



Operation: CuddleDom (The Port Haven Omegaverse #9)

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Category: Romance

Description: Justice Twill thought surviving the cruise was the hard part. Turns out, unresolved childhood trauma, alpha ego, CEO drive, and being a pack leader doesn't mix well. He's drowning in his need to control everything while denying himself the very comfort his omegas are desperate to give.

Ren launches a conspiracy with his omegas, Mackenzie and Theo, to break down Justice's walls.

Commence Operation: CuddleDom

Mackenzie is tasked with turning their alpha into a cuddle monster. Theo must nurture their fragile power dynamic. Calling his alpha "Sir" in front of his pack might be the hardest thing he has to do.

And Ren? Well, despite not being the pack lead, he always gets to be on top.

As Justice cracks in the best possible way, all four of them discover that true intimacy means being brave enough to be vulnerable and completely messy.

This novella is a companion to *Why Cruise*, part of the Port Haven Omegaverse, and is best enjoyed after reading *Why Cruise*. A steamy, emotional look at love after the happily ever after, where the real work of building a pack begins.

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REN TWILL

It should be illegal, criminal, to be this damn happy.

I leaned back on an elbow on a checkered blanket. An actual fucking checkered blanket. Mackenzie had made a passing comment about wanting to go on a picnic and the next day, a luxury picnic kit, complete with a wicker basket, wine tote, and checkered blanket had been delivered to the penthouse.

Justice was in his wish fulfillment era, apparently.

It made him giddy. I never wanted that to stop.

“You should have made them,” Mackenzie said, popping open the lid on a little glass dish. She fished out a tiny ball of marinated mozzarella, popped it in her mouth before setting it down in front of me.

“No, you don’t eat mushrooms,” Theo said.

“Yeah, but I’m not allergic or anything. You like stuffed mushrooms. Ren likes them. Justice likes them. I just think they are slimy and gross.”

“Exactly,” Theo said like that was all there was to the conversation, effectively banning mushrooms from the Twill household.

Twill .

It still gave me a rush, seeing “Twill” next to my name. Not all packs did the name change thing. Some adopted a new pack name. Some never did. I was more than happy to put Delano in the ground.

Mackenzie stretched her legs out, hooking one over Theo’s. I tugged at the hem of her sundress. I didn’t need a flash of her thigh distracting me. They chatted about food and the upcoming house manager interviews, finishing each other’s sentences, like they had been doing it their whole lives.

I cracked open a bottle of water. It was no longer icy cold.

Port Haven was experiencing an early fall heat wave with tropical temperatures.

We were tucked in the shade of a giant weeping willow overlooking the Grand Lawn of the University’s botanic gardens.

Not only was it cooler, but it also gave us a bit of privacy.

It was still public enough to stall any potential meltdowns that might occur.

I had completely chickened out of this conversation once or twice already, and was counting on the semi-public environment to make it easier. For me. Not for them.

I stretched my legs out, propped up one knee, and picked at the pasta salad with my fingers.

“So,” I kept my voice light, “we need to form a conspiracy.”

Mackenzie gasped. “Oh! Are we doing crime?”

“No.” My smile hurt my face.

“I know you’re the professional, but I think we did a rather good job at it during the cruise.”

“Speak for yourself. I am not cut out to be a thief,” Theo said, almost despondent.

“Well, stealing cars is out, at least until I get my license and can be the getaway driver.” She gave me a sharp look.

Justice and I had both steadfastly refused to be her driving instructor. It wasn’t a question of not wanting her to learn, if that’s what she chose to do. We didn’t think we could handle it and be nice in the process.

It was a control issue. We both felt better when we were the one who was behind the wheel.

Shit got tense when it was just the four of us in the new SUV he’d bought.

Limo service was a little better. But the thought of our omega negotiating a several ton vehicle through the Port Haven streets with little to no driving experience pushed our tolerance.

She had yet to book driving lessons herself, however.

I took a breath and inwardly braced.

“Justice isn’t doing well.” Not great phrasing, not that it mattered. There wasn’t a pretty way to deliver that line.

“What do you mean?” I felt the instant anxiety in the pack bonds. “No. But what do you mean?”

Theo twirled his fork in his pasta salad. “He’s not really eating.”

She turned to Theo with another gasp.

“What do you mean?”

“He cooks eggs every morning and never eats them.”

“Well, some people aren’t breakfast people. And he has a chef at work for lunch.”

“He’s not sleeping either.”

“Theo, what do you mean? How do you know that and I don’t know that?”

In the short time we’d been together, I had noticed that if she wound herself up a little, it was easier to talk her down, and she wouldn’t stew on it, so I let her go.

“He works in the middle of the night when he thinks we’re sleeping.”

That I didn’t know, but I suspected. It was part of the problem, or a symptom at least.

“What’s wrong?” Mackenzie’s bottom lip trembled.

I casually picked an olive out of the salad and bit into it. If he would just talk to me... But that was part of the problem, too.

“Justice has hit a wall,” I tossed the olive pit into the grass, “and we have to pull him through it. And we might not have a lot of time.” I regretted that last part almost instantly.

“I swear to god, Ren, if you don’t tell me...”

“Take a breath, Mackenzie.” Theo rubbed her back.

I went for a cherry tomato next, smirking to myself. Theo had remembered I didn’t like when they burst in my mouth, so he had taken the time to cut them in half.

“This is really Justice’s story to tell, but at this point, I’m not sure he can get there on his own.” I didn’t change my posture from the relaxed sprawl I was in, nor change my tone. They didn’t need my own trauma about all this to amp up the situation.

“I think I had mentioned that Justice’s parents weren’t great. That is a severe understatement.”

Theo nodded. Mackenzie twisted the hem of her dress in her fingers.

“Both his parents were thrown out of their packs. Their bonds were broken.”

“Fuck,” Theo breathed. Mackenzie’s eyes went wide.

“There isn’t much you can do about the aura damage that comes from broken bonds, except...”

“Form a new bond,” Theo completed my sentence. That made me smile, despite the topic of conversation.

“So that’s what they did. They were desperate.

Aura damage eventually leads to madness and death.

They hated each other. But no other pack would have them, so they did it anyway.

And then thought it was a bright idea to have a kid.

I'm going to spare you the details." Liar, I was sparing myself the details.

"They were too broken, too stupid, to actually parent a child. When they couldn't handle it, or they needed a babysitter, they would lock him in a closet.

When he cried, they'd upgrade to a padlocked freezer chest in the garage. "

He had missed school, again. I had searched his house, top to bottom, screaming his name when I heard the pounding from the garage. I had taught myself to pick locks that day.

"Oh god," Mackenzie's voice was small.

"The claustrophobia?" I just nodded at Theo's question. "And the panic attacks."

"Justice doesn't have panic attacks. He's just... He's just stressed. We all get stressed." She wasn't in denial, she just didn't have the right frame of reference for everything.

"That's why he was on the cruise, Mackenzie," I added softly. "He was spinning out long before that. He was forced to take that vacation. To get a grip on his life, and he comes back as a pack lead with two omegas and the criminal ex who ruined his life."

"So, we're the problem?" Her voice shook. I took the knotted hem out of her hands and smoothed it against her thigh.

"No. Justice is the problem. Good news though. You are the solution. But we have to be smart about this, and I don't think we have a lot of time."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Ren. Is Justice dying or something?"

“No, pretty girl.” I sat up and pulled her to me to kiss her forehead. “Justice is rolling out coping mechanisms that will turn into habits and then conditioned behavior that he won’t be able to break.”

“The eggs,” Theo’s head was hanging.

“The eggs.”

“So before Mackenzie’s next heat, which should be two months?” I paused, doing the math in my head, “And Theo’s right after that...” I practically stuttered as Theo’s aura lit up.

“What?” I said, turning to him, my eyes sharp.

“What what?”

“Pack bonds, love. You can’t feel whatever that is,” I made a messy hand gesture, “and not have us know it. Don’t like it? Take an aura management class. Pack Bonds 101.”

Theo just nodded and chewed on his lip. Not a great sign. Mackenzie got animated, talked nonstop when her emotions were elevated. Theo chewed on his lip and thought. He took a breath and blew it out.

“I’m still taking low-dose suppressants.”

“Theo?” Mackenzie looked shocked. I was right there with her.

“What’s that about?” I asked softly. I had been basically stretched out at their feet since we’d spread out the picnic blanket. I shifted so that I could stroke my index finger up and down his ankle, hoping he’d get through contact with my aura that I

wasn't pissed.

"I don't know," he said around a sigh, "I just... I don't know."

"Can I put words in your mouth?" He nodded, so I continued, "You think that two omegas going through heat is too much and you want to make sure Mackenzie is taken care of?"

He shot a guilty look at Mackenzie.

"That's part of it. I've been on suppressants for so long and, male..." he cut himself off and rubbed his eyes before trying again. "I guess part of me is... concerned about having a normal heat cycle."

"Because you're a male omega?"

He shrugged.

I snagged another tomato out of the salad and thought for a minute while I chewed.

The bite of the vinegar in the dressing went well with my simmering anger.

I wasn't angry at Theo. Slightly annoyed he'd keep this from us.

My anger was more at the world that would make such a divine creature unsure of himself because of who he was.

"Okay. I'm saying this as your alpha," his head came up, and he finally met my eyes, "I'm going to require two things of you.

" I counted off one finger. "First, is that you have this conversation with Justice, and

us, as a pack. This is just like the baby conversation. We all shared the same opinion that kids were not something we wanted to do, and we each made our own decision about birth control. But we all got on the same page. As a pack. How you manage heat, what happens to your body, is up to you, but it does affect the pack. We should all talk about it.”

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“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have kept it to myself.”

“Don’t apologize, we’re all still figuring out how this pack thing works.

The second thing. Whatever decision you make, you’re going to do it with medical supervision.

Justice and I have been concerned. Your last heat on the yacht was too painful and too short, which isn’t healthy.

This can be a side-effect of long-term suppressant use.

” I sighed now. “There hasn’t been a really good time to bring it up to you.

See? We’re all figuring this pack shit out. So. Tell Justice and see a doctor.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

There was another thing that had been poking at my brain for a week or so. I had gotten an email from Willow, with details about her next heat. I’d said no immediately to being her heat helper. It was absolutely the last thing I wanted to do, but it had illuminated things in our pack’s future.

“Before I say this next part, know that nothing is wrong, and we do not have to do anything about this right now. But I want to put the idea in your head so you two can do your thing and whisper about it and decide how you feel.”

“We have a thing?” Mackenzie asked.

I smiled. “You have a thing, Precious, and we love that thing. You’re like twins developing your own language. It’s adorable.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure Mackenzie had realized that until this very moment.

“We have a pack math issue.”

“What the hell is pack math?” Theo asked.

“Packs exist because of omega heat. For heat to be safe and satisfying, an omega needs more than one alpha. And we have our own little age gap pack romance going on here. When Mackenzie hits her glorious stride, we’re going to be old men.

” I put on my ‘wicked’ smile, as Mackenzie liked to call it.

“Don’t you worry, our knots will still be going strong.

But in the near future, we should talk about expanding the pack and starting a relationship with a heat helper. ”

“A heat helper? We don’t need help!” Mackenzie protested.

“We don’t, but we do.” I put up a hand to stall any protests.

“It’s not unheard of for two omegas in a pack to have their heat cycles sync.

For a pack as small as ours, that might be stressful for all of us.

Physically stressful. And as your alpha, I want your heats to be fun, safe, and

satisfying.

Or Justice could be traveling for work. There's a hundred things that can come up that we can't plan for.

Having an established relationship with someone we know and trust means that there will be no surprises during heat. ”

Theo and I shared a look. Mackenzie had been “surprised” during her last heat. He glanced once at her and nodded. He knew exactly what I meant. She hadn't brought it up, and I was not going to probe her for details today.

Mackenzie rarely talked about her 10 year relationship with Daryl.

But it showed up in small and alarming ways.

Alarming for us, not for her. She would ask for permission before spending money and was shocked that Justice didn't want to approve the grocery shopping list. She thought it was funny that we didn't send her to her nest when we wanted to play video games.

She had asked me why I didn't bring my phone to bed, so I would have something to do while I waited for my knot to let her go.

There were red flags everywhere for us, but Mackenzie was seeing it almost like a cultural difference, not that she had been in an abusive relationship.

“And,” I changed the tone before we tumbled into bad places, “We have a lot of love in our pack. And a stupid amount of money. Theo has always wanted a big pack. We shouldn't be closed off to the idea.

Like I said, we don't have to do anything about this now.

But test the idea out in your head." Mackenzie looked dubious.

I pushed my point. "Like, Mackenzie, picture what it might feel like for you to see an alpha, who is not Justice or me, knot Theo."

She sat up straight, blinked and turned her head away.

"So, do your thing, chat amongst yourselves, until Justice..." and we came full circle back to the topic at hand.

I cracked my neck and looked up through the canopy above us. The leaves were limp in the heat. There was barely a breeze. Like that night on the yacht when we'd stared up at the stars and Justice chose to suffer rather than seek comfort with his omegas.

"This is why we need a conspiracy."

"Yeah, I still don't get that part," Theo said, popping the lid on a glass container and offering the brownies he made last night.

"Justice is stuck. We have to, like, crank him up. Wind him up and push him forward. But I think we have to do it in such a way that he thinks it's all his idea."

"But what's wrong?" Mackenzie asked. She adjusted her leg that was hooked around Theo's.

"Now you both know there's some unresolved childhood trauma.

Should he go to therapy? Probably, but we are miles from that right now.

You both know he is..." I drop the next word carefully, watching Theo, "controlling." He looked away.

"It's more than a coping mechanism. And it's heightened by being an alpha and a pack lead.

It's who he is. That does not mix well with panic attacks, which, for Justice, are a fundamental loss of control. "

I groaned as I sat up and reached for one of Theo's brownies. It was gooey and rich and took a moment before I could speak again.

"To sum up, before the cruise, he was spinning out of control. He was supposed to relax and get his head on straight again. He comes home with a pack. And he's currently denying the thing that could make this all better for him."

"What's that?" Mackenzie asked.

"You." I looked between our two omegas.

"I'm still not following."

"This isn't aura damage, but omega auras are very healing, especially in pack bonds."

"Okay, so what's wrong with us it's not working?" She bit her bottom lip, probably to keep it from trembling.

"Have you noticed that Justice doesn't touch you?"

"That's not true. He touches us all the time."

“No. You touch him.”

She opened her mouth and closed it, and stared down at her sticky brownie, contemplating that.

“We were all sitting on the couch last night, right? What happened?”

“We just watched a movie,” Mackenzie said to Theo. He frowned, trying to see what I saw.

“Mackenzie was in your lap. She’s always in your lap, Theo. You’re always curled around each other. I dug Mackenzie out of your cuddle puddle and then you both were in my lap. You two are always touching each other.”

They looked down at where their legs were intertwined as proof of what I was saying, and they immediately disengaged. I grabbed their ankles and twisted them back together.

“This is not the problem,” I caressed their legs, “we love it. And before you two get all twisted about it, he doesn’t touch me either. The problem is twofold.”

“Shit.” Theo exhaled loudly and shook his head. “Justice said Mackenzie always comes first and that he’d never come between us.”

“Literally.” I nodded. “It’s almost as if he feels it’s not his place to physically insert himself.”

“But he’s our alpha,” Mackenzie said.

“On top of that,” I blew out my own exasperated breath, “he feels so good when he is touching you, when your aura is affecting him, that he feels it’s selfish. You two can’t

fully comprehend how good you feel.”

“Selfish?” She sounded incredulous.

I nodded. “He feels good touching you. That makes him feel like he’s using you for his benefit.”

“But he’s our alpha. We basically, well, belong to him.” Mackenzie’s fingers went to the bite mark on her neck.

Another “shit” from Theo as he got the subtext. Daryl had treated her like property. He would have passed her from alpha to alpha like a doll. Justice didn’t want to be that. None of us did.

“Right. Justice’s brains are a little bit scrambled right now.

He’s very logical. A to B to C. But his logic is running on the wrong tracks.

He’s developing habits that are going to become ingrained behavior.

We need to interrupt that. We need to be smart and sneaky about it because his logic, and well, alpha stubbornness, are going to fight us. ”

“We can’t just sit down and have a conversation about this.

I’ve tried. He can’t recognize that there’s an issue here.

If we tackle it head on, I’m pretty sure it’s going to have an opposite effect.

So, the three of us are going to enter into a conspiracy, coordinate our efforts, use our own version of exposure therapy and turn Justice Twill into a cuddle monster. ”

Mackenzie snorted a giggle and covered her mouth.

“We are going to start small. We just can’t dive tackle him.”

“Okay. What do we do?”

“When we’re on the couch tonight, put your head on his knee.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s where you start. Put your head in his lap, let him play with your hair. Hold his hand. Put his arm over your shoulder. Snuggle into him. Make constant contact with you so natural and normal that he’ll notice it’s not there and will seek it out on his own.”

“Oh.”

“Now, we need to coordinate. Exposure therapy works with incremental changes. not triggering a negative response. I nominate Mackenzie to be in charge of PDA.”

“What do I do then?”

I kept my face, posture, my aura as neutral as possible for this ripping off of the bandaid.

“Call him ‘sir’. In front of us.”

Theo held my gaze, but stopped breathing.

“You forget, if I’m paying attention, I can feel what you’re feeling.

Last week, when we were teaching Mackenzie to play Go Kart Go, you got up to get a drink, and Mackenzie hogged the couch.

You sat on the floor and ended up sitting between Justice's feet.

Tell me that was not the best feeling of your life. Because it sure as fuck was Justice's."

He licked his lips and fought off his own little panic attack.

