left but you and this."

"Sterling—" I gasp, riding him in wild, helpless jerks, my body barely able to process the heat, the pressure, the stretch, the obscene fullness locking us together. "I'm—I'm gonna?—"

"Yes," he snarls against my mouth, thrusting up into me as much as the swollen knot will allow, every desperate flex driving him deeper, tighter. "Come for me, Hank. Own me."

The filthy promise rips through me—and I detonate. I come with a hoarse, broken sob, my whole body convulsing violently, helplessly, hot ropes of release painting Sterling's chest and stomach and my own belly, each pulse ripped out of me by the relentless, choking grip of his knot grinding against my prostate. The pleasure is endless—merciless—electrifying every nerve in my body, setting my skin on fire.

I can't stop.

Each spasm clenches around the thick base of him, squeezing down tighter, dragging shattered groans from Sterling's throat, making his huge body jolt under me like he's being electrocuted by my climax.

"Fuck—" Sterling gasps, voice wrecked and breaking apart, his arms snapping around me like a trap. "So fucking tight—gripping my knot like you're trying to rip my soul out—gonna fill you so deep you'll never get me out."

He breaks with a roar that sounds like it could tear the world apart. His hips jerk up wildly, slamming deep inside me, and then—he's coming. Violent, endless spurts of molten heat flood me, so much I can feel it forcing its way around the brutal seal of his knot, slicking my thighs, dripping down between us.

He keeps coming—longer, harder than anything I've ever felt—his cock jerking helplessly inside me, locked so deep I can feel every pulse, every twitch, every desperate overflow.

And it wrecks me all over again.

Another orgasm crashes through me without warning—white-hot, violent, tearing a wrecked, broken sob from my throat as my cock twitches against his chest, releasing weak spurts over skin already slick with sweat and cum.

I can't think. Can't breathe. Can only feel?—

The deep, endless pulses inside me. The brutal, perfect stretch of the knot locking us together. The low, guttural sounds Sterling makes against my neck, broken, helpless, wrecked beyond words. His whole body shakes under me, huge hands clinging to my hips like if he lets go for even a second, he'll die.

"That's it," he rasps against my temple, voice shaking so bad the words barely make it out. "Take it all. Fucking take it, sweetheart. Knot's locked. You're mine now. Nothing's ever getting me out of you." His cock throbs again—another heavy, desperate spurt—and it feels so deep, so full, so impossibly right that I whimper, clutching at his shoulders, grinding down against him instinctively, chasing every last aftershock.

Our bodies are locked together in the thick, sticky wreckage of it—sweat and cum and heat smeared between us, leaking out of me in obscene, hot rivers.

I'm trembling so hard I can barely hold myself up.

Sterling wraps his arms around me, dragging me tight against his chest, burying his face in my throat, breathing like he's just survived drowning. We stay like that—locked, flooded, broken—hearts hammering out the same wrecked, frantic rhythm, bodies welded together by something stronger than physics.

Even after Sterling's release fades, my body won't stop trembling around him. Every slight twitch of my muscles drags the knot against oversensitized nerves, pulling fresh, involuntary pulses of pleasure through me. Smaller orgasms ripple out in waves

I can't control, wringing desperate little gasps from my throat as more fluid leaks from my cock, pooling between our bodies.

"Don't... stop," I manage to gasp, though he's barely even moving. It's not anything he's doing. It's the knot, swollen and locked inside me, holding my body hostage to pleasure I can't outrun.

"I've got you," Sterling murmurs, one massive hand moving to stroke my cock with the lightest, gentlest touch imaginable—feather-light caresses that somehow draw even more from me, leaving me broken, trembling, completely undone.

Time stops meaning anything. There's just us—tangled together, joined so deeply I can't tell where I end and he begins. Nothing matters except the overwhelming, all-consuming rightness of this.

"Are you all right?" he asks after a long moment, voice rough like he's been shouting—or praying.