"And I guarantee you he's going to get twisted up about it. Because a good alpha doesn't make his omega kneel at his feet." Theo's eyes darted to Mackenzie. "She needs to be set free to thrive. You need to be controlled to thrive. Justice can provide both those things if you lead him there."

"I..." Theo stalled out.

"Have you stopped to think that Justice needs it, too?" I pointed between the two of us.

"That's not the nature of our relationship, but if it's there with Justice, fucking cool.

I have to be honest, Theo," I let more of my annoyance into my voice than I wanted, "as your pack mate, not your alpha, I don't want to be in a pack where my pack mates can't be exactly who they are and feel like they have to keep part of themselves behind closed doors. "

I stretched all the way across the blanket, coming to my knees, and wrapped my fingers around his throat.

"And as your alpha, I want all of you. I need all of you. I love all of you. Hiding this

part is pointless, not to mention insulting that you don't think you can trust us. " I kissed him quick and let him go.

"It just feels... fragile," Theo picked at his thumbnail. "I didn't know how you'd react."

"I mean, it's kind of hot," Mackenzie added for good measure.

Theo looked off into the distance and blew out a cleansing breath.

"We're going to baby step this." I dusted off my hands and leaned back. "We'll coordinate our efforts so it doesn't feel like we are dog piling him. Mackenzie will turn him into a cuddle monster. Theo will bring out his dom side."

"What are you going to do?" Theo asked, putting the cover back on the brownies.

"Oh? Me? I'm going to hold him down and fuck him into next Tuesday in front of you."

Mackenzie and Theo traded a wide-eyed look.

We started packing up some of our trash and empty containers.

"It's kind of like we're on a secret mission," Mackenzie said. "Oh! We can call it 'Operation: Cuddledom' or something. Get it? Cuddle? Dom? Cuddledom."

Theo snorted. "You might have to bring your branding team in on that name."

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JUSTICE TWILL

Daisy:

We need to talk.

It was the third “we need to talk” message she had sent today. I’d been doing an excellent job of avoiding her. I wasn’t really sure why. Maybe I just didn’t want to stand in her firing line and get called on my bullshit. I slipped the phone into my back pocket and stepped into our apartment.

I immediately smiled.

The place was a wreck. Paint swatches decorated the walls like abstract art, and boxes were stacked up by the door.

Most were returns. I’d been one-click-buying and asking questions later.

Working with an interior designer and balancing four people’s tastes was more involved than I’d thought.

But the chaos meant something now. People lived here. It was home.

Music poured from the kitchen, but it was the laughter that drew me there.

Theo stood at the island, flour dusting his forearms as he tossed a disc of dough into the air.

Mackenzie danced around him, a wooden spoon in one hand, belting out the chorus to some pop song I didn't recognize.

Ren leaned against the counter, a beer in hand, watching them with that same dumbass grin I was probably sporting.

For a moment, I just stood there, letting the scene wash over me. Two months ago, I'd come home to empty rooms and silence.

"Justice!" Mackenzie spotted me and practically squealed. She abandoned her spoon and threw herself at me, filling my mouth with her tongue. She tasted sweet. Her hands went around my waist and under my t-shirt, her warmth against me stealing my breath and making me instantly hard.

I staggered and let the wall catch us. She drank me in, her tongue desperate and hungry against mine.

"Do we need to clear the counter off for you two?" Ren drawled.

Mackenzie giggled and broke our kiss. "We're making pizza. Homemade!" She pulled me to the counter and wrapped me around her like a blanket. I closed my eyes for a second. She felt so damn good in my arms.

"Right on time," she said with a smile. "How do you always manage that?"

"Years of practice." I pressed my lips to her temple, letting her citrus scent fight to overpower the garlic and bread.

"I'm teaching them how to make dough," Theo announced, gesturing to the array of toppings scattered across the counter.

“He’s been insufferable,” Ren added, crossing the room to place a cold beer in my hand. His fingers lingered on mine. “Apparently, the way we’ve been eating pizza wrong our entire lives.”

“Not wrong,” Theo corrected, “just inferior.”

I took a long pull from the beer.

“So what do you want?” she asked.

“You. Always you,” I said, and then realized I’d slurred the question into her ear like I was drunk on her.

“No, silly. On your pizza,” she laughed.

“Right. Food.” I took a breath to clear my head and straightened to get on with the serious business of choosing toppings. I stepped back, reluctantly dropping my arms from her, but she snatched me right back.

“We’ll do it together.” She patted my hand that was resting on her tummy. “I want veggies. You?”

“I’m a simple guy. Just pepperoni.” I traced my fingertips up her sides as she reached across the table for toppings.

“This ban on mushrooms is frankly silly,” she said, popping a slice of pepperoni in my mouth, over her shoulder before dealing them out onto the dough.

“What’s silly about it? You don’t like them.” I whispered into her ear. She bent her neck, offering it to me. The bite mark there stood out, practically glowed. Even thinking about my mark on her skin got me hard. As if I wasn’t already.

“Justice!” Mackenzie nudged me. “Theo says you have to choose a side. Anchovies. Yes or no?”

“No,” I said firmly, meeting Theo’s betrayed expression with a smile. “But we can put them on half.”

“Traitor,” Theo muttered, but there was no heat in it.

The oven beeped. I jumped slightly.

“He’s never heard his oven make a noise before,” Ren snarked as he pulled the door open and slid two of the pizzas in.

“That’s right. I’m a four-star restaurant takeout kind of alpha,” I laughed.

I took a half step back again, feeling like I shouldn’t be crowding Mackenzie while she was trying to get the pizza done. The second there was a breath of space between us, she reached back for me like she couldn’t bear not to be touching me. Liar. You’re the greedy one.

She quickly wiped her fingertips on a dishcloth and raked all her hair to one side, baring her neck for me, again.

I was lost for a moment. She was so soft and warm under my fingers.

Her scent rose off of her, the citrus softened by floral notes.

It was becoming more woodsy now, too. Theoretically, I knew pack bonds altered scents, but to experience it?

To actually smell that she was mine? It went right to my dick.

Being this close to her felt divine, like all of her sunshine was warming me, soothing away crappy work bullshit.

She turned in my arms suddenly. A slice of pizza suspended in the air between us. I shook off some confusion. Had I really been standing here, sucking up her scent and aura long enough for pizza to get made?

“No anchovies,” she said, wrinkling her nose in that cute way.

I bit the point of the pizza. It was heavenly.

She swiped her thumb across my lower lip, catching a dribble of sauce.

I stepped to the side to grab a napkin, but she turned again in my arms, putting my hand on her hip like she didn’t want me to let go.

And that’s how dinner went. Ren pulling pizzas out of the oven.

Theo and Mackenzie chattering around full mouths, and me, eating pizza one-handed, my omega pressed to me.

We never even made it to the new dining room set.

It was the best fucking night of my life.

Second best, after the night on the yacht, our first as a pack.

“Okay,” Mackenzie said, dusting her hands off on a napkin. “It’s time for your education.”

“My what?” I asked, checking the clock on the stove. It was barely 7 PM.

“Your cultural education,” Theo said, as he gathered plates. “It’s a crime against humanity that you’ve never seen ‘The Pack Next Door.’”

“The what?”

“Only the most popular show of the last five years,” Mackenzie said, taking my hand and leading me toward the living room where our new sectional dominated the space. “Everyone’s talking about the season finale next week, and you haven’t even started.”

“I’ve been busy,” I said, feeling oddly defensive. “Running a company doesn’t leave much time for television.”

“Running a company doesn’t mean ignoring important cultural moments,” Theo said.

I flashed a look at Ren, hoping he’d back me up or get me out of this. “Dude, I watch every week. So does every single person in Port Haven.”

I took my position at the end of the sectional.

We all fell into place like we had assigned seats.

Me and Ren anchoring the ends, our omegas cushioned safely between us.

They, of course, were curled around each other as usual.

I shifted to get comfortable and shake off some of the irrational protectiveness that my inner alpha was screaming for.

That was the most unsettling thing about forming a pack, being pack lead.

All the new emotions and drives that I now had to figure out how to handle.

Ren settled in on the opposite end, smirking at me over Theo's head. "You're going to love this show. It's about this dysfunctional pack of rich assholes."

"So it's basically a documentary about our neighbors," I grumbled.

Theo queued up the first episode while Mackenzie gave me a detailed explanation of the characters and why I should care about them.

The show started, and I tried to follow along, but my mind kept drifting.

The fourth-quarter projections would be due next week.

Glenn had scheduled three back-to-back investor calls. And Daisy...

"Theo, we need popcorn," Mackenzie announced suddenly, pausing the show fifteen minutes in.

"On it," he said, untangling from Mackenzie. "Don't bother pausing. I've seen it a hundred times."

Mackenzie hit play and flopped back on the couch, stretching out and laying her head in my lap. I tensed immediately, my hands frozen in mid-air, unsure where to put them. I wasn't used to this level of casual intimacy.

"You're missing the best parts," she said, looking up at me. "Your brain's too busy."

"Sorry," I stretched one arm along the back of the couch and tentatively let my other hand rest on her head.

Slowly, I let my fingers comb through her hair, picking it up and letting it fan through my fingers.

It was impossibly soft. A strand snagged on one of my chipped nails and tugged.

I held my breath, half expecting her to sit up and yell at me.

But she sighed and snuggled into my thigh.

I smoothed it all back and off her shoulders.

“I forget how tacky her nest was in the first season,” Theo said, rounding the couch with a giant bowl of popcorn.

My stomach flipped, knowing Mackenzie would sit up, and I’d lose this contact with her.

Theo, without missing a beat, settled on the floor, his back to the couch and offered up the bowl.

Mackenzie took a big handful, but I passed. My hands were already full.

They chatted and snacked. I knew I should pay attention.

This was important to them. But my whole being was consumed with feeling Mackenzie under my fingers.

I took a risk and dropped an arm from the back of the couch to rest on her upper arm.

I traced lazy circles there. She reached forward for more popcorn and fingers slid to her rib cage.

Mine .

The word circled my head. Raw, possessive, and tender at the same time. My fingers stilled. I shouldn't be touching her as if I owned her. Like she read my thoughts, she reached for my wrist to rebuke me for being so forward.

No. She pulled my arm around herself like a living blanket and placed my palm right over her breast. My breath caught.

I glanced at Ren. He was focused on the TV, but his head was turned slightly toward me. A smile pulled at the corner of his lips. He had Mackenzie's feet in his lap.

I circled my fingertips, feeling her heavy in my hand, her nipple getting hard. She was mine, ours. No one else got to touch her like this.

And then... she purred. She actually purred. The sound vibrated through my hand, right into my very soul. I shuddered, feeling her aura all around me, slipping into the places inside me I never wanted to look at. Claiming me, making me hers as much as my bite mark made her mine.

My phone buzzed again. Daisy would have to wait. Everything outside these walls would have to wait.

I had more important things on my hands.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:42 pm

THEO TWILL

The frying pan sizzled as Justice cracked in the eggs. I leaned against the counter, watching him cook like he did every morning. There was an absent precision about it. He kept glancing at his watch, letting time tell him when the egg was done, rather than how it looked in the pan.

I wasn't going to let my thoughts stew, yet again, on how much we were fucking up all his routines. Everything about his life was different now. Ours too, but it affected Justice the most, probably. And me second.

My first few days in this apartment had been disorienting. I probably would have woken up every day in a panic if Mackenzie hadn't been wrapped around me every morning. I still technically had my old apartment. I had been dragging my feet with packing it up completely, and I wasn't sure why.

The toast popped, and Mackenzie bumped my hip as she reached for the butter. I stifled a yawn. We had stayed up picking apart the first night of "Operation CuddleDom."

She had declared it a success, save for one side effect she hadn't anticipated.

"It took everything I had not to just climb him like a tree," she had admitted.

She rode me, whispering in between gasps what her next plan was.

As we came, I covered Justice's bite mark with my mouth, and she called out his

name into my ear.

I hadn't gotten much sleep, and ended up puttering around the kitchen for hours before everyone woke.

I had debated for a solid half hour if I should rearrange the utensil drawer.

I couldn't decide if that would fuck up Justice's headspace or not.

Like, would he be distressed when he couldn't find a spatula?

I blinked and watched Justice slide his eggs onto a plate. Ren had been right about Justice, right about everything. His fork hovered above the plate, and he shook his head like he was just noticing all of us here. He joined us at the little breakfast table, putting his plate down.

"What's on your schedule today?" Ren asked, scrolling through something on his phone.

"Product demos this morning. And then a sit-down with marketing. Investor calls. Nothing terribly exciting," Justice said, cutting into his eggs, breaking the yolk. "Should be home by six."

I stifled a gasp at the burst of sunshiny warmth coming from our alpha. Mackenzie had noticed, too. We connected across the table, sharing a moment of shock at feeling Justice through our pack bonds. "Home by six" had made him go all warm and fuzzy.

"I've got that focus group for Twist," she blurted, stuffing toast in her mouth. "Ellen thinks we might be ready for packaging mock-ups next week."

I did the same. It was a cover for our stupid grins.

She and I had consumed enough pack romance novels to know that you were supposed to feel your alphas once they'd bitten you.

We talked about it endlessly and searched all the omega message boards.

We even considered posting anonymously on the "am I the problem" board.

Ren had said we both should take a course on auras, but we had figured it would just develop naturally.

"That's ahead of schedule." Justice nodded approvingly. I saw how his eyes lingered on her as she got up to get more coffee, like he was calculating how long until it would be appropriate to touch her again.

"What about you, Theo?" Ren asked.

"Nest consultant at three," I said casually.

Ren nodded. It was a code word. We were going to head to my apartment and figure out what needed to be done.

Mackenzie's anxiety spiked whenever we talked about my apartment.

Ren thought it was an unnamed fear that I had had a whole independent life before meeting her and that I might want to go back to that.

I thought it was more her bumping up against the realization that Daryl had been a shithead and had wasted her life.

Either way, we didn't want to cause her distress unnecessarily.

“I should go.” Justice stood and put his plate of untouched eggs in the sink. He made it a few steps before pausing. Mackenzie whipped her head around to me as the feeling of nervousness hit the edges of my awareness.

He turned back around and crossed the room to Mackenzie. He placed an awkward kiss on her cheek before heading for the hall, almost like he had stolen that kiss.

I followed him, heart suddenly pounding, snagging the bag out of the fridge along the way.

“Justice, wait,” I called. I’d been up since five preparing it, and now I was unsure.

He turned, eyebrows raised in question.

“I... I, uh, made you lunch,” I said, suddenly feeling foolish as I held out the box in the little black insulated bag. “I know you have a gourmet chef at work, so it’s okay if you don’t want it.”

He stared at it like this was the first time he’d ever seen an insulated bag.

“It’s just a bento,” I rambled, wondering if he could feel my anxiety rising.

“There’s the fried chicken bites you liked from dinner last week.

Marinated in ginger and soy. Some rice with furikake—oh, and those little rolled omelets you like.

I ordered those yesterday though, from that sushi place.

I can’t quite make them right yet. And I pickled some cucumbers because I noticed you always eat those first... ”

“You made me lunch.” His voice was so quiet, so surprised, that I stopped mid-sentence.

“What?”

“No one’s ever...” He left the sentence hanging. He took the bag from me and held it like it might explode. His thumb brushed the edge of the zipper, slow and unsure.

“You didn’t have to do this,” he said, but his grip on the bag tightened.

“I wanted to,” I said simply. Then, before I could talk myself out of it, I added, “I like taking care of you.”

Something flashed in his eyes, dark and hungry. In one fluid motion, he slammed me against the wall, his mouth crushing mine like he’d been starving for it. His knee split my thighs, and I ground against him until my cock ached.

He gripped my hips and held me steady. When I gasped, his hand slid to my throat. He didn’t squeeze. He just kept me there, exactly where he wanted me, like letting go wasn’t an option.

“Theo,” he rasped, like it meant mine .

“Alpha,” I breathed, shifting my hips just to feel the outline of his hard cock against me.

“I have to go,” he said, his voice rough. His eyes searched mine, like leaving was the last thing he wanted to do. “But we’re continuing this later.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He pushed off the wall and paused to kiss me on the cheek, just like he had done with Mackenzie.

And then he was gone, with the lunch bag swinging from his fingertips, leaving me slumped against the wall, a puddle of slick and omega need.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:42 pm

JUSTICE

I closed my office door carefully behind me, not slamming it. Which, given my mood, should earn me a gold fucking star. The product demo had gone well. That is, after the lead engineer forgot to be scared of me. Whatever. That's his issue.

My head was screaming from the tension crawling up my shoulders. I looked at the coffeepot in the corner. I didn't need caffeine, I needed hydration. I pulled open the mini-fridge, and the lunch bag stared back at me.

Theo's bento.

I placed it on my desk and opened it slowly.

The only other person who had ever brought me lunch was Ren.

When we were kids, I had known he was making giant sandwiches for himself, just so that he could give me half.

I had always been grateful, but as a kid, it had always been embarrassing and shameful.

I hated that I hadn't had normal parents who did things like make lunch.

The lid came off to reveal... perfection. It was like a PackSpace pic come to life on my desk. Fuck restaurant quality. This was foodie obsession quality. And made just for me.

Theo had thought of everything, right down to a folded napkin, chopsticks, and a tiny little bottle of brown sauce.

I stared at it for a long moment, almost afraid to mess with the perfection.

I took a bite of the chicken, and it practically melted on my tongue.

It was salty, a little sweet with the sauce.

I chased it with a bit of rice that was perfectly sticky.

I closed my eyes, savoring it. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until that moment.

And not just for food, but for this kind of care. For my omega.

"Well, this is a shocker."

I looked up to find Daisy standing in my doorway. She was tall for a woman, but she took up way more space than her physical frame commanded. That was partly because of her alpha aura, but mostly because of her no-bullshit attitude.

"What?" I asked, already defensive.

"You, eating lunch. At your desk. From what appears to be," she squinted, "a homemade bento box? After your long-standing objection to the meal prep trend?"

I had, in fact, delivered several rants about the absurdity of Sunday meal prep.

I had held back on the PowerPoint, however.

Why spend hours making mediocre food that would only get worse day by day?

When we had been dreaming up the company back in college, catered lunches were the first thing on our perk list.

I set the chopsticks down. “My, uh... my omega made it for me,” I said, trying to keep my voice matter-of-fact. I wasn’t used to this new normal yet, and fuck knows what Daisy actually thought about it.

She smiled and dropped into the chair across from my desk. “Look at you. Pack Lead Justice Twill, eating a homemade lunch like a regular person.”

“Shut the fuck up.” I tried hard not to smile. She stretched a hand across my desk and snagged a pickle, making an appreciative sound.

“No, it’s cute. You’re all domesticated now.” She crossed her legs, her expression shifting from teasing to serious. “Which is actually perfect timing for this conversation. Since you won’t answer my fucking text messages.”

She tossed a folder onto my desk, careful not to disturb my lunch. I frowned, picking up the chopsticks and taking another bite.

“What’s this?” I said with my mouth full.

“CVs. For the CTO position.”

“I’m the CTO.” I finished chewing and swallowed.

“And the CEO. And now a pack lead.” She leaned forward. “Justice, we’ve put this off for too long. You know it was always supposed to be temporary, you wearing both hats.”

“I’m handling it fine.”

“Are you?” She gave me a look that said she knew better. “The demo started late because you had to personally inspect the code.”

“It needed to be fixed.”

“It needed to be fixed by someone whose job title includes ‘technology officer,’ not by the fucking executive officer.” She sighed. “Justice, you have a pack now. That’s a full-time job in itself. CEO is another full-time job. You don’t need a third.”

I felt a familiar stubbornness rising in me. The CTO role was mine. I’d built this company line by line from my dorm room. Every piece of our technology had my fingerprints on it.

“I’m not ready to give it up,” I said finally.

“Tough shit. Co-founder,” she said, pointing a finger gun at her own head. “I already have interviews scheduled. There’s a press release.”

I stared at her in utter disbelief. I took in a deep breath to let her have it, but she cut me off with a wave of her hand.

“I know, ‘how dare I?’ right? Suck it up. You started a pack without my permission. I’m hiring a CTO.”

“Are you... jealous?”

“Cupcake, we tried that, remember? We went a whole two weeks trying to pretend we had romantic feelings. And the sex? It was just bad. You never let me be on top.”

I snorted. It had been an awful two weeks.

Daisy's face went still in a rare flash of... love. I loved Daisy, and she loved me. It wasn't romantic, or pack, or even platonic, really. It was something else, something more.

"This is the best thing that's ever happened to you.

Despite fucking Ren." She rolled her eyes.

I might have forgiven him, but she probably wouldn't.

"And you're being a dickhead. Work, even this empire we've built, comes second to pack.

You know it, you feel it in your bones. And you're too fucking stubborn to do anything about it.

So," she brushed invisible lint off her shoulder, "as usual, I have to wear the pants in this relationship and do it for you."

My pack. The words still sent a thrill through me, even as they complicated everything.

"This isn't about your capabilities," Daisy said. "It's about what's sustainable. You, of all people, should appreciate the importance of scalable systems."

I hated when she was right.

"Well, nice chat." She snagged another pickle and stood. "Interviews will start next week. They're all betas, by the way." She tapped the folder twice before turning toward the door. "We don't need any more big dick alpha energy floating around here," she said over her shoulder on the way out.

I flipped the folder open and scanned the first applicant. I pushed it away to focus on my lunch.

The whole point of going on that cruise had been that I was losing my shit. Filling both roles was killing me, and the company. Letting go of the CTO role felt like letting go of a part of myself, the part I understood best.

CEO? Pack Lead? Those were things I didn't quite understand. And now everything depended on me getting it right.

I looked down at the bento again. It could have been a PB & J on whole wheat and it would have still outclassed the 4-star meal our cafeteria made downstairs.

Theo's 'yes Sir' floated into my awareness.

He was always the perfect combination of hard and soft under my fingers.

Wet and willing, too. And him sitting at my feet the other night...

Seeing him on his knees for me, at my feet, like all he wanted in universe was to serve me, please me.

It was erotic and visceral that went way beyond my alpha aura.

It did something to me deep inside my psyche.

I sat back in my chair and took a deep breath. Shifting my weight, I adjusted my hard cock and replayed that scene at the door. How his mouth opened for me, how he was instantly hard. Moaning around my tongue.

My mind took it further and put him on his knees between my legs. Naked and needy,

taking my cock right down to the knot.

Running fingers through my hair, I blew out a breath and checked my watch. I had at least three hours before I could get home and finish what we'd started. Leading the investor meeting with a hard-on was going to suck.

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THEO

I stared at the boxes stacked by the door of my apartment.

I had taken everything sentimental or necessary on previous packing trips, but I had lived here for about six years and was shocked at the amount of stuff I'd collected.

Like veggie peelers. I had four. Who the fuck needs four veggie peelers?

The living room was eerily empty now, nothing but a few dust bunnies where my couch and coffee table had been just days ago.

"All picked up by the Center?" I asked, knowing the answer but needing to fill the silence somehow.

"Yeah." Ren leaned against the tiny kitchen counter. "They were really grateful. Said the furniture would furnish their new transitional housing."

I nodded, oddly satisfied that my things would help omegas escaping bad situations.

The kitchen felt hollow without my mismatched appliances, but Justice had gone on a buying spree that could only be described as manic.

Chef knives, copper cookware, a stand mixer were all already delivered to the penthouse, along with a pasta roller attachment I had mentioned exactly once.

"Donations can be written off as a tax deduction," I said, trying to sound practical

about giving away most of what I owned.

Ren laughed, pushing himself off the counter. “That man hasn’t thought about a tax deduction in a decade. He’s got people for that, who I am sure jump through every loophole imaginable.”

The bedroom had been the first thing that I had emptied. Now, with the furniture gone, it was a blank slate for someone else to build a life on. I paused at the second bedroom door, my hand on the knob. It was the only room I hadn’t let anyone touch.

“Hey.” Ren put a fingertip under my chin and turned me to face him. “You okay?”

When Ren looked at me like that, when all his attention, his sharp wit and discernment were focused on me, everything melted away. Even the parts I didn’t want to admit were there.

“I feel like,” I struggled to find the right thing to say, “maybe I didn’t really know the person who lived here. It’s only been weeks, really. So much has changed.”

“Do you want to do this another day? Maybe with Mackenzie?”

“No. We’re giving up the lease next week. It’s just shocking that this doesn’t feel like home anymore.” I pushed the door open to my nest and stepped inside, Ren following close behind.

The room was crowded with furniture, almost claustrophobic.

Nothing matched. I had been lying to myself and calling it “shabby chic”.

A chaise lounge pushed against one wall.

A giant bean bag chair covered in too many throw pillows.

Several small side tables of varying heights and styles, all jammed together.

In the corner, a mattress was set low to the floor, surrounded by a mountain of stuffed animals.

The overhead light was harsh. I'd always meant to replace it with something softer.

Ren whistled low. "That's a lot of stuff."

"Yeah." I ran my fingers over the back of the chaise. "I just kept buying things. Trying to make it... right."

Ren said nothing. He sat on the arm of an overstuffed chair.

"This room never felt like me. It was always just... trying to be some idealized version of what an omega's nest should be. Soft things. Fluffy things. Comfortable places to curl up during heat with..." I let my voice trail off.

I gestured vaguely at the room. "But it never worked. It never really felt safe or comfortable. Just cluttered. I'd buy something new, thinking 'this is it, this will make it feel right,' but it never did.

" I picked up a stuffed rabbit with floppy ears.

"It always made me feel like a failure. Like I couldn't even do this one omega thing correctly. "

I kept my eyes on the stuffed animal in my hands, not wanting to see judgment or, worse, pity in Ren's eyes.

“I don’t even like stuffed animals.” I huffed out a laugh.

Ren plucked it from my hands and tossed it over his shoulder. He pulled me close, wrapping his arms around my waist. It was like being drenched in muscle relaxers. Everything eased, like all my edges were filed down.

I closed my eyes and sighed. In my wildest dreams, I couldn’t have imagined how good it felt to have your alpha just hold you. Minutes later, I opened my eyes. The look of satisfaction on my alpha’s face was practically feral. It was like he needed this contact as much as I did.

“So,” he drawled, squeezing me tighter, “we have options. We can pack up all this stuff exactly how you want. We can get movers to come in, or staff from the Center. Or...”

“Or what?”

“I could fuck you senseless and give you new memories of this room.”

I smirked. I knew he was more than serious. And more than capable. I took a cleansing breath.

“Does it make me a terrible person if I want someone else to do it?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Okay, let’s do that.”

“So, we’re not fucking?”

“Oh, no, I totally want you to fuck me. But in my nest. My real nest. Where it feels

like home.”

He pushed my head to the side so he could nip at my bite mark before tugging me out of the room. I shut the door firmly without looking back.

“We’ll have to be quick, though,” Ren said, locking up my front door.

“Wait. What?”

Ren showed me his watch and then flung his arm over my shoulder, tucking me next to him.

“Justice will be home around six. And the state you left him in with that bento? I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s been picturing how to fuck you all day.”

My cheeks burned, but I felt a purely omega sense of pride burn even brighter. Knowing that I could completely undo my alpha with a simple gesture was the best feeling in the world.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:42 pm

JUSTICE

Exhaustion and anticipation were frying my nerves. It had been a long week, but it was Friday. Two blissful days doing nothing. Glenn was under strict orders to reroute all my calls to other people. If Daisy was going to steal my CTO title, I could embrace the dreaded “delegation.”

My shoulders loosened the second I pushed the door open. I could pick out everyone’s individual scent, but together it smelled like home.

I dropped my bag by the door and put the lunch bag on the side table.

Today had been a protein heavy pasta salad with grilled shrimp.

I let the dumbass smile take over my face.

Theo knew I didn’t need to bring lunch. But the little ritual we were developing with a kiss at the door as he handed me the lunch bag was addictive.

The dining table was covered with boxes, bottles, packaging, and what looked like laboratory equipment.

It was like a mad scientist’s workshop had exploded across our apartment.

I picked up one of the mockups of the packaging.

The Twist logo spiraled around the tall skinny empty box, really driving the twist

imagery home.

There was a stack of pre-folded proofs next to it with different finishes, glossy and matte.

One even had the logo embossed in gold. That was my least favorite.

“Oh, hey, you’re early.” Theo stepped out of the kitchen, hands full with plates and silverware. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. Ren’s running joke that “CEO Justice” looked like shit compared to “Pack Lead Justice” was unfortunately sticking. It didn’t stop my smile from widening. “What is all this?”

“Mackenzie’s new formulations and packaging samples.” He gestured at the chaos with the stack of plates. “She’s testing different combinations for the winter line. She made something special for you.”

There was a little pot on top of a green sticky note with my name on it.

“Uh...” Theo stammered. “I know there’s a method to Mackenzie’s madness. I don’t want to disturb anything. They’ll be back soon with dinner.”

I looked from the plates he was holding to the table. We had to get her an office. I was in talks to buy the apartment beneath us, and turn the penthouse into a duplex, but that would take time.

“Executive decision. We can eat in the living room and watch the next episode of Pack Next Door. Why don’t you set the plates on the coffee table?”

“Yes, Sir.”

My heart literally jumped every time he said that. I picked up the little jar meant for me, twisted off the cap and sniffed. It had a faint nutty smell. “What is it?”

“Cuticle cream.”

I cringed inwardly and set it down.

“She wants you to test it before she finalizes the formula.” Theo said. “You promised to test the last batch too, but...”

“I forgot,” I admitted. I had left it next to my bathroom sink, figuring I’d just see it and use it.

I slumped on the couch where Ren usually sat, a bit dejected. The cosmetics line was important to Mackenzie. Using the cream was a small thing, and Pack Lead Justice was letting her down. I squeezed my eyes shut and tipped my back and sighed.

“You’re not good at taking care of yourself,” Theo stated plainly.

I snorted. That was an understatement. He crossed to the table and picked up the little pot, and then nodded to himself, like he had decided something.

He turned it over in his hands and screwed the cap off. He sank to his knees at my feet. I froze. The sight of him on his knees gave me heart palpitations.

He carefully picked up my right hand and dabbed cream on each of my nails.

My throat went dry as I watched him. The concentration on his face, the way his blond curls fell across his forehead, how his fingers moved with such precise care. My omega on his knees, taking care of me. He switched to the other hand.

I shifted uncomfortably, a war breaking out inside me. My dick throbbed, trapped behind my zipper, while my brain screamed that good alphas didn't put their omegas on their knees.

"Theo," I said, my voice rough.

"Sir." He looked up then, his eyes dark with need.

That word. That fucking word that destroyed what little self-control I had. He knew exactly what he was doing, and the knowledge only made me harder.

I leaned forward, putting my hand at his neck to stroke my thumb along his bite mark. The one I'd given him that made him mine. I could feel him breathe harder, his pulse raced. Squeezing slightly, not enough to hurt, just to be felt, I pulled him up to me.

His lips parted for me. I could feel his need simmering, tightly held. He moaned when I pushed my tongue into him.

The door creaked. Mackenzie's laughter spilled in. I held my breath, knowing Theo would stand and shift away. But he didn't. He stayed exactly where I held him, on his knees at my feet. My face flushed with that hand in the cookie jar feeling.

"Thai iced tea!" Mackenzie held a drinks tray high.

Ren was right on her heels with take out bags in each hand.

Neither of them seemed to think it was out of place for Theo to be on his knees for me.

I swallowed, thinking a rebuke was coming.

Mackenzie just stepped over Theo's legs to put the drinks on the table.

"We got way too much food. I just couldn't decide," she said, making grabby hands for the takeout bags.

I was still holding Theo by the neck, my thumb on his mark.

I searched his face and then his aura for what he was feeling.

He was calm, level, with a sense of challenge.

I kissed him quick and let go. But he didn't move.

It was like he was waiting for permission.

I nodded toward the table. The twisted smile he gave me told me he knew the game that we were playing.

"We need to have a talk, Mr. Twill," Ren said, depositing one of the bags into Theo's hands.

I braced. "What kind of charm did you cast on the teenager working behind the counter at the Thai place? I placed the order under 'Twill' and she made me show ID before giving us the order. She was super pissed it wasn't you."

I huffed out a disbelieving laugh. That was his concern and not the omega kneeling at my feet?

"I know you two get off on this age gap thing with me," Mackenzie motioned between us with paper wrapped straw, "but she's an actual child. And you two are old."

“Ugh, wounded.” Ren coughed like it hurt. She tore off one end of the paper and puffed air into the straw to shoot it at him. He snatched it out of the air.

“It’s the pretty rich boy thing,” Theo said, opening a carton of rice.

Tugging on my pants, I scooted to the edge of the couch, trying to make room for aching cock.

“I sponsored her school’s robotics team,” I said defensively. “She graduated last year and I, well, made sure she got a full ride at Port Haven University.”

“Ah, buying her affection and loyalty.” Theo said.

“So, technically, a legal adult,” Ren noted.

“I propose a new pack rule,” Mackenzie bit off an end of a spring roll and talked around the food, “when we add new pack members, they all have to be older than me.”

I snapped my head to her. New pack members?

“Mmm, darling, you will always be the baby girl.” Ren bent over the table, pinched her chin, and pecked a kiss on her lips.

New pack members. No one else reacted to the comment. To cover the sudden nerves, I said, “Theo, go get beers for us.”

“Yes, Sir.” He said, loudly. Clearly. For everyone to hear.

I held my breath. Ren and Mackenzie didn’t seem to notice that my omega had just called me sir. Or they didn’t care?

Mackenzie smiled brightly at me. “Dumplings, satay or spring rolls?”

“All three?” There was questioning in my voice, and it wasn’t about the appetizers.

Ren flopped down next to me on the couch, rolling up his sleeves. He hooked a finger under my chin and kissed my cheek. “Good day at work?”

I nodded, feeling unsure. We’d been keeping the “yes sir” thing between us, under wraps. A part of me felt like they wouldn’t approve. Especially Ren, given our shared feelings about Mackenzie’s past and abusive alpha asshole ex.

Maybe they hadn’t noticed?

Theo was back. He put two beers on the table. “Ren. Sir.” He said, handing one to each of us in turn.

Well, that blew the “maybe they hadn’t noticed” theory out of the water. Theo sat in a fluid movement right between my legs. Mackenzie passed my plate to Theo, who handed it to me over his shoulder.

I took a nervous sip of the beer before setting it on the floor next to Theo.

They ate and chatted about the food and the new bar that was opening up next to the Thai place. I tried to follow the conversation, but my brain wouldn’t fully get in gear. Something had shifted in my little pack. I crunched into a spring roll, not actually tasting it.

Ren took my plate to pile it high with Pad Thai. Theo was still between my legs, his shoulder brushing my knee. I traced my fingers softly at the nape of his neck. He shivered and moaned, bending his head forward.

As dinner wrapped up, Ren and Mackenzie handled the clean up. Theo sighed and leaned his head against my knee. I patted the couch cushion next to me in invitation. “You could sit here, if you wanted.”

He bent his head back to look at me. “I’m right where I want to be.”

I threaded my fingers in his hair and bent forward to kiss him. The angle was awkward. I kept him there, pulling his hair until he moaned and squirmed.