"Perfect," I murmur, nuzzling into his fur like it's the safest place in the world. "Better than perfect."

"We'll be like this for a while," he says, voice dipping into that low, soothing register that strokes every raw, exposed nerve inside me. "Fifteen minutes. Maybe longer."

"I don't mind," I whisper, sinking deeper into him, letting his massive frame curl protectively around mine. The sheer intimacy of it—the ache and the heat and the feeling of belonging—makes my throat tight.

Sterling looks at me, something fragile flickering behind his burning amber gaze. Vulnerability, stark and unguarded.

"I never thought I'd have this," he admits quietly. "Someone who could accept all of me. Who'd want to."

The rawness of it guts me. I lift a shaky hand to his face, running my fingers through the thick, soft fur of his jaw, marveling at the incredible, impossible creature holding me like I'm the most precious thing he's ever touched.

"I don't just accept you," I say, voice steady even though my heart feels like it's cracking open inside my chest. "I want all of you. Every part. Because of who you are—not in spite of it."

Sterling closes his eyes for a second, like my words hurt almost as much as they heal. He turns his head and presses a kiss to my palm, lingering there like he's afraid he'll wake up and this will all be gone.

"I've never been so glad to be wrong about something," he whispers.

"Wrong about what?" I ask, though I think I already know.

"About us." His arms tighten around me, pulling me impossibly closer. "When you first started looking at me like that... when you spied on me in the collection room... I thought it was just curiosity. Just something new." He shakes his head, almost bitter. "And when we got physical, I told myself it was just attraction. Just hormones. Even after weeks, after months, I kept thinking it was temporary. That you'd get bored. That the novelty would wear off."

"And now?" I whisper when he goes quiet.

Sterling meets my eyes—and there's nothing left of the careful, professional man I first met. Only the wild, furious truth of him.

"Now I know it's something much more dangerous," he says hoarsely. "Something permanent."

The confession steals the air from my lungs. My heart pounds against my ribs, against his chest, the weight of what's between us slamming into me with the same terrifying, beautiful force that everything else about Sterling carries.

Before I can respond, Sterling winces slightly, his massive hands tightening protectively around my hips.

"The knot's starting to subside," he says, voice tight with apology. "Might be uncomfortable for a minute."

He's right. As the pressure inside me slowly eases, it's strange—more a tugging, shifting sensation than pain, walking the edge between pleasure and discomfort. I hold onto him, burying my face against his throat, breathing him in.

When he finally slips free with a slow, careful motion, I can't stop the soft, broken sound that leaves me. The sudden emptiness is jarring, leaving me feeling hollow and raw and still somehow desperately full of him.

Sterling doesn't let me go. Not for a second. His arms band around me, hauling me against his chest, his hand smoothing soothing circles down my spine like he's trying to glue me back together.

"How do you feel?" he murmurs, pressing kisses into my hair. "Any pain?"

"No pain," I breathe, nuzzling closer, greedy for every point of contact. "Just... different. Good different. Full in a way I've never been before."

He rumbles with satisfaction—a low, deep sound that vibrates right through my

bones—and keeps petting me like he never intends to stop.

For a long time, we don't move. His fingers map lazy, reverent patterns over my bare skin while mine trace the thick, mesmerizing texture of his fur. Every stroke feels like a promise. Every breath shared feels like a vow.

Eventually, Sterling shifts just enough to murmur against my temple, "We should probably clean up." But he doesn't move to let me go.

"In a minute," I mumble, already half-asleep, completely boneless against him. "Just... stay. Stay like this a little longer."

Sterling presses a kiss to the crown of my head, his massive frame curling protectively around mine.

"We have all the time in the world," he promises, voice shaking with how much he means it.

And lying there, wrapped up in him, the late afternoon sun spilling across the tangled sheets and the wreckage of us, I believe him. For the first time, I believe everything.