“See?” Ren’s voice was sharp and made me jump, breaking our kiss. “We could have been fucking this whole time. But no. You wanted dinner.”

“I was hungry.” Mackenzie said with a little whine in her voice.

Ren crouched and grabbed Theo by the ankles, tugging him a few feet forward until he was forced on his back. Ren popped off each of Theo’s shoes and tossed them over his shoulder as Theo cursed and fumbled with his zipper.

I let out an ‘oof’ as Mackenzie dropped into my lap, straddling me. My dick had been hard this whole time. I moaned as she ground against me. She took my hand and put it between her legs, pulling aside her panties.

“I’ve been waiting all day for you to get home.” She moaned as I slid two fingers deep inside her.

“I’ll have to take half days on Fridays if this is what I have to come to.”

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JUSTICE

The morning air was crisp, making me glad I'd suggested Mackenzie grab her sweater before we headed out for fresh croissants and coffee.

We caught the light to cross the street, but we'd have to hustle to make it across before it changed.

I put my hand on the small of her back. The causal touch made me shiver.

I pulled my hand away after a moment, ignoring the subtle way she leaned back, seeking the contact I'd broken.

"Can I ask you something about business?" Mackenzie tilted her head to look up at me, the sunlight glittering in her hair.

"Always."

"What's the actual difference between a founder, a CEO, and a president?" She chewed her lip in that way that always made me want to kiss her. "Everyone keeps introducing me as the 'founder and CEO of Twist,' but I don't feel like a CEO."

"Technically, a founder is just someone who starts a company. You can be a founder and nothing else."

"Like you're the founder of Ice'd Inc., right?"

“Co-founder. Daisy and I are both founders. But I’m also the CEO because I run the company strategically.

I make the big decisions about direction, growth, securing capital.

” I winced slightly and added, “Daisy is COO, operations. And I’m also CTO, chief technology officer.

A president typically handles more of the day-to-day operations. ”

Mackenzie nodded, her expression thoughtful. She brushed her arm against mine as we walked. I swallowed hard, fighting the urge to wrap my arm around her shoulders.

“So, if I’m being honest, I don’t really want to be CEO of Twist. I love creating formulations. I love testing products. But I hate the idea of managing people, hiring and firing...”

Relief washed through me. I’d been worried about this for weeks. Mackenzie was extraordinary at product development and the vision about what she wanted to create, but I’d seen the growing anxiety in her eyes every time Aria talked about scaling operations.

“That’s completely valid.”

“Is it?” She looked up at me, nervous that I’d judge her or something.

“Many founders eventually step back from the CEO role. They become Chief Innovation Officers, or head of product development, or even just remain on the board.”

We paused at a street corner, waiting for the light to change.

I noticed two women staring at us from across the street, their whispers and pointed glances unmistakable.

Since the news of our pack had broken, I'd gotten used to the public attention, but it still made my skin crawl now and again.

Mackenzie shifted closer to me, subtly pressing her shoulder against my arm. She'd noticed people watching us, too.

"What if we hired someone to be the actual CEO? Someone who knows what they're doing? I could be... I don't know... Chief Product Officer or something."

The light changed, and we crossed the street together.

I caught more stares from a pack leaving a restaurant.

One of them, an alpha, nudged his pack mate, nodding in our direction.

Before I could think better of it, I slid my hand to the back of Mackenzie's neck, my fingers curling possessively around her nape.

I felt her relax into the touch, a small purr escaping her throat. I barely contained a growl.

"If that's what you want, we can absolutely make it happen." I kept my tone even, supportive, doing my best to mask the sudden onset of homicidal alpha possessiveness.

"But would investors be okay with that? Aria keeps talking about how important founder-led companies are."

I pulled her back as someone stepped out from a nest boutique, almost running into us.

The window displays were full of square stackable floor pillows.

They were almost the exact green Theo wanted to paint his bedroom in.

My thumb traced small circles on her skin, an action that was half protective display for our audience and half selfish indulgence.

I just liked how she felt under my fingers.

“Investors care about results. If your company performs better with you focusing on innovation while someone else handles operations, that’s what they’ll want.”

We approached Perc, my favorite coffee spot in Port Haven. They did something magical when they roasted their beans. The resulting coffee was rich, but it never had that bitter or acidic bite.

A couple at an outdoor table glanced up, did a double-take, and immediately bent their heads together in hushed conversation. I fought the urge to pull Mackenzie even closer.

“I just don’t want to fail because I’m trying to be something I’m not,” Mackenzie said as I held the door for her. She deliberately brushed against me as she passed, her scent intensifying with the contact.

“That’s actually the most CEO thing you’ve said yet,” I replied, unable to hold back a smile. “Good leaders know their limitations.” I could smack my forehead right now, or bang it on a desk. Fuck Daisy. She was right. I should have stepped out of the CTO role ages ago.

Inside, we joined the short line at the counter. I scanned the room out of habit, checking for exits and making extra sure the room wouldn't suddenly turn into a closet. The claustrophobia was better now, but the habits were hard to shake off.

The line moved fast. Perc was relatively quiet for a downtown shop, but it was Saturday morning. By midday, it would be packed with students from Port Haven University, huddled over laptops.

"Justice!" the manager, stepping from the back room, called out. Clara's braids were piled high on her head, making her seem even taller than she was. She motioned us out of the line to the end of the counter.

"It's been ages."

"Yeah, I've been busy." I refused to drop my hand from Mackenzie. The homicidal tendencies had dissolved. This was pure pride.

"I read the news. Congratulations." She extended a hand to Mackenzie as they traded names. "Has your coffee order changed, too?" Her smile was dazzling.

"No," I chuckled. "But I'll take a large latte and a flat white, and whatever my omega wants."

My omega. Fuck, that was a rush.

Mackenzie got an ice coffee, and we ordered croissants, plain and chocolate. There were a few open tables, but I didn't want to sit. I didn't want to break contact with Mackenzie. She turned towards me, effectively tucking herself into my arms. It made my knees weak.

"Does it make me a coward, or less than, or whatever, because I don't want to run the

company?” Her eyes were full of indecision and concern. Like the old Mackenzie. The one who had to give herself pep talks under her breath. Fuck that.

“No,” I said simply.

“I... I don’t want to be a stereotype of an empty-headed omega who only bakes cookies and fucks. But... I’m not like Aria. I don’t want power like that.”

“I think you should build the company you want to work in,” I said, careful not to sound like I was dictating her choices. “We could look for an experienced COO who could grow into a CEO role. Someone who complements your skills.”

Clara came around the counter with the coffees in a carrier in one hand and a bag of pastries in the other.

“I also gave you chocolate muffins for a little celebration. On the house, of course.”

“Fuck no,” I smiled, and dropped my arm from Mackenzie’s waist to pull out my wallet and a crisp \$100 bill. Clara didn’t protest.

Mackenzie grabbed the drinks, leaving pastries for me. I guided her toward the door, but stopped short before opening it.

“Shit, I almost forgot,” I said, flipping my wallet back open and thumbing through the contents.

“What?”

“The loyalty card.” I fished it out and headed back to the register to get the right number of stamps. I handed it to the kid at the register. “Do you mind? We got four drinks.”

On the street, Mackenzie snorted out a laugh.

“What?”

“Justice, you have enough money to buy the whole place, and you’re concerned about earning a free coffee.”

I turned the card in my hands and looked deep into her eyes.

Things like this, the loyalty card, my rock climbing gear, my bedroom lights, I never really examined them openly.

Shit, I barely could acknowledge they existed, let alone were problems. But Mackenzie made those character flaws less dangerous. She made it safe to say out loud.

“I... uh... when things are unfinished, incomplete, it makes me anxious. I know it’s irrational. It’s a silly card, a marketing gimmick, but it will linger in the back of my mind if I leave it undone.”

Her face transformed. There was no pity or ridicule, but I couldn’t quite place the emotion. It was like she found something new to love.

“And,” I continued, feeling extra bold, “Perc was like a second home when I was in college. I lived off of the free coffees back before I had money. Now,” I shrugged, “I get the free coffee, but triple tip. It feels like I’m balancing the scales.”

“I fucking love you,” she said, going up on tiptoes to kiss me.

I hated public displays of affection, but my omega could kiss me anytime, any place if it always felt like this. She grabbed my wrist and pulled it over her shoulder as we

made our way back to the penthouse.

I didn't stifle my smile. It was pure alpha ego. I wanted people to see us now. To see how fucking lucky I was to have this gorgeous woman under my fingers.

"So, how do I hire a CEO but more importantly, how do I tell Aria?"

"How about we enjoy our pastries before draw up that battle plan?"

"Deal," she said, slipping her arm about my waist.

I practically died.

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JUSTICE

I groaned and stretched my arms out. They didn't even skim the edges of the bed. It was really the only thing I had wanted when I moved in here. One fucking huge bed. Not on the floor, no walls closing in, just endless space.

My door clicked open softly. I sat bolt upright in the bed, panic drenching me, making me nauseous. It was familiar and dreadful.

"Mackenzie," I whispered, relief instantly flooding my system when I recognized her silhouette.

She shut the door behind her, but for a second she was backlit and magnificent and very naked. Her curves made my mouth water, a primal part of my brain lighting up with need and possession. Mine. My omega. Flashing like red lights.

"Are you all right?" I said in a rush, scanning her for any sign of distress.

"Can I?" She tugged at the corner of my down comforter, her voice small and uncertain in a way that made my chest ache.

I tore it back and shifted over, making space for her, the mattress dipping slightly under her weight. "Is Theo okay?" I asked, my protective instincts immediately kicking in.

"Yep," she said softly, lying next to me.

I tucked the comforter around her as she snuggled into my chest. Her skin was warm against mine, her orange blossom scent wrapping around me like a physical thing.

My heart was still beating a mile a minute, but the second she put her head on my chest, relief washed through me.

The warmth of her body and aura soothed away the last tendrils of panic, grounding me in the present.

“Everything all right?” I asked again, running my palm down her back. It wasn’t that she was unwelcome in my bed, but just that she and Theo usually slept together, cuddled up in their nest. The deviation from routine made my engineer brain immediately search for problems to solve.

She huffed out an annoyed breath that tickled my skin.

“I feel silly,” she said, her voice muffled against my chest.

“About what?” I pulled strands of hair away from her face, letting my fingers enjoy the silky texture. Her hair always felt impossibly soft, like it wasn’t quite real.

“About feeling silly,” she said.

“You feel silly about feeling silly?” I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at my lips.

“Yep.”

I knew I should sit up and have a proper conversation with her, but she slid her leg between mine and curled around me like a vine. The press of her breasts against my side made it hard to concentrate on anything but the feel of her.

“I want something and, I don’t know, I feel silly for asking for it.” There was an uncertainty in her voice that made me bristle. My omega should never feel hesitant to ask for what she needed.

“Well, considering that there probably isn’t a single thing you could ask for that I wouldn’t give you, I’m not sure I completely understand how that would feel silly.” I meant every word. I would tear down buildings for her with my bare hands if she asked.

She was quiet for a long moment, her fingers drawing absent patterns on my chest that sent electricity through my nerves.

“Before, you know, with Daryl,” she made a disgusted noise before continuing, “he hated it when I asked for things. Omegas are too needy.”

I took a slow breath, desperate to keep the rage down.

Red-hot anger burned in my gut, but I forced it back.

I didn’t want her feeling that in my aura.

Just the mention of that asshole’s name set me off, made me want to find him and tear him apart with my bare hands.

I was fucking with his digital life enough right now, I really didn’t need to bring that kind of violence into the physical plane.

“You and Ren,” she said, making a vague gesture in the air, “you’re just so different. Sometimes I don’t know how to, you know, do things.”

I nodded even though she couldn’t see it, my jaw tight with suppressed fury.

We'd been dancing along this fine line when it came to her ex-alpha.

She didn't see things in that relationship as being abusive.

She just saw us as 'different', as she said.

Maybe I should talk to Ren about therapy.

I wasn't sure avoidance would ultimately be healthy.

"Well," I said, forcing my voice to stay light, "you could always try hinting at it, but Ren and I are kind of dumb. We might not get it." She playfully swatted my pec as if I shouldn't have called myself dumb.

"So maybe just say it. Tell me what you want." I ran my palm down her spine, feeling the delicate bumps of vertebrae beneath her soft skin.

She picked her head up and looked at me. The blue light reflected in her hair, making her look like an anime drawing. Her eyes were dark pools in the dim light, her lips slightly parted.

She narrowed her eyes. I couldn't tell in this light if she was annoyed or being playful, but either way, she was breathtaking.

"Cockwarming," she said, her voice low and unexpectedly direct.

"I'm sorry, what?" My brain short-circuited for a moment, blood rushing said appendage so fast I felt light-headed.

"Cockwarming. That's what I want, and I feel silly for asking for it." Her eyes darted away from mine, that uncertainty creeping back in.

“You want cockwarming?” I questioned, my voice rougher than I intended.

She nodded. “Daryl didn’t like it. But I am,” she paused and licked her lips, the gesture sending a spike of heat through me, “sometimes I just need to be filled,” she said, little frown lines appearing between her eyes.

“Mmm. Omegas have needs,” I said around a smile, my body thrumming. The thought of being inside her, just there, connected in the most intimate way possible. Fuck, it was better than any fantasy I’d ever had.

“If you don’t want to,” she trailed off and pulled away, that vulnerability making my chest tighten.

I snatched her to me and rolled her over onto her back, pushing her legs open so I could fit between them. The movement was possessive, almost desperate. I didn’t think I could bear her leaving my bed right now.

I ground my hips into her so she could feel me getting hard, already aching for her. The soft gasp she made sent a shiver to my toes.

“I have a little confession,” I said, lowering my voice to just above a whisper, watching her pupils dilate in response.

“Oh?” she said around a little moan that made my cock twitch.

“I’ve never done it.” I felt oddly vulnerable admitting this, a rare moment of inexperience for me.

“Cockwarming?” she asked, her thighs tightening around me.

I nodded and pushed her legs a little bit wider, reveling in how she yielded to me.

“It’s kind of intimate, you know? I was never with someone that I wanted to be like that with.” The admission felt raw, honest in a way I rarely allowed myself to be.

“And now?” Her voice was breathless, expectant.

“Oh, little omega. If I could be inside you 24/7, I would be.” The truth of it hit me hard. I wanted to be connected to her always, to feel her around me, warm and tight and mine.

She snorted and ground her hips against me. The friction made me groan, my hands tightening into fists.

“But you’re the expert here. You’re going to have to tell me how you want it.” I was desperate to give her exactly what she needed, to be what Daryl never was.

“Justice. It’s cockwarming. Not rocket science. You put your dick in me. I keep it warm,” she said, sounding very much like Theo when he was teasing me for being smart but kind of dumb.

“Yeah, but how do you want it?” I shifted my hips back and forth. When I hit the right spot, she gasped and arched her back slightly.

“Do you want me to fuck your brains out until you’re too exhausted to go on? You just fall asleep on my cock?”

She thought about that for a second as I rocked against her, or maybe she was just lost to the sensation.

I was still in my flannel pajama bottoms, the fabric getting soaked through with her slick.

The dampness against my skin was maddening, her scent filling my lungs with each breath.

I wanted to devour her, to lose myself in her completely.

My omega, asking for what she needed from me. Nothing had ever felt more right.

“Tell me how you want me, Mackenzie.”

She gasped but didn’t answer.

“Do you want my knot?” I asked her. “Do you want me to fuck you hard and fast?”

“No. Slow,” she said almost frantically, “I want to feel every inch of you.”

I let go of her long enough to drag my bottoms down my hips with my thumbs. The sudden coolness of the wet fabric made me shudder.

I marveled at her spread open on my bed. She was perfect. Her soft skin glowed in the light, the curls between her legs gleamed with slick.

I ran my hand up the back of her thigh, gently bending her knee and pushing it higher as I nudged her other leg to the side. She reached for me, her hands, both of them, wrapped around my cock. I sucked in a breath before pulling out of her grip. I moved her hands away.

“You want to be filled, Mackenzie?” I asked, kissing her fingertips. She made one of those cute little squeaking moans in reply.

“Close your eyes and focus right here.” I put the flat of my palm to her pussy and gently pressed down. “Feel how empty you are.”

She nodded and her eyes fell shut. She took a deep breath and squirmed under me. I pulled my hand away, and she groaned. I grasped my cock and used the tip to explore her. Dragging it up and down her slit, letting her feel me from the outside.

“Your slick is gorgeous.” I coated myself in her. It heightened every touch. I lingered at her entrance and watched her eyes flutter and her lips flush. She was the most stunning thing I had ever seen in my life. I eased into her, barely, little more than pressure at her opening.

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“You feel that, princess?” I didn’t call her nicknames often.

I liked the way ‘Mackenzie’ filled my mouth.

She blushed and turned her face into the pillow.

I withdrew and ran my tip up and down again.

I rubbed against her clit. She gasped, and half way sat up.

I put my arm around her back to support her.

“Too intense.” She panted.

I kissed her, claiming her tongue, and repositioned myself.

“Like this?” I eased her down into the plush hold of my bed and pushed into her again.

She wrapped an arm around my neck, keeping me no more than an inch from her.

“Like this,” she answered.

I gave her more of my cock. It took all my concentration not to bury myself in her in one thrust. This was a delicious torture. I wanted all of her around me.

“Slow,” I whispered. “You want to feel stretched. All of me filling you.”

She shivered under me but held my eyes. I could swim in their depths and lose myself.

“More?” The question was moot, but I wanted to hear her say it.

“Please.”

“No.” Her eyes shot open, like I was about to stop. “Don’t ask for it. Don’t beg. Demand it. Tell me what you want.”

“More.” She echoed me.

“You can do better than that.” Something like fear mixing with excitement flickered in her eyes.

“Slowly. Give me all of you slowly. Don’t tease. Not tonight, Justice.”

I growled. My hips obeyed and pushed agonizingly slowly into her. She had one arm across my shoulders, the other on my collarbone, her delicate little nails digging into my flesh.

“Fuck,” she threw her head back. She hooked a leg behind my back to pull closer, but I wouldn’t let her.

“Open your legs wide, Mackenzie,” I said through gritted teeth. “This is what you wanted. You’ll take my cock as slow as I give it to you.”

“I changed my mind.” She panted. “Fuck me.”

“No.” I pinned her wrist to the bed and pushed a little deeper.

She was thrashing, and I was sweating by the time my knot rested against her. I rocked into her with short, slow, rhythmic thrusts, my knot grinding against her clit. She was close, on the edge, and I pushed deep and stilled.

“Are you full enough, little omega?” I breathed hard into her ear.

“More.”

“Say it.”

“Knot me.”

I rolled us over. The suddenness made her yelp. I pushed her back, putting a little space between us, my fingers curling around her neck.

“Take my knot. I want to watch you stretch yourself for me.”

I put my hands on her hips and pulled her almost off my cock completely, making her shudder. Then I pushed her upright.

“Close your eyes and fuck me, Mackenzie.”

She did, lowering herself onto my cock. Her hands crept up her body, one cupped her breast, the other traced the bite marks on her neck. She was fucking magnificent. I squeezed my fists, commanding my body to obey and give her what she wanted.

My eyes fixated on where our bodies were joined. My knot was huge and sensitive. Impossibly huge. She pushed down and groaned, like she was struggling.

“Good girl, I know you can take it. You want to be full, don’t you?”

She nodded absently, like this was taking all her concentration.

“That’s it. Open for me. It feels so good to be stretched like this, doesn’t it?” Each word seemed to ripple on her skin like a caress. “All you want is cock? I bet you want to be full of my cum, too.”

She threw her head back and moaned at that. I smirked. Was she uncovering a cum fetish? I pushed on that button.

“Is that it? You want to take my knot and be full of cum? Have it dripping out of you?”

“Justice!”

“You want my cum? Take my knot.” I growled.

She bounced slightly, my knot parting her wider.

“Fuck.” I dug my fingers into her thigh. She threaded her fingers into mine, like she could use that for leverage. “I want to come so deep inside you. You want to come too? Take all of me.”

A scream caught in her throat as my knot slipped past that tight ring of muscles. Her eyes fluttered. I felt her body tighten in waves around me. But I wasn’t done with her yet.

I reached for her neck and squeezed, not hard, just enough for her to feel owned. My thumb pressed against her clit. She jumped, but my knot was deep in her.

“You’re going to have to do better than that if you want my cum.” Her eyes flew open as I circled her clit.

She shuddered again and again, her voice lost in moans and gasps.

“That’s it. You want to be a good cum slut, don’t you?” She went feral at that, her fingers joining mine on her clit. She sagged, my hand on her neck the only thing keeping her up as she practically convulsed. I thrust my hips, bucking into her even deeper.

“Fu...” That was all I could get out before my orgasm ripped through me like a lightning bolt.

I could feel jet after jet pumping into her.

She collapsed onto my chest and it was my turn to thrash.

Her body was pulsing around me, making me more sensitive, squeezing every drop out of me, until I was a quivering mess too.

I kissed the top of her head as we both tried to remember how to breathe.

I cursed under my breath as my alarm trilled.

I had been awake for a while, watching Mackenzie sleep and straining not to move a muscle.

The second I realized I was still inside her, she was still warming my cock, I got instantly hard.

Discovering she might have a cum fetish was one thing, somnophilia was not something she had previously discussed, let alone consented to. I did my best not to

move a muscle.

Her face wrinkled up when the sound of the alarm finally broke through. She groaned and moved to roll on her back. I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her tight to me.

“Oh god,” her voice was scratchy. “Are you...” the rest of that got lost in a moan.

She hooked her leg over my hip and rocked.

“Fuck,” I whispered, pressing my forehead to hers. I felt her nod.

I rolled her onto her back and fucked her slowly, until we were both sweaty, gasping and satisfied. We ended with her curled on my chest, still deep inside her. She lifted her head and beamed at me.

“Good morning.” I kissed her forehead.

“Mmmm. I guess we should get up.”

“Do we have to?”

“I’m covered in slick. We probably should shower.”

“I’ll have all day to make you sticky again.”

“Ok. Give me a second,” she said, like she was bracing herself. She eased forward, letting my cock slip from her. She came again, panting in my arms.

Once she caught her breath again, she picked her head up.

“See what happens when you ask for what you need?”

She rolled her eyes, groaned, and rolled off me, dragging me by the wrist to the bathroom to shower.

THEO

“No, no,” Justice grabbed my fist. “The power comes from your hips. Non-dominant foot forward. The movement starts here. Your shoulders follow, and all that energy goes through your arm as you extend and into your fist. Try again.”

I shook out my arm, then raised my fists and stepped into the punch.

“You’re still punching with just your arm,” Ren said, circling around me. “Here.” He positioned himself behind me, placed his hands on my hips, and turned them slightly. “When you throw the punch, twist here.” He demonstrated the motion, rotating my hips the right way. “Feel that?”

I nodded, trying to absorb the mechanics of it.

“Again,” he stepped back, joining Justice against the whitewashed cinderblock wall.

I took a breath, reset my stance, focused on my hips, and threw another punch.

“Better,” Justice said, smiling. “Do it again.”

I repeated the motion several times, each punch felt more natural. After a dozen attempts of fighting nothing but the air, I stepped back, shaking out my hand. Maybe I was clenching my fist too hard? At least they didn’t have to tell me not to tuck my thumb inside.

“Is this something all alphas learn automatically?” I asked, “Like, boom, your aura

presents and you just know how to fight? Do they give out free boxing lessons or something?"

Justice and Ren exchanged a look that contained an entire private conversation.

"No," Ren said, "but when your aura presents, your hormones go crazy. You turn into a bit of an asshole for a while."

"A bit?" Justice raised an eyebrow.

"Fine. A major asshole," Ren conceded. "You get into a lot of fights. It's why the life expectancy of an alpha is shorter than a beta or omega."

"A lot of young alphas die when they first present," Justice added, his voice dropping into something more serious. "Fighting and fucking are the only real ways to deal with rut."

"And you can't always fuck," Ren said. "So, fighting it is."

I wiped sweat from my forehead. "Does it fade? That need to fight?"

"No," Justice said, shaking his head. "You just find ways to deal with it, channel it into other things."

I had never really thought about what it was like to become an alpha.

Perfuming was totally different from presenting.

I had never wanted to fight. I had never thrown a punch before the cruise.

After the cruise? I totally got the desire to take someone apart with your bare hands.

A realization dawned on me.

I turned to my alpha. “The rock climbing?”

Justice was silent for a second, and then nodded. “That’s part of it. The rush, the danger... it satisfies something primal without requiring me to smash someone’s face in.”

“I lift weights,” Ren added, flexing unconsciously. “Heavy things. Repeatedly.”

“That’s why he’s built like that, and you get to enjoy the six-pack abs,” Justice said with a smirk.

Ren winked at me. “Perks of pack life.” They fist bumped. They were criminally pretty. Ren was broad and almost beefy, but chiseled. Justice was just as powerful, but wiry. I had to stop devouring them with my eyes. Now was not a time to get horny.

“As a CEO, I just can’t go around beating up assholes,” Justice said, sounding almost regretful.

I turned to look at the third alpha in the room, who had been silently watching from the door. Maybe he didn’t think his punching advice was necessary. He wore all black. The suit was gorgeous and fit him like a glove.

“I just beat up assholes,” Nico said, his voice deep and even. He gave a casual shrug.

Ren laughed at that, a full-throated sound that echoed in the basement.

“Alright, let’s see a few more practice punches,” Justice said. “Then we can move on.”

I threw several more punches, each one feeling more powerful. We should have prepared better. Maybe I could get them to take me to a real boxing gym. That wasn't the kind of place omegas could just show up at on their own.

"I think I'm ready."

I stepped forward and shook out my arms.

I cocked my arm back, but Ren caught it before I could swing. "Lower," he said, moving my arm. "Body shots are better. The face has too many bones, and I don't want you to hurt your hands."

He guided me to the position. "Here," he said, pointing to a spot on the ribs. "Or here, for the kidneys. Maximum effect."

I nodded, my heart racing. I took a deep breath and threw the punch.

Daryl grunted, a scream muffled by the silver duct tape.

He was hanging by his wrists from a chain in the ceiling, feet barely touching the ground. His face was already swollen, one eye purpled shut. Blood trickled from his nose down to his chin.

My fist connected with his side again. The impact jarred up my arm, but the sound he made, a choked gasp of pain, was deeply satisfying.

Something inside me snapped. All the rage I'd been holding back since the cruise, since watching Mackenzie try to pretend she wasn't terrified, since learning what he'd done to her during heat.

How even now, she second guessed herself.

She had agonized over the cockwarming conversation for a solid week.

All of it, all the rage came pouring out.

I hit him again. And again. My fists found his ribs, his stomach, his sides. I added my pain to it. Each punch carried years of my own frustrations, my pain at being overlooked, dismissed, unwanted.

But mostly, I hit him for her.

For every time he made her feel small. For every time he controlled what she ate and made her feel fat. For every time he made her believe she wasn't good enough.

I wasn't aware of stopping. At some point, my arms just wouldn't work anymore. My knuckles were raw. I was panting, air tearing through my lungs.

Daryl hung limply from his chains, his breath coming in wet, ragged gasps.

"Feel better?" Ren asked, sliding his arm around my waist, pulling me close to him. I nodded, unable to speak. My whole body was shaking. But it didn't really make me feel better. Being held by my alpha did.

Nico pushed off the wall and assessed Daryl with a critical eye. Then he completely dismissed him.

"I think we should head upstairs to the Vig for drinks," he said, breaking the heavy silence. "And get your omega some ice for his hands."

Nico Front, owner of the Pax nightclub complex in the Mired District, one of the scariest alphas I'd ever met, smiled at me. Like he was proud.

Justice wrapped an arm around me, guiding me away from Daryl. “Nice punch,” he said softly.

“What about him?” I managed to ask, glancing back.

Nico sniffed and tugged at his cuffs. “He can enjoy the hospitality of the Pax for a little bit longer. His pack ditched him. I want to see if they come back.”

We left him there, bleeding in the dark. I should have felt guilty. Maybe that would hit tomorrow.

As we climbed the stairs, club music pounded through the walls. Justice was keeping pace with Nico, and Ren had a hand on my back.

Mackenzie was having a girls’ night with her best friend, Jillian.

Our plan had been to just chill and play video games when Justice got a call.

Ren had been wary when Justice excused himself.

That didn’t happen often. He came back and said Nico Front had Daryl in a security room at the Pax and wanted to know if we wanted to pay him a visit.

I hadn’t expected that they would take me with them.

I flexed my hands. Ice was probably a really good idea.

We entered the Vig from the staff door in the back. It was the exclusive VIP bar inside the Pax, and it was mostly empty when we walked in. The space was all polished wood and leather, with low lighting that somehow made everything look expensive.

A tall man in a tailored suit crossed the room toward us, his presence commanding attention.

“Justice, good to see you,” he said, shaking Justice’s hand.

“Star, thanks for letting us use the space downstairs,” Justice replied. “You know Ren. This is my omega, Theo.”

Star Knightbridge. The Star Knightbridge. We had met him briefly that first night at Sanctum. I would never get over how Justice knew all the famous people in Port Haven.

He nodded at me but didn’t extend his hand. Most alphas didn’t touch other alphas’ omegas. It usually annoyed me to no end. Treating omegas like breakable prizes was obnoxious. Now, there was an odd sense of pride. I was Justice’s omega and that meant something to people like Star.

“Come sit with me,” Star said, leading us to a curved booth in the corner. Nico whispered something in Star’s ear and stepped away. Justice seated me between him and Ren. Their solid warmth on either side kicked off that small, marshmallow feeling.

A server appeared almost instantly with a tray of cocktails.

“So,” Star said, settling into business mode, “we should have dinner some night. I’d like your input on some revitalization projects for the Mired District. Small business initiatives, that sort of thing.”

“I’d be interested.” Justice sipped his cocktail.

Nico came back to the table. He put his hand on Star’s shoulder as Star made space

for him.

Oh. They were pack mates. The thought was slightly terrifying.

One look at Nico and you knew he was dangerous.

Star? He was pretty, stylish. Drool worthy.

But you could see violence simmering behind his cocky grin.

Nico handed me two blue ice packs and snapped open a heavy cotton napkin.

“Thank you,” I said softly, curling the ice pack around my fist. I sighed. It felt good. Justice squeezed my knee under the table.

“I thought gambling was Win’s racket,” Ren said, pointing to the posters scattered across the table. They were print proofs, so not finalized designs.

Star nodded, spreading out a stack of posters on the table.

“We’re looking to replace some lost income from canceling most of the illegal fight nights.

Poker nights instead.” He tapped one of the posters showing a stylized image of poker chips and playing cards with “KNIGHTbrIDGE HIGH STAKES” emblazoned across the top.

“You should come consult for us, Ren,” Star said, “rather than working for my brother Win. The pay and hours would be better.”

Ren took a sip of his drink. “I’ll talk to my pack about it.” I could tell Ren was

interested, but wasn't going to commit to anything.

I studied the posters, my brow furrowing as I took in the designs. They were sleek, professional... and aggressively alpha.

"Something wrong with them?" Star asked, noticing my scrutiny.

I looked up. All the alphas were staring at me.

I took a deep breath. I had just beat an alpha up. Granted, he was tied up, but still. I could give an honest opinion.

"They're very alpha-coded," I said, pulling one closer. "They won't appeal to betas, certainly not omegas. That's a missed opportunity."

Star's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, that's interesting," he drawled. "How so?"

"Betas would love a way to show up alphas that doesn't result in broken bones and bleeding," I continued, flexing my bruised hand. "Poker evens the playing field. It's about strategy, not strength."

"He's right," Nico said, leaning forward.

"And if you added an omega-only night," I said, the idea forming as I spoke, "you could make a lot of money."

Star looked skeptical. "How do you figure?"

"Male omegas have tons of disposable income," I explained.

"Most of us work and we keep our income. It's kind of tradition that male omegas

have pack money and their own money.

So male omegas in packs have lots of cash in their pockets.

There are so few safe spaces for male omegas, and most things for omegas are pink and girly.

” I echoed something I had heard Justice say a lot.

Star sat back to evaluate me, spinning a ring on his index finger. He was gorgeous and totally fucking intimidating. Fuck it. I had opened my mouth. I was going for it.

I tapped the poster. “Not catering to male omegas would be another missed opportunity. And you could run a PR angle, make it a fundraiser for a good cause.”

Star stared at me for a long moment, then looked at Justice. “Where did you find him?”

“On a cruise,” Justice said, a hint of pride in his voice.

“You’d have to start with an omega-only night first, though.”

“Why is that?” Nico asked.

I licked my lips. This could be a touchy subject. “Alphas are assholes. Especially when they are losing. And casinos are not a safe space for omegas who are susceptible to an alpha bark. Most omegas have never played in an actual casino setting. Online play is a lot different from in-person.”

Star shook his head, looking genuinely impressed. “You want a job too, Theo?”

I blinked, surprised. “I, uh...”

“He’s taken,” Justice said, his voice dark and eerie. It made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck and gave me an instant hardon. He was doing something with his aura.

Star addressed Justice, and Justice only. “I’m serious. I want both of their input. Their professional expertise.”

Justice was stone cold, and didn’t move a muscle.

“For pay, not for favors,” Star added. “I am not my brother.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but it was enough to bring Justice down a notch.

“We’ll talk about it.”

“Excellent.” Star called over the server who must have been waiting in the wings with a platter of appetizers and more drinks.

“Tell me,” Star nudged one of the posters towards me, “How is this alpha-coded? I thought it bold and elegant.”

I rolled my eyes. “Black and red?” I offered. For whatever reason, that was the default alpha color scheme. “It’s over done and kind of tacky. Bold, serif, all-caps font? This is the design equivalent to a screaming hard-on and an inflated ego.”

Star laughed and slumped back casually, looking more like a rich playboy than a questionable business man.

“Fuck,” he nodded at Justice, “our omegas can never meet.”

THEO

The car ride home was quiet. I flexed my fists, a small, vicious smile playing at my lips. I didn't know what to call this emotion. Vindication maybe. The look Daryl gave me as we filed out? I'd live off of that for years. I wondered if this was how alphas felt all the time.

My head came up as we pulled into our building, rocking me out of my thoughts.

Justice held the door for me and his hand skimmed my back as I passed through.

His longer legs quickly put him a half step in front of me.

He hit the button for the elevator. It came immediately and took us right to our floor with no stops. I followed him into the penthouse.

"Oh, we didn't tell you," I said. The packages by the door were a reminder. "We have interviews set up with house managers starting next week."

Justice nodded. He had put me in charge of finding our own Todd the Butler.

Or at least picking out the people we'd talk to.

I followed him into his bedroom and he went straight to his bathroom.

His room was dimly lit, as always, it was never fully dark.

The motion sensors flicked on as soon as he stepped into the bathroom.

“Mackenzie was thinking about painting her bedroom again. She won’t admit it, but she hates the color.

I still haven’t decided about mine,” I said.

I nudged the chunk of rock on the media console so it was in line with all the others.

This one was the biggest, the size of my palm.

Justice kept rocks from some of his favorite rock climbing spots.