The early morning light filters through the blinds, casting lazy gold stripes across Sterling's sleeping form. Six months in, and I'm still a goner. Totally, hopelessly undone by the simple, devastating way he exists—massive chest rising and falling in deep, steady breaths, the occasional twitch of his ears, the way his hand seeks me out even in sleep like some part of him knows I should always be there.

"Staring again?" Sterling rumbles without opening his eyes, his mouth curving into a sleepy smile that punches straight through my ribs.

"Can't help it," I murmur, dragging my fingers through the thick, silky fur covering his chest. "Six months later and I still wake up half convinced I dreamed you."

Sterling's eyes blink open—molten amber, warm as the sun. "Believe it," he says, tugging me closer with an easy strength that still leaves me breathless. "Though, full disclosure... sometimes I wonder too."

The rhythm of our mornings has settled into something soft and sure—Sterling making coffee while I throw breakfast together, our movements synchronized like some slow, private dance. Us. A domestic life I never even knew how badly I wanted until I had it.

"Expansion meeting's at ten," Sterling reminds me, handing me a mug—his the size of a soup bowl, mine normal-sized but proudly emblazoned with Sterling's Pride across the side.

"The Westside location?" I ask, sliding a plate of eggs and toast across the counter.

He nods, already scrolling through his emails with one hand. "Zoning commission finally approved the request. Dr. Kim's got the equipment budget ready, and you're presenting the operational timeline."

"Which means Helena will pick apart every staffing projection I made," I groan, only half joking.

Sterling reaches across the table and wraps his huge hand around mine, squeezing. "She only tears into the work she respects. You've earned her trust. You've earned everyone's."

The words mean more than they probably should. Maybe because they're true. Maybe because six months ago, I'd been the intern nobody trusted not to screw up a coffee order. And now... I was his Administrative Director. I was his partner in more ways than one.

"Speaking of respect," I say, scrolling through my own messages, "the Chamber of Commerce wants you to speak at next month's leadership conference. Theme is 'Innovative Agricultural Models in Rural Communities.' You've been specifically requested."

Sterling freezes, coffee halfway to his mouth, something like pride and disbelief flickering across his face. "They specified me? Not just someone from the company?"

"You specifically," I confirm, grinning. "And yes, they know you're a minotaur. They even mention your 'unique perspective' as an asset."

It's a small thing, maybe. But it feels enormous. After everything—after Blackwood's blackmail attempts, after months of cautious visibility—it feels like winning something we hadn't dared name out loud.

Sterling's still processing when he glances at the clock and grimaces. "We should get moving. Helena will start passive-aggressively texting in about five minutes."

I stand to clear the plates, but Sterling grabs me by the waist with a low, rumbling growl, yanking me between his massive thighs like he owns me.

"Though," he murmurs, voice dropping into that wreck-me register that makes my spine melt, "we do have thirty minutes before we actually need to leave..."

"Cutting it close," I tease—but I'm already leaning into him, already feeling the fire catch low in my gut.

"I've gotten very efficient," he says, slipping his hands up under my shirt, palms rough and sure, dragging heat across my skin.

Six months has taught us exactly how to break each other apart and still make it to meetings on time. Barely.

I straddle his lap without hesitation, mindful of the chair's reinforced frame, and Sterling kisses me like he plans to keep me here all fucking day. His mouth is heat and filth and hunger, grinding me down slow and filthy against the thick, hot line of his cock.

"Bedroom?" he growls against my mouth.

"No time," I pant, already yanking at his belt with shaking fingers. "Here."

His eyes flash molten gold, and the low, possessive sound he makes vibrates straight through my bones. A second later, we're tearing at each other—clothes shoved out of the way, pants in a puddle on the floor, cocks flushed and leaking between us.

Sterling grabs the lube from the kitchen drawer like we've done a hundred times

before, slicking his hand fast and filthy. Before I can move, he flips me—strong hands grabbing my hips, spinning me around so my back presses to his chest.

"Hands on my knees," he orders, voice low and wrecked. "Now."