The rough brokenness of the stones somehow went with his sleek room.

He emerged from the bathroom with a glass tumbler full of water.

He stalked to me. My heart skipped a beat.

He had an edge to him right now and if I wasn’t totally in love with him, I might have been scared.

I still backed up a step, and another, until the back of my thighs bumped up against the console.

He handed me the glass and then put two little pills in my palm.

“Take them.”

“Oh, I don’t think I need painkillers,” I said absently, looking down at my hands.

“I didn’t ask your opinion. Take them.”

“I…” my breath caught as his aura pushed against mine. “Yes, Sir,” I said softly, and downed the pills with a sip of water. He took the glass from my hand and placed it on the media console. With two of his long fingers, he pushed my chin to the side.

“It pushes me to the edge, seeing our bite marks peek above your collar.” He trailed fingertips across my neck. I resolved in that second to only wear collared shirts.

He knelt suddenly and pulled on the laces of my left shoe, before guiding my foot up so he could slip it, and the sock, off.

My right shoe was next. He stood, without a word, and tugged on my belt buckle.

I reached up to undo the buttons of my shirt.

He batted my hands away. I moved them to my belt.

He pinched my wrist, hard. And glared. I dropped my hands to the side.

With a sharp tug, he whipped my belt free from the loops.

He attacked the shirt buttons next, roughly tugging the tails free and pushing it off my shoulders, but not completely off.

He tugged me forward to stand in the middle of the room and then yanked the shirt all the way off.

He folded it, not neatly, and stepped back to drape it over the console.

Turning me slightly, he pressed into my back and pushed my head aside again.

He dragged his lips across his bite mark, making me moan.

Soft kisses as he undid my pants and let them drop to the floor.

I stepped out of them without being told.

And then he was gone, striding across the room and perching in a sleek chocolate brown leather armchair.

He spread his legs wide and adjusted his hard cock.

He rested an elbow on the arm, and pinched his bottom lip, devouring me with his eyes.

That was the only way to describe it. He ate me up, inch by inch, his eyes burning into me.

Being naked wasn't the point. Being made naked by him was.

I licked my lips and took a cautious step forward. I slid to my knees right in front of him. He opened his legs further for me.

"Your hair's gotten long." His voice was gruff and dark.

"I..." I hesitated. This was a private secret I had been keeping to myself. "I like when your hands are in it. When you pull."

A smile flickered across his lips. He held out his hand in invitation. I wrinkled my brow, a little confused, and placed my hand in his. He grasped it lightly and brought it to his lips. He kissed each knuckle, like he was healing any hurts the blows I gave Daryle might have caused.

Feeling bold, I went right for his belt.

He didn't stop me as I unzipped him and freed his cock.

Holding his eyes, I bent forward and licked the head with a long stroke of my tongue, before taking him into my mouth.

I sighed deeply. It was so damn satisfying having any part of my alpha in me.

I played with the tip in my mouth, savoring how it filled me, even just this little.

He reached down and traced my lip, stretched tight around his cock, like he could erase the boundary between us.

My eyes fluttered shut. I wanted all of him in me.

I caught his wrist, guiding his hand to the back of my head before settling both of mine on his thighs.

I moaned when he stroked the soft hair at my nape, then went still, waiting.

When I looked up, something flickered behind his eyes, uncertainty, hesitation, maybe.

The good alpha warring with his dom side.

This was what Ren had meant. This was the wall my alpha had hit, the part of him that still asked permission even when he didn't need to.

He tightened his grip on my too-short hair and I moaned again.

I had a wall too. I was afraid of what I wanted.

The needy, desperate side of me. I kept that locked down.

He pressed at the back of my head with the lightest pressure, like he was testing how far I'd let him go. My whole body shivered. He gave me more. Both hands in my hair now. And I melted for him, every inch of me surrendering. Something shifted between us.

“You want me to fuck your mouth, little omega?”

I moaned my response. His hands became firmer in my hair.

He moved me just how he wanted me, short thrusts, just the tip, working himself against my tongue.

I dug my fingers in his leg when he gave me more of his cock, let me take it deeper into me.

I nudged my head forward, to get even more.

He tightened his grip on my hair and pulled me back, pulling all the way out of my mouth. I grunted in protest.

“You want me to use your mouth.” I didn't know if that was a question, but I nodded anyway.

“Say it, Theo.”

My eyes fluttered open. I licked my lips. “Sir, use my mouth.”

“Lips together,” he ordered.

I licked them again and closed them. He brushed the head of his cock over my lips, slow and careful, like he was waiting for me to get greedy and take. I didn't. I kept still, kept open, I wanted him to take it, to show him he could.

When he finally pushed down on the back of my head, it was slow. Measured. Like he was still checking, still giving me time to stop him. I didn't. My lips parted around him, and I let him fill me.

I slipped a hand between my legs and stroked myself in time with his pace. He fed me more, deeper, until he hit the back of my throat and I swallowed around him. Just a nudge more. I gagged, and he pulled back, but I made a desperate sound. I needed him deeper.

He moved in again, his cock sliding along my tongue, slipping between my cheeks.

He dragged himself out slow, and I whimpered.

Then both hands were in my hair again, and he guided me back down, inch by inch, until I couldn't breathe around him.

He held me there. I squirmed, choked, my throat burning, my hand still working my cock.

He let up just a little. My fingers dug into his thigh.

He gripped tighter. Small thrusts. Controlled. Using me exactly how he wanted. I grabbed the head of my cock and squeezed like that would stop me from coming. It didn't. I spilled over my hand, shuddering around his cock.

I wrapped a hand around the base of him, fingers sliding over his knot, slick, spit and cum. He grunted.

“Fuck, Theo.”

His rhythm faltered. Shallow thrusts. His breath caught. One more curse, and he came, his hips jerking out of control. I swallowed fast, greedy for all of him.

He pulled me off before I could finish and crashed his mouth to mine, tongue claiming what he’d just given. Then his hand locked around my throat and he pushed me down, until I was spread out beneath him on the floor.

“We’re not going to make it to the bed,” he growled, and kicked the armchair away to make space. I almost laughed at the idea of needing a bed. He could have me anywhere he wanted.

He sat back between my legs, forcing them wide. He calmly unbuttoned one of his cuffs.

“I want you coming, writhing, until I’m ready to give you my knot.”

My hands obeyed. I gripped my dick, stroking hard and fast.

“Did you forget how to reply?”

I froze, my heart leaping right into my throat. “Yes, Sir,” I whimpered.

“Good boy,” he growled, satisfied.

“Fuck,” I thrust my hips into my own fists, coming again as he calmly unbuttoned his shirt.

JUSTICE

“I, er, I need to talk.” My fist was balled up in my pocket. This shouldn’t be that hard. And the fact that it was? That was the problem. He was my fucking pack mate. I’d been halfway to a mental breakdown for a day and a half now.

Ren tossed me a bottle of water from the fridge.

He levered himself up onto the counter with his feet dangling.

We were alone in the penthouse. Mackenzie and Theo had a nest consultant appointment at Cuddle Puddle.

They felt like they needed an unbiased third opinion on how to blend their nesting styles.

They each had their own bedrooms, but were insistent on having a shared nest. They’d be home soon with dinner.

I took a few seconds to twist the cap off and take a sip.

I chanced a glance at Ren. He was unflappable as usual.

Just waiting on me. There were so many times in the past few weeks where I thought Ren should be pack lead and not me.

I’d watched other packs struggle with alphas jockeying for dominance in a pack.

It was an alpha thing, and ego and pack leads usually ended up forcing alphas in their pack to comply.

Ren was no less dominant or ego driven than I was.

There wasn't an ounce of submission in him.

But there was deference. He never yielded, he just...

stepped aside. No, he stepped to my side.

There was a difference in there somewhere.

My heart pounded in my chest, the anxiety building with each silent second.

"Something happened... with Theo. And..." I took another sip, stalling, "I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about it."

"Well, you could start with how you actually feel about it."

I rolled my eyes, but then licked my finger and awarded him an imaginary point on our imaginary scoreboard.

"Tell me what happened first."

I felt... shy. Ren regularly had my dick in his mouth, but this felt too intimate? What the actual fuck? I was a goddamn pack lead, not a blushing teenager. Still, some weird shame or something crawled up my spine, making my shoulders tight with tension.

"Theo was giving me a blow job," I started, my voice lower than I intended.

“Oh, this is going to be good. Where were you?” He kicked his feet.

“In my bedroom.”

“Was he on his knees?”

I smirked, but reined it in. “Not the point.”

“Yes, but I need the visual. So, our delicious little omega, on his knees for you, sucking your dick.”

“He, uh, wanted my hands in his hair. On his head...” The memory sent heat through my body, at odds with the cold dread in my stomach.

Ren gasped, delight in his eyes. “It wasn’t a blow job. He wanted you to fuck his mouth.”

“Yeah.” I felt the echo of the thrill of it. How he offered up that control and went all pliant and soft in my hands. “But then, I pushed a little too deep and he...”

“Choked on your cock.”

I looked up at Ren, leaned into the kitchen island. That was a statement, not a question. I braced for some recrimination, a dose of “how dare you do that to my omega,” but there was none there. His face remained neutral, almost maddeningly so.

“I pulled back immediately, of course. That’s not... comfortable.” My fingers tapped anxiously against the water bottle.

“But?”

“I did it again, but held him there for longer. I might have even, I don’t know, made him take more.” I held my breath.

“What was Theo doing?”

“He had one hand digging into my thigh.” The memory was vivid, his fingers pressing into me. He might have left marks if I had been naked. But the vibe of that moment... He wasn’t struggling because it was too much, it had felt like he wanted more.

“One hand? What was his other hand doing?”

I had to think about that. “He was jerking off.”

“Did he say stop or pull away?”

“No.”

“And?”

And? How does he not see the problem here? I put it in the most simple terms, frustration making my voice sharp. “I hurt him, and I liked it.”

And Ren just sat there. He tipped the water bottle back and took a long sip. Why the fuck wasn’t he launching himself at me for treating our omega like that? The silence stretched between us, making me want to crawl out of my skin.

“Theo did too.”

“What?”

“This may come as a shock, Just, and it is not limited to omegas, but some people like choking on dick.”

“But I hurt him.” My voice cracked slightly.

“Did you though?”

“You think having so much cock shoved down your throat it trips your gag reflex is comfortable? That it’s fun?” I paced in front of the refrigerator, agitation making it impossible to stand still.

“Yeah, I do. And you do too. It’s not my particular kink, but there have definitely been times where I’ve gagged on your cock and wanted more.”

“But, Theo...”

He cut me off. “Theo enjoyed it. He was jerking off, right? I will bet you every dollar in our joint bank account that it took him right to the edge.”

“You don’t understand...”

He cut me off again. “No, I understand perfectly. You don’t understand, though.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. How is this not obvious?

“Did you harm him? You get the distinction, right, between hurt and harm? Are you forgetting some of the shit we used to get up to as kids? That one time you choked me out by accident and we thought it was hysterical. Sixteen-year-olds dabbling in breath play.”

“That’s different.” My voice was tight, defensive.

“Why? Because we’re alphas? We weren’t then.”

“Alphas shouldn’t treat their omegas...”

“Treat their omegas exactly how they want to be treated.”

Ren leaned towards me. “Look me in the eye and tell me Theo doesn’t enjoy it. All of it. That he doesn’t enjoy the dom/sub thing you have going on. That he doesn’t want to be on his knees for you.”

Well, that’s confirmation that they did, in fact, notice. Heat rushed to my face, embarrassment and something like relief wrestling inside me.

“And there you are, trying to be all suave, thinking that we don’t notice.”

“Fuck you,” I bristled at his ridiculous mind reading skills.

“Yes, please,” he replied, the corner of his mouth lifting.

“And I know exactly where you’re going next.

Just, this isn’t about Mackenzie. What the little shit did to her is a completely different thing.

Theo wants to give you control. He wants you to take it.

And yeah, probably some of that’s going to be uncomfortable.

Maybe painful if you do it right. You have to trust that he’s going to know his limits.
”

“I just don’t want to fuck this up.” The admission felt raw, scraped from somewhere deep inside me.

He slid off the counter and prowled around the island toward me, his movements fluid and predatory. He stuck his hand into my belt loop and pulled me to him. We were chest to chest, his warmth and aura seeping into me.

“The only way you fuck this up, my love, is by not being who you are. Theo wants that control over him. He wants to explore. And you need it.”

He cupped my face, and I nuzzled into his touch, sighing as some of the tension drained from my shoulders. He pushed into me, backing me against the counter. I could feel his cock rigid between us, a reminder of how easily he could want me, even now.

“I would literally kill for you, and you think gagging on a little cock is too much for me to handle?”

“Since it happened, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about...” I looked away. This admission might be too far. It might be a line for him, for Theo. Ren wasn’t about to let me run now. He pulled me back.

“Oh, now you have to tell me, given how hard your cock just got and what your aura just did.” His eyes gleamed with curiosity and lust.

“During heat, both of us knotting him. At the same time.” My pulse raced, the fantasy spilling out before I could stop it.

I watched as the realization clicked into place, his eyes going wide.

“Fuck. Not every omega can take a knot orally. That’s going to take...”

“Training,” I finished.

“Shit. Am I sweating?” He put his hand to his chest. “I’m having heart palpitations and sweating.”

My eyes snapped open as the real fear crystallized, cold and sharp. “What if I go too far?” The question held all my anxiety, all my fear of becoming some kind of a monster.

“Not going to happen,” he said, biting his bottom lip like I was a meal he was looking forward to eating. His confidence steadied me. “You won’t go too far. And if you do, we’re here to catch you. That’s what we do. Alpha.”

Fuck. Every time he called me alpha like that, it undid me.

The door swung open, and Mackenzie’s infectious laughter flooded into the apartment, breaking the intensity of the moment.

“I don’t know about you, but I think I need an appetizer first before fucking our omegas on whatever new nesting supplies they bought,” Ren said, his voice dropping to that register that made my cock twitch.

“I’m sure they picked up spring rolls,” I replied, relief washing through me in a warm wave.

“Hm, maybe we need to fuck first,” he said, stroking me through my pants before smacking me on the ass and heading for the living room.

He spun suddenly and grabbed me by the throat. “This is all good Justice. He loved it. You loved it. Work with it. Take it further. All the way.” He squeezed hard once and then pushed me towards the door and our giggling omegas.

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THEO

The elevator doors closed behind us. Ren hit the button for our floor. The little shopping bag felt heavy in my hands.

“I don’t know,” Mackenzie huffed out a breath. “I’m still not sure if he’s initiating contact or I am.”

“Operation CuddleDom is working. Trust me.” Ren pulled her close. “Seriously, you two need to take pack bond classes or something. I can literally feel the shift in him. He’s more relaxed, open.”

Ren had told us about the blowjob conversation. I was still processing it. Honestly? Kind of a revelation. Apparently I was unaware that I liked deep throating and enjoyed... pain? Discomfort? Suffering? I’d have to talk to Ren about it.

No. I should talk to Justice. We were all using Ren as a buffer or a translator.

I supposed that was part of being in a pack.

We all had our strengths and weaknesses, but this was between Justice and me.

I switched the little shopping bag to the other hand, so I wasn’t holding it behind my back like a dirty little secret.

“Are you sure?” Mackenzie asked.

“Positive. He’ll be home in like an hour. We’ll do another movie night. Crawl in his lap and see what he does.”

The elevator opened, and I held my breath. The hallway was empty. I was relieved and disappointed. Another thing I didn’t want to admit was that I had a crush on the omega next door.

Ren tapped his card to unlock the door and pushed it open for us.

“Hi!” Justice practically tackled Mackenzie for a kiss. He then reached for me and then Ren, kissing us each too, like it had been months since he saw us.

“You’re home early,” Mackenzie said, flustered.

“I know. I did something. Come look.” He dragged Mackenzie forward.

Her shoulder bag toppled off her arm, and she just let it hit the floor.

The penthouse was laid out in basically one big room.

There was a dining area, a smaller cozy sitting area by the balcony doors, and then the bigger living area with the oversized couch, coffee table, and giant TV.

Jewel-colored floor pillows now littered the space.

Round little poofs and thick, squishy square ones.

A stack of those that stood waist high, tucked in the corner next to the TV console. There was a new ottoman, too.

“Pillows?” She cocked her head like a puppy.

“We never really eat at the dining room table. And I kind of like it. But it’s... triggering or whatever.” Justice was talking exceptionally fast.

I shot a glance at Ren. He had his hands casually in his pockets, an eyebrow raised, but he wasn’t completely relaxed, like he wasn’t quite sure where this was going.

“Yeah, it’s, uh...” Justice scooped up one of the square pillows and squished it in his hands.

“I... growing up, my bed was just a mattress on the floor. And well, this one time, my parents sold all the furniture to buy drugs, so I had to sit on the floor to do homework, eat, whatever.” He stalked over to the stack of floor cushions and pulled two off.

“So, seeing you guys sit on the floor, it, like, I don’t know, tips into panic attack territory. ”

Ren took a double take. I was right there with him. Justice never talked about his childhood. He also didn’t talk about having panic attacks.

“And it’s not, like, totally comfortable. The floor is hard. Maybe it’s an alpha thing, or a trauma response. But pillows. See?”

“Oh.” Mackenzie gasped. “You want to sit on the floor, but you want to be comfortable.”

“Exactly!” Justice stacked two of the pillows on the floor, and then pulled Mackenzie over. He stopped short of shoving her to the floor.

She sat delicately, bounced a little, and then beamed up at our alpha. “I love it.”

“We can get different colors,” he fluffed up another round poof and repositioned it.

“Or whatever kind is good. I didn’t know what would work, so I sort of just...”

“Bought one of everything?”

“Uh, yeah.” Justice blinked like he realized that was a little bit ridiculous. “Am I going overboard?”

“No, my love,” Ren cupped Justice’s face and kissed him fiercely. “It’s perfect.”

We all arranged ourselves around the coffee table. I picked a jewel-toned emerald cushion that matched the throw pillows on the couch. Justice kept shifting his weight, turning his pouf slightly, adjusting his position like he was trying to settle the air more than his body.

The silence stretched. Not tense exactly, but crackling. None of us knew what to say now that he’d said that.

“Okay,” Mackenzie said suddenly. “I vote we name the pillows.”

Justice blinked. “What?”

“This one’s Harold,” she said, patting the fluffy plum-colored poof beside her. “He’s judging me, but he’s soft about it.”

Ren raised an eyebrow. “You’re naming the furniture now?”

“Don’t act surprised.” She pointed at my cushion. “That one’s definitely a Lucinda. Very classy. Very smug.”

I snorted. “She does have main character energy.”

Justice made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sigh and sank a little deeper into his own pillow. “Mine’s unnamed. I’m not forming emotional attachments to floor décor.”

“Coward,” Mackenzie grinned.

“I’m playing the pack lead card. We’re going out for dinner. I think we should give Lucinda and Harold time to settle in,” Justice announced, a huge smile lighting up his face.

“Fine. I’ll play the alpha card. We’re going to a steakhouse,” Ren said.

“I’ll need to change. What level of fancy are we going for?”

“Wear that blue dress so I can fantasize about peeling you out of it all through dinner.” Ren’s voice almost had a growl in it.

“Only if you wear a suit.”

“Well,” he smacked his palms on the table and stood. “I guess we’re all changing.”

We all got up from the table. Justice hung back, flipping through his phone.

“I’ll make a reservation.”

I put the shopping bag on my bed and pulled open my closet to assess my options.

There was a soft tap at the door. Justice stepped in and shut it behind him. “Hey, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Me too.” I eyed the bag on the bed. “I bought something.”

“Oh?”

I climbed onto the center of the bed and pulled the bag to me. Justice sat, and then reclined back on one elbow.

“I, uh, I’m a little nervous.” I pulled the tissue paper out and then the sleek box. I set it between us and pulled the top off.

Justice sat up and swung his legs on the bed, sitting cross-legged. “Cuffs?”

I licked my lips and pulled out one of the four matching padded leather cuffs from the foam cradle.

“I did a lot of research.” There was a little instruction book tucked in the edge of the box.

Justice honed in on it and flipped through it quickly.

Figures. “They have a breakaway clasp for emergencies.” I knew that would be important to him, given how meticulous he was about his rock climbing gear.

“You want to try bondage. With me.” It wasn’t a question. It was like he had to actually say it out loud for it to be true.

His eyes lifted from the booklet.

“I need you to say it, Theo.”

“I want you to tie me up.” The words rushed out. I kept my voice low, not wanting it to crack or something equally embarrassing. “And... use me.”

He picked up one of the cuffs. Turned it over in his hand.

Inspected the clasp, the stitching. He unbuckled it and held it open.

I stared at it. There was something final about this moment.

Like once I did this, I couldn't pretend anymore about who I was.

We cracked a hole in our walls and this might bring it all the way down.

I put my wrist in the cuff, and Justice buckled it shut like he was born knowing how. I swallowed back a moan and blinked fast. I traced the edge of the leather with my fingertips. My heart rate slowed and steadied, and my head spun.

Justice hooked a finger in the ring on the cuff and tugged my arm to the right. I did moan now. Then he jerked hard, making me sit up. Finger still hooked in the ring, he brought my hand up and kissed my wrist, right where leather met the skin.

“Wear the black suit. No tie. I want to see your bite marks.” His voice was low and dangerous and I fucking loved it.

“Yes, Sir.”

He stood suddenly and left me panting on the bed.

“I might never take these off,” I whispered to myself.

“They won't go with your suit.” He ran his fingers through his hair, making it stick up and looking devastatingly sexy. “Take it off before we leave and put the box on my nightstand.”

He shut the door softly. I needed a minute to make sure my legs would work before getting changed.

REN

I leaned against the doorway, arms crossed, watching my pack. Mackenzie and Theo sat on the floor, heads together, scrolling through design files for Twist. They looked happy, completely wrapped up in their work, teasing each other about color names, each more ridiculous than the last.

Justice, though, was somewhere else entirely. He sat on the couch behind them, silent, chewing on a thumbnail, eyes fixed on nothing. His jaw twitched. He was disappearing behind that thick wall again, shutting us out like we couldn't feel the tension bleeding through our bonds.

Fuck that.

I slid a possessive hand along the back of his neck. "Found you," I murmured, letting my lips ghost against his ear. He flinched, but didn't pull away.

Before he could shift out of reach, I vaulted over the back of the couch and straddled him, planting my weight into his lap.

His hands came up fast. "What the fuck, Ren?"

"You're doing it again." I swatted his hands away. "Slipping away like we won't notice."

"Get off." His voice was sharp, but his cock betrayed him. Already hardening under me.

“That’s your head talking, not your dick.” I rolled my hips, slow and cruel. “That says you need this.”

He snarled, jaw clenched so tight I felt it in my own teeth. “I said, get off.”

“Say it like you mean it, baby.” My hand found his throat, a little squeeze... just enough to remind him who was here, who saw him. “Poor little alpha. CTO interviews got you spiraling?”

“Fuck off.”

“I think you need to be handled,” I said, dragging the words slow. “You need to be reminded you’re not alone. That you don’t have to carry it all.”

His body twitched beneath me, a shudder of denial and need. That’s when I felt it, the flicker of panic, raw and bright across the bond.

Good.

I yanked him forward, shoving him over the coffee table. He caught himself on his forearms with a curse. I followed, pressing him down with my full weight.

“You don’t get to disappear,” I growled against his neck. “Not from me. Not from us.”

I yanked his pants down rough, his cock already hard. I wrapped a hand around it, firm.

“Fuck,” he gasped.

“Mackenzie,” I called, my fingers stroking his inner things. “Come here, baby girl.”

She moved instantly, sitting on the little footstool, just inside his line of sight.

“Look at her,” I murmured, “You really think she’s not turned on by this? Watching her alpha squirm?”

The flush rising up her throat gave her away. I didn’t even need the bond to know she was soaked.

My grip on Justice tightened. His pulse kicked harder.

“Mackenzie.” I purred, “Show your alpha how wet you are.”

She didn’t hesitate in the slightest. She bit her lip and lifted the hem of her dress. She was, indeed, soaked.

“She’s made a mess of your panties, Just.” I stage whispered. The reminder of the cruise sent a shiver down his spine. She had a whole closet full of panties now.

“Ren,” he growled. I was sure he meant that to sound dangerous, but it just sounded needy.

“You want to go all-in on how hard Theo’s dick is right now?”

He stilled, and I literally felt his brain short circuit. There was a flash of white hot lust chased with a sense of dread.

I leaned more weight onto his back, pinning him and cupped his balls with my free hand.

“Tell your boy to come here.”

He shot a glance at me over his shoulder, like he was unsure that even gravity existed.

I smiled and raised an eyebrow. This was a trust fall, and he knew it. All he had to do was let go.

“Theo,” he finally managed, voice strained, “come here.”

Justice was sipping air, shallow, shaky breaths. He didn’t take his eyes off me.

“Tell him,” I said, steady. “Get his hand wet, dripping in her slick.”

He hesitated. I waited.

“Theo,” he said finally, voice tight, “touch her. I want your fingers soaked.”

Mackenzie made a noise somewhere between a giggle and a growl.

“So helpful,” I winked at her as she shimmied out of her panties and held her skirt in her teeth. She leaned back and spread her legs wide. Theo nipped at her thigh as he pumped three fingers in her, fast and dirty.

Justice finally ripped his eyes from me to take in the glorious sight.

“Fuck,” his voice was barely above a whisper.

I undid my belt and let the tip of my cock nudge between his cheeks.

“Now,” I said, close to his ear, “tell him what it’s for.”

Justice made a sound low in his chest. I pushed against him, let him feel how fucking ready I was. I ground against him. Justice was a genius. He’d get it.

“Theo,” he said, voice breaking. “Stroke Ren’s cock with her slick.”

The omegas looked at each other and mouthed “fuck” in unison.

Then Theo was at my side. His fingers shook slightly as they wrapped around my cock and stroked, slow, spreading Mackenzie’s slick over me.

I took a steadying breath. I didn’t want to be the one to fuck this up by coming like an over eager alpha who just presented.

“Now,” I said, wrapping a hand around Justice’s throat and pulling him up, “here’s what’s going to happen, Alpha. I’m going to fuck you until you scream my name while you tell your boy to make my omega come.”

Justice made a sound that was close to a whimper. “Theo,” was all he managed to say.

I pushed in slow, steady, until he was full of me. He groaned, low and guttural, and his whole body went tense and his head hung.

“Yeah,” I said, voice right against his ear. “That’s it.”

He was tight, like he still didn’t know how to let go. I started moving in deep, controlled thrusts, no tease, no build-up. Just fucking him like I knew what he needed before he did.

His fingers balled into fists. He tried to breathe through it, but the sounds Mackenzie was making cut through everything. She was always a fucking symphony. Theo had her on the floor, legs spread, fucking her like he couldn’t stop, like holding back was killing him.

Justice moaned. Loud. Raw.

I pressed harder into his back, grinding in deep. Letting him feel the weight of me. The weight of this.

“You’re doing such a good job, Alpha,” I said, dragging the words slow. I knew exactly what it did to him when I called him alpha. “Taking my cock like you fucking mean it.”

“Fuck,” he said. I was going to translate that to “please”.

“Now tell Theo he doesn’t get to come until you do.”

He tried to shake his head, breath gone, but I wrapped a hand around his cock, stroked him slow and tight, just enough to push.

“Say it.”

“Theo... fuck...” Justice’s voice cracked. “Don’t come.”

Theo groaned loud, and paused, like he needed to gather himself. She was writhing under him. Her moans doing all the begging for her. She came on the next thrust, screaming Justice’s name.

Justice watched. Watched them fall apart. I grabbed his hip and pounded hard.

And then we broke.

He came in my hand, cock pulsing, body trembling, screaming my name, like the good little alpha he was. I followed, deep and hard, grinding through it, hips locked tight against him, emptying everything I had.

He slumped, and I pulled him upright, holding him with an arm around his chest. I let my cock slip from him, but I held him tight, one hand still wrapped around his cock. The panting and satisfied mmmm's of our omegas filling our ears.

I nuzzled into his neck. He smelled fucking fantastic.

"Ren," he breathed. That was his thank you.

"Alpha," I whispered back, just to feel how the word made him shudder.

And then I bit him. Hard. Pushing all my will and intent into him for him to take.

A pack lead forms a pack with a bite. Pack members can build their own bonds. Theo and Mackenzie wore my teeth. Now Justice would too, though his would fade. Pity.

I stroked his cock hard and fast, my teeth still in him. He stretched an arm up, over his head to press me closer to him, leaning into my bite. The bond exploded between us. We came, together, with a ferocity I'd never experienced before.

As we shook and screamed, warm gentle hands enveloped us. Justice collapsed into Theo. Mackenzie propped me up by tucking under my shoulder.

Mackenzie reached up and wiped a trickle of blood off my lips. And then she turned to Theo.

"Did we just break our alphas?" She said in a stage whisper.

"Can you come so hard you give yourself a TBI? Is this healthy?" Theo said, running fingers through Justice's hair.

"Justice does look like he got hit by a truck."

“A truck made of dick.”

“We’re not qualified for this. We need an adult.”

“We are the adults. That’s the problem.”

“If we are going for a round two, I’m going to need a snack first.”

“Protein bar or blowjob?” Theo asked.

“Yes.”

Justice half laughed, half coughed. He twisted in Theo’s lap so that he could hike his pants back up his hips. “Your alphas are going to need a minute.” His voice was rough.

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot. You’re old.”

We all looked at Mackenzie. She shrugged. It was a dare.

I threw her over my shoulder and stood. She shrieked. Legs shaking, but I fucking stood. I could totally make it as far as Justice’s bed before they gave out.

MACKENZIE TWILL

I stood with my hands on my hips, staring at the sad little mall kiosk crammed between a pretzel stand and one of those places that bedazzled phone cases. The vendor had spread out a pathetic collection of sketchy MLM beauty products across a wooden cart.

“Absolutely not.” I shook my head. “Twist is not a mall kiosk brand.”

Justice raised an eyebrow. “No?”

“Aria is completely off base if she thinks I’m going to sell my products like this.” I gestured at the disaster in front of us. “Look at this setup. It screams ‘knockoff moisturizer that’ll give you a rash.’”

Before I could continue my rant, Justice scooped me up in his arms like I weighed nothing. His mouth was on mine before I could protest, his hands roaming over my back and waist. Not obscene, but definitely possessive. Definitely obvious to anyone within a fifty-foot radius.

When he finally let me breathe, I gasped against his lips. “Justice. Everyone is watching.”

He pulled back just enough to smirk at me. “Is the next phase of your little plan to turn me into a raging exhibitionist?”

My stomach dropped. “You know about the plan?”

“Ren told me about it last night.” His smile turned wicked. “Operation CuddleDom? Really, Mackenzie?”

Heat flooded my cheeks. “I—”

“Theo was right. You should not be in charge of naming things.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “That’s not where your brilliance lies.”

He set me down, but kept his arms around me as we continued through the mall. And not just around me, all over me. In my hair, around my waist, at the back of my neck. I was still trying to process that he knew about our little conspiracy.

“Can I get your opinion on something?” His voice carried that nervous edge that only appeared when he was asking for something important.

He guided me into a jewelry store, positioning me in front of the glass display case. His arms wrapped around me from behind, his cheek resting on my temple as he tapped the glass.

“I was thinking of getting these for Theo. Two of them. What do you think?”

I looked down at what he was pointing to. They were understated, expensive but simple and two of them? With one on each wrist, the white gold bracelets would look suspiciously like elegant cuffs.

I turned in his arms and kissed him. “Theo will love them.”

We walked back through the mall to the parking garage, the shopping bag swinging from his fingers and his hand at the back of my neck. Two omegas passed us, whispering to each other, giving Justice hungry looks. They knew who he was.

I chewed on my lip, thinking. Operation Cuddledom hadn't been just about Justice. He wasn't the only one with walls. I shivered as his fingers absently stroked my neck as we walked.

I stopped suddenly. Justice didn't stumble, like he was so finely attuned to me he knew my movements before I did.

He looked down at me with that concerned wrinkle on his forehead.

I pushed him, I pushed my alpha back against the glass of a shop window and pulled him down to my mouth.

I kissed him hard, all tongue. He slid his hand into my hair, tightening his grip.

I broke the kiss. We both panted.

"I love when your hand is on my neck. It's like you're showing off my bite mark. You're showing me off like I belong to you. It makes me feel special... and, well, horny."

A slow feral smile spread across his lips. "You're mine, and I want everyone to know it." I pressed my body into him just to feel if he was hard.

"You said I could ask for anything." I felt my own wall crumble to dust between us.

"I would set the world on fire just for you to toast marshmallows."

I didn't hesitate now. No lip biting. No strategizing with Theo.

"During my next heat, I want to be covered in cum. Everywhere. All over me. I want my pack all over me. In me. So full of all of you. Dripping out of me. I want you

dripping out of me, Alpha.” The words were clumsy, like they tripped out of my brain in a messy rush.

“Fuck.” He said it in that same tone he used when Ren had him on the edge, just before he lost control. He wrapped his long fingers around my neck, pushing into my bite marks.

“My little cum slut.” He whispered it, his lips just brushing mine.

His aura poured into me. I felt his lust, his desire, his ownership. I let it wash over me, like an orgasm. Maybe it was, coming where I stood in the middle of the mall for my alpha.

He pressed his lips to me, all gentle heat, like I was precious and special. And completely his.

“Do I have to buy you new panties?”

“They’re absolutely ruined.” I smiled wide.

He blew out a breath and let go of my neck.

Delicately, he smoothed out my bangs, tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, like he was putting the finishing touches on a work of art.

We stayed like that for a long few minutes.

I was sure people were gawking as they passed by. Nothing mattered but Justice.

“Oh!” I said brightly, remembering the other errand I wanted to do today. I reached into his back pocket and fished out his wallet. I dug through the bill section and the

little pockets.

“Okay, well, who knew a girl stealing your wallet could be such a turn on. Maybe I have a money kink.” Justice laughed.

“Ah! Here it is!” I pulled out his Perc reward card. “You only need two more stamps. Let’s get coffee on the way home.” I closed his wallet but immediately flipped it back open and took out a hundred-dollar bill. “But I want to pay this time and leave a big tip.”

He beamed at me as I slid his wallet back into his pocket. He turned me with a hand on the back of my neck and pointed me toward the exit.

“You want to stop for coffee rather than going home to fuck,” he chuckled, like I was ridiculous and he loved it.

“I... well, I kind of like it when you make me wait.”

“Fuck, we’re taking the scenic route then.”

JUSTICE

We barely made it home without me crashing the car.

I had double parked in front of Perc rather than bothering to search for an open spot.

Her absolute thrill at saying “keep the change” as she handed over the hundred was a shot of adrenaline to my system, better than rappelling off a sheer cliff face.

I had been the one who couldn’t wait. We had pulled into our parking garage and I had barely managed to put it in park.

The engine had still been running when I pinned her to the passenger seat and finger fucked her.

The ice coffee rattled in her hand as she came.

I had made her lick my fingers clean before we got out of the car.