I brace myself against his legs as he spreads my thighs wide, hauling my ass back against him like he's claiming territory. I feel the blunt, slick head of his cock press against my entrance—hot, heavy, demanding—and then he shoves in with a brutal, perfect stretch that knocks the air right out of my lungs.

"Fuck, baby," Sterling groans, his massive hands locking around my hips, yanking me back hard. "Always so fucking ready for me. So fucking tight."

He starts working me open with rough, relentless thrusts. One heavy hand pushes me down until my cock slides between his thick, hard thighs—until I'm desperately fucking him while he splits me open on his cock. I can feel his muscles flexing around me, trapping my cock between them, squeezing every desperate, leaking twitch of it like he's milking me already.

"That's it," he growls, biting at my shoulder, rutting into me. "Use me. Fuck my thighs while I stuff you full."

The slap of skin-on-skin is obscene, wet and messy, echoing off the kitchen walls. I can barely breathe, grinding helplessly between his legs, feeling the rough drag of his muscles against my cock every time he shoves deeper into my ass.

"Close," I choke out, shuddering. "Sterling, fuck—I'm close?—"

"Good," he snarls, driving his hips up harder, his knot already starting to swell, locking me down onto him even tighter. "Come for me. I want to feel your cum dripping down my fucking legs while I fill you up."

The filth of it—his voice, the grinding heat, the thick, brutal stretch—shatters something inside me. I come with a broken, wrecked cry, cock jerking helplessly between the rough vise of his thighs, painting his skin with hot, sticky spurts. My whole body clenches down around him, locking him in even deeper.

Sterling lets out a savage roar and slams into me one last time, knot locking brutally thick, stretching me wide open as he empties inside me—hot, endless pulses of cum spilling so deep I swear I can feel it in my guts.

I sob against his thigh, overwhelmed, ruined, shaking with the aftershocks. Sterling holds me crushed against him, locked to the hilt, every frantic twitch of his cock sending aftershocks through my broken, oversensitized body.

"That's it," he pants, voice raw and broken. "Gonna have my cum leaking out of this sweet little ass all fucking day. So full of me everyone'll know you're mine just from the way you smell."

I whimper, clenching around him instinctively, grinding weakly against his legs, wringing every last drop out of him.

He pulls me up, arms wrapping around my chest, caging me against him like a trophy, both of us panting, shuddering, still fused together, still twitching with overstimulation and wrecked, brutal pleasure.

Sterling presses his forehead to the back of my neck and growls low and possessive. "Next time," he promises, voice shaking, "next time I'm not gonna stop until you're dripping so much you can't even fucking walk."

* * *

An hour later, freshly showered and dressed in clothes that still feel too tight over skin aching for more, we slip into the expansion meeting like nothing happened.

Helena shoots us a look—sharp, knowing—but just hands out the agenda without a word. Thank God. Because if she said one thing, one thing, I would crack wide open and spill every filthy thing Sterling did to me in the kitchen.

The meeting hums along, voices droning in a rhythm that almost lulls me into forgetting how raw I still feel. Dr. Kim rattles off her budget proposals with her usual scalpel-precision. Helena bulldozes through staffing needs like a woman on a mission. Marina clicks through scheduling updates like her fingers are powered by rage and caffeine.

When it's my turn, I push off the table, palms sweaty, and somehow deliver the operational timeline like I can't still feel Sterling's cum dripping out of me. The questions come quick—focused, respectful—but my head's swimming, every brush of Sterling's knee against mine sending fresh heat spiraling low in my gut.

"Nicely done," Sterling murmurs when I drop back into the seat beside him. His voice curls inside me like a fist, wrecking my composure. His knee presses into mine, steady, deliberate, and no one notices, but I notice. Oh, I notice. I want to crawl into his lap and stay there. Preferably naked.

The meeting adjourns, the room a sudden, blessed release, but Marcus cuts us off before we can bolt.

"Almost forgot," he says, thrusting an envelope into Sterling's hand. "Annual Minotaur Cultural Association dinner. You're both invited."

Sterling stiffens, catching the significance faster than I do. "Both of us?"

"By name," Marcus confirms, his mouth twitching like he's fighting a grin. "First time they've ever extended a formal invite to a human."

The weight of that lands like a hammer between us—heavy, monumental. Sterling

and me. Together. Not hidden. Not half-recognized. Seen. And not just seen—celebrated.

"You don't have to come," Sterling says as we walk to his office, voice low enough to scrape along my spine. "I know those events can be... difficult."

I close the door behind us with a snick that feels way too loud. "Are you serious?" I step into him, chest to chest. "Of course I'm going."

Something fractures in his expression—this rough, vulnerable tenderness he never shows anyone else. He moves to the window, arms folding across his massive chest like he's trying to hold himself together.

"When I started this place," he says, voice thick, "all I wanted was to offer dignity. I never thought it would become... this." He gestures helplessly—toward the blueprints on the wall, the buzz of construction outside, me.

I cross to him, slide my arm around his waist, feel the way he leans into me without hesitation. "You built more than a business, Sterling," I say quietly. "You built a life. Our life."

He turns, slow and deliberate, and my heart hammers so hard it hurts.

"Move in with me," he says.

I blink. "What?"

He cups my face like I'm breakable and he's terrified of losing me. "Make it official. No more bouncing between your place and mine. No more half-measures. Life's too short, and I want all of you." He pauses, and when he speaks again, it's a rasp dragged from somewhere raw. "I need all of you."

For half a second, I just stare, stunned by the naked want in his voice. Then I'm laughing, half-choked with emotion. "God, when did you get so good at this?"

"I can do even better," Sterling says, already reaching into his desk drawer. And then he's kneeling—this huge, powerful man sinking to one knee with absolute, fearless devotion—and holding out a simple gold band.

I forget how to breathe.

"I had a whole thing planned," he says, voice steady, rough. "But you deserve the truth, not some performance. I love you, Hank Honeyworth. Will you marry me?"

The world stops spinning. Time snaps into a tight, electric knot between us. I see everything—every kiss, every whispered confession, every stubborn, feral act of love he's shown me—and I know, I know, there's only one answer.

"Yes," I say. My voice breaks, but I don't care. "God, yes."

He slides the ring onto my shaking hand, and when he stands, I'm already surging into him, clutching his shirt, desperate to anchor myself to him before I float right off the damn earth.

He kisses me hard then pulls back just enough to growl, "Home. Now."

I try to remember the meetings we have. I really do. But then he grinds against me, letting me feel exactly how hard he is, and my brain surrenders in a rush of heat.

"Cancel the meetings," I gasp against his throat. "Cancel everything."

He's already texting Helena by the time I stumble toward the door, my legs jelly. "Administrative privilege," he rumbles smugly.

I grab his tie, yanking him down to my level. "Celebration privilege," I correct, kissing him hard enough to bruise.

The ride home is a blur. Sterling drives like a man possessed, one hand on the wheel, the other gripping my thigh with bruising force. Every red light is a new form of torture. Every brush of his fingers a silent promise: Soon. Soon. Soon.

The second we tumble through the door, all pretense is gone. Sterling lifts me like I weigh nothing, slams me against the wall, and devours my mouth with a groan that vibrates through my whole body.

"My fiancé," he pants between kisses, hands everywhere. "Mine. Always."

"Yours," I rasp, clawing at his belt, dizzy with need. "Now, Sterling. Now."

He doesn't make it to the bedroom. Neither do I.

Clothes shred. Buttons pop. There's nothing careful about it—just raw, filthy need, the kind that turns you inside out and leaves you begging for more.

When he finally drives into me with one hard, relentless thrust, my entire world explodes. I swear I black out for a second, clinging to him like my life depends on it.

And when he growls my name into the crook of my neck as he comes, trembling, wrecked, his huge body shuddering around mine—I know with absolute certainty: This is home. This is forever. And this is just the beginning.