She held my hand as we rode the elevator, positively glowing and sipping on her coffee. I felt like I was skipping down the hallway, my dripping wet omega in one hand and the little shopping bag in the other.

Theo sat curled into Ren’s side on the couch, both of them looking relaxed and content in a way that still made my chest tight. I stepped in front of them.

“Theo.” His eyes immediately found mine. “Come here.”

I pointed to the floor between my feet. He slipped off the couch without hesitation, settling on his knees and looking up at me with those remarkable eyes.

“I got you something.” I pulled out the box, opening it to reveal the two gold bracelets nestled in black velvet.

Theo’s breath caught. “Justice...”

“I want you to wear them when you want to feel small, like a marshmallow.” I ran my fingers through his hair. “When you need to remember that you’re mine.”

He leaned into my touch, his eyes fluttering closed. “Yes, Sir.”

I bent down and kissed him, soft and claiming, tasting the yes on his lips.

“Put them on me?” His voice was barely a whisper.

As I fastened the first bracelet around his wrist, I felt Ren shift on the couch behind me. Felt Mackenzie’s presence as she curled up next to him. The pack bonds hummed between us, warm and settled and complete.

“Perfect,” I murmured, clicking the second bracelet into place.

Theo flexed his hands, the gold catching the light. “They’re beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful.” I threaded my fingers through his hair. “All of you.”

Ren’s laugh was soft behind me. “Look at our boy scout alpha, getting all sentimental.”

I turned to find Mackenzie beaming at us, her legs tucked under her as she leaned

against Ren's shoulder. The bite marks on both their necks were still visible, still made something possessive and satisfied purr in my chest. Ren's teeth on my neck were healing way too fast.

I pulled Theo up by the wrists as I straddled Ren's lap on the couch. He looked up at me with that wicked smile that had been getting me in trouble since we were kids.

"So," I said, settling my weight against him, "do you have any other plans to fuck with your alpha, or can we consider this operation a success?"

Ren's hands found my hips, his grip possessive. "Alpha, I haven't even begun to fuck you in all the ways I want."

He pulled me down for a kiss, feeding me all his loyalty and lust through our bond.

When his hand slipped between us to stroke me through my pants, I groaned against his mouth.

I traced his bottom lip. He flicked his tongue out to lick it and I pushed it into his mouth.

Ren would always be greedy for me, for any part of me.

"We have a problem," I said. He raised an eyebrow. "Our omega," I indicated Mackenzie, "couldn't get through a simple shopping trip without coming on my hand in the parking lot. But I think she needs cock."

"Justice!" she gasped and swatted me on the shoulder.

I nodded towards Theo. "And this one is inches away from begging."

Ren rolled his eyes like this was a hardship. “Work, work, work.”

I held his face, stroking my thumb across his cheekbone. I let everything I felt for him flow through our bond. My devotion, gratitude, my need for him like air. I held his gaze until he was breathless.

His hands went to my belt, methodically undoing me, pulling the zipper down.

“Yes, Alpha,” his voice vibrated in the air. “I still get to be on top.” His wicked smile was almost enough to make me come on the spot.

MOXIE SCHEELE

The sound of the aluminum bat was icy and hollow. I leaned over the bar, making sure my cleavage spilled adequately, and rolled the bat with a coy fingertip.

I've always found that tits and the threat of violence were enough to short out most male brains, unless they were an alpha, of course. Alphas needed a whole different strategy.

"Say that again," I pitched my voice low into that sweet spot that would tangle his brain even further.

A bit of drool collected in the corner of his mouth. He watched my lips like a hawk, either imagining what they could do or praying to some unknown god that he had lip-reading skills.

"Come on, puppy. You were so brave just a second ago. You can do it. Say it again."

He looked around the room. Maybe he was checking for an exit. More likely, he was looking for backup. He was unlikely to find that in the Delta Lounge.

"It's not a big deal, Moxie," Becky said. She was one of my newer regulars, recently having found enough courage to sit at the bar with the big kids. Her creamy beta aura blushed peach around the edges—obvious embarrassment.

The beta asshat in front of me ground his teeth and went all red in the face. Helena, my server, edged away from us, knowing she didn't want to be in the middle of this

nonsense.

“Who gave you permission to sit at the bar?” I changed tactics, knowing he was just about to wind himself up good.

“I don’t need your fucking permission,” he managed to get out.

I cocked my head and gave him a slow up-and-down, taking in his limp blonde hair and faded Dynamix T-shirt. It wasn’t retro or vintage. It was just simply old. I just knew that T-shirt had been sitting in the bottom of his closet for at least half my life.

“Oh, pet, I’m happy to serve you drinks, but if you’re going to get all sassy, you need to beg ‘please’ first.”

The alpha in the corner barked a laugh. He held up one of his long, elegant fingers, licked the tip, and marked the point on an imaginary scorecard in the air. I refused to look at him. He was a deadly distraction. His scent of croissants and coffee was distracting enough.

The beta dude-bro did turn, however. White shimmered through his aura.

Technically, betas couldn’t sense auras.

They couldn’t tell if you were alpha, omega, or beta on sight.

But you’d have to be dead not to clock my little book nerd alpha in the corner as an alpha.

Could a beta have that level of confidence?

Sure. But guessing alpha was always the safest course.

He took a breath and turned back to me. I tsk'ed at him and shook my head. "If the next words out of your mouth are not an apology..." The sharp taps of my nail on the aluminum bat finished the sentence for me.

"Sorry," he muttered.

My lip curled into a fake sugar smile. I'd let that be enough for now. It had already been a really long night.

"Good puppy," I chided. "Now come on, you're going to pay your tab and hers, and get the fuck out of my bar."

"Wha... what?"

"You got to pay your stupid tax, my friend. You don't walk up into the Delta Lounge and call one of my closest friends a fat bitch for politely saying no thank you to your disgusting invitation."

Becky squirmed on the barstool. I didn't enjoy putting her on the spot like this. But when you are a single omega hiding out in a dive bar, you can't take shit from anyone. Not even some greasy little beta who is looking to get lucky for the price of a lite beer.

He fumbled his wallet open, the grimy chain connecting it to his belt loop clanked dully. He pulled the \$20 out, and I snatched another from the open mouth of the duct tape wallet.

"Yo, I only had one drink." The beta moved to snatch the bill back. I held it high above my head. He'd have to invade my space to get it back.

"Stupid. Tax." I flicked the bill back and forth like a hypnotist's watch. While

mesmerized, I snatched another bill and slapped it down in front of Becky. “That’s compensation for being a dick.”

Becky chewed her lip, nervous about the blowback.

I knew nothing would happen. I could tell from his aura.

He’d slink on out of here and not come back.

Ever. He had a typical beta aura, dense and close to his skin, and smooth like notebook paper.

No jagged edges, no breaks or leaks. His aura tasted desperate and lonely.

That’s why I served him a Jaggerbomb on his first visit.

The guy made a big production of snapping his denim jacket open and pulling it on, and picking up his cares and woes, all the while muttering under his breath.

He got within feet of the door when the alpha in the corner stood and stretched.

His cashmere sweater rode up to show off a sliver of abs.

I knew he couldn’t feel the alpha’s aura, but I could.

Years of practice kept my knees from shaking and had me resist the urge to back the fuck up.

He looked casual in his tailored dress pants and feather-light sweater I ached to touch.

He held his book in his long fingers, the middle one probing its depths so he wouldn’t

lose his place.

His aura was anything but casual. It crackled with menace and pushed out into the room.

Betas couldn't manipulate their auras, couldn't feel them in the same way.

But it didn't matter when an alpha like this had an aura like that.

The beta paused, white flashing through his aura again.

He darted his eyes between me and the alpha before ducking out with his tail between his legs.

The door wailed. It was appropriate. That little hydraulic mechanism that helped the door close on its own had decided it was going to scream bloody murder every time it closed.

The alpha saluted me with his book, sat down, crossed his long legs, and carefully unfurled his book again.

Now Becky, she had a delicious aura. It was creamy and thick, like Irish cream. And static too, like most beta auras; it wasn't prone to the chaos and volatility of alpha auras or the narcotic sea of an omega.

I pulled a wide fat martini glass from behind me and filled it with ice to chill. I had quite the collection of glassware that rarely got used. Most patrons of the Delta Lounge were the beer and a shot crowd.

"You didn't have to do that, Moxie," Becky said, tucking her bangs behind her ear. The \$20 bill I slapped down in front of her stared at her like a viper.

“Oh, but I did. This is my place, and you are a friend. No one treats my friends like that.”

“She gets off on it.” Helena said, not picking her head up from her phone.

She didn’t need to know the real reason I stashed baseball a bat behind the bar.

I had considered a shotgun for a while but axed that idea.

First of all, I couldn’t trust Marty, my line cook, to make good choices with deadly weapons.

The kid was sweet, good at his job, best dick that money could buy, but not the brightest crayon in the box.

It didn’t really matter. The threat of a firearm was predictable, which made it ignorable, especially for an amped-up alpha. Pumped full of ego and aura, alphas could see guns as toys and slide into bravado, trusting their instincts to dodge bullets.

But a girl with curves and cleavage stepping up to you with a Louisville Slugger? Now that was unpredictable. To get the upper hand with alphas, you had to disrupt their patterns.

No alpha would ever suspect a little beta going to town on them with a bat.

No alpha would suspect that little beta to be an omega auracle hiding out, and those were cards I needed to keep very close to my chest.

My fingers stilled on the well vodka. Becky deserved top shelf tonight. I stepped back and pulled a bottle of Amabie Vodka and the milk chocolate liqueur from the glass shelves behind me.

I filled a pint glass with ice and two jiggers of vodka and a healthy pull of the liqueur. I stared into the depths of the glass and needed something else. A dash of cream would do it.

I spun the plastic tub of cocoa powder in front of me. Her aura wasn't bitter enough for cocoa. She lacked depth, the complexity of trauma.

That's what gave Becky her butter-smooth aura.

I didn't know if it was the same with other auras.

I avoided them like, well, like everyone else.

But to me? Auras had color and texture and tastes.

Just like your tongue could tell the difference between heavy cream and oat milk, auras tasted different to me.

Becky didn't order this drink. They never ordered this drink.

I squeezed my eyes shut before pulling out an envelope of hot chocolate. This was madness. This obsession with making drinks that taste like people's auras. I tried to go cold turkey once and just ignore the fact that I was a freak who could see auras. That was a fucking disaster.

My brain needed some way to cope with all the extra sensory input, especially considering I had so few outlets. I didn't even have one single friend I could unburden myself with and spill the tea. Making drinks to match random people's auras was a crutch.

I popped the shaker on the pint glass and went to town.

No showy flips in the Delta Lounge. This wasn't a fancy heat hotel where you had to keep the patrons entertained with pretty things.

This was just a dive bar on the way out of town.

I topped off the glass, sprinkled some hot cocoa dust on top, and then I just stared at the thing.

It was missing something. Without looking, I fished out the can of whipped cream from the little fridge under the bar and added a perfect little knot of cream.

Knot.

I shivered at the word dancing through my gray matter. Keep your eyes to yourself Moxie, and just ignore the stupid alpha. I knew I wasn't putting out enough scent to be noticed. And I knew for damn sure he couldn't see my aura. But it still felt risky.

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I placed the drink in front of Becky with more brightness than I actually felt. Her eyes danced. She had gotten used to my surprise drinks, especially now she wouldn't have to pay for it.

She leaned forward to watch the progression of the glass as it made its way to her lips. She swooned as the sweetness of the chocolate martini hit her tongue.

"How do you always know exactly what I want?" Becky asked in wonderment, not for the first time.

"That's why I get paid the big bucks," I said before turning to Helena. "Why don't you take off?" It was just Becky and the alpha and a table of betas in the far back.

"I'm waiting on them to cash out." She jutted her chin toward the table. They popped in a couple times a month and were pretty decent tippers.

I crumpled the instant cocoa envelope and tossed it in the trash.

Of course, I missed. I always missed. Keeping my grunt of disgust to myself, I swooped it off the floor and placed it properly in the trash, folding over the cardboard holder for the six-pack of ginger beer I had just restocked.

I took a step away from the bar and couldn't move any further, like I had gotten caught up in some force field.

Damn it.

My sigh was very audible and very annoyed as I smacked a highball glass on the bar and reached for one of the ginger beers.

The clatter of the ice would have been soothing if I was in the mood to be soothed.

I free-poured 2 ounces-ish of Kappa Dark Rum.

The spicy bite of the alcohol tickled my nose.

I spun the ice in the glass with two bar straws.

I always liked my booze to be icy before I put in anything fizzy.

My epic stretch for a bottle opener displaced my locket.

It swung beneath my shirt. The top of the ginger beer gave me a happy-sounding pop.

I grabbed a fresh lime from the basket behind the bar.

I had plenty cut up, but I wanted a twist, not a slice.

The channel knife pulled the perfect strip of rind off the lime.

When I could, I liked to zest citrus right over the glass to not waste all those potent essential oils.

I rimmed the glass and dropped the twist in.

He was lounging in his usual spot without a care in the world.

His whisky, neat, still on its little paper napkin.

He was deep in concentration. One hand lovingly cradling the book, the other absently pinching his bottom lip.

I'd seen him do that quite often. When he thought no one was looking, he'd fall into these idiosyncratic habits, like pulling on a strand of hair or pinching his lip.

The second he registered attention paid to him, it was like a curtain fell, and his entire demeanor changed. His aura changed, too.

Well, not completely. Your aura was your aura.

You were born with it and you died with it.

It grew and shifted as you matured and gained life experience.

Only trauma could cause sudden changes. But auras shifted all the time.

Their colors and textures changed like an octopus.

It could flush with sudden intense emotion.

It was his aura that sucked me in at first. His stereotypical bad boy in a suit look didn't hurt either.

But his aura was what got me. It was powerful but constrained, like a wind-up toy cranked to the max but not allowed to uncoil.

Powerful alphas typically had a different signature.

They toned down their auras rather than held them back, like a stained glass window on a cloudy day before the sun burst through it with startling color, taking over the

entire room.

His aura was seeking something. A tendril of energy whipped around him, a tentacle of longing reaching out for completion but held back by obligation.

And that was downright weird. He had no pack bonds, no mate attachments, no scent match markers which usually rooted an aura to obligation.

It was like he was beholden to something that didn't exist.

Condensation on the glass made it slippery. I tapped the heavy bottom of the glass to the spine of his book before setting it down.

"How do you accidentally become a vampire? What do you fall on someone's fangs or something?" I cocked my hip and crossed my arms with the table between us.

He folded the book around his middle finger to keep his place. He tilted the cover toward me so I could read the full title and not just the spine.

"Ego and hubris." His voice was audible velvet, deep and smooth. He set the book aside and eyed the drink I had delivered. He picked it up with three fingers and promptly took a sip. He never asked what it was or why I brought him a different drink every day.

His usual was Bedivere Whiskey. That did not suit him at all, but I was a good girl and gave him what he wanted.

The drinks all flopped, and it seriously irritated me.

Not that he would know that. He drank every single one, savoring it like it was the elixir of life.

He might smell like a White Russian Croissant but that wasn't what it tasted like. No taste suited his aura.

When I had started this drink obsession, I had thought I was matching flavors to scents. But it went deeper than that, or as deep as a boozy drink could get. Figuring it out, debating it in my head, secretly testing my ideas helped me cope with the sensory overload, especially in crowded spaces.

"Moxie," he said, picking up the glass with a sense of reverence, like I had given him a priceless treasure. As the glass touched his lips, he closed his eyes, blocking out other senses to fully enjoy the experience. "It has a bite."

Bites. Knots. This was a mistake. Why do I always have to play with fire?

"I like my drinks to be assertive. They let you know who's boss."

"Well, I'll be a good boy then," he nodded towards the glass, "for the drink at least."

And this is how it went, every day for at least a month.

He'd saunter in with a book, order a single drink, and turn page after page after page.

Occasionally, someone would get rowdy in the bar and I'd have to break out the bat.

He'd do nothing more than close his book and stand, and let his aura and presence do all the bullying for him.

He didn't intervene, just let me handle the show, but he made it known that he'd clean up if he had to.

I liked that more than I wanted to admit. It was a rare alpha who could sit back and let

an omega go to town. But he didn't know I was an omega. Like everyone else who wandered into the Delta Lounge, they all believed that Moxie Scheele was enough of a beta bitch to hold the joint down.

"Who are you? Do you have a name?" I normally never asked personal questions of patrons. It was never necessary. People treated the bar like a therapy session and just vomited their problems with no prompting.

"You have a nickname for me. You have one for all your regulars. Low Boy, Becky..." He nodded towards the girl at the bar.

"That happens to be her government name, thank you very much."

"Really? That tracks."

"Yo, Moxie." Low Boy, the aforementioned beta regular called out from his table, and his little crew got to their feet.

He waved the receipt folio and slapped it on the table.

Helena double timed it to cash them out.

The alpha didn't move a hair, but his aura stood at attention like the pack of gamer boys was going to be a problem.

I bit the inside of my cheek. Fucking biology. Alphas were hard-wired to protect what was theirs. Most omegas couldn't help but respond to that.

Fuck all the way off with that. I didn't need anyone or anything that I couldn't make for myself.

I turned to bus the table and get closing underway.

“Alistair.” His voice went right to my core and rumbled there.

I took two steps away and paused.

“Book Nerd,” I said over my shoulder, giving him his nickname. His deep, rich chuckles chased me into the kitchen.

PERFUME

“Stop throwing dildos at our guest!” I yelled into the microphone. “We’re all fucking adults here.”

Another fake cock sailed past my shoulder, bounced off a cymbal with a crash, and landed on a drum with a thud.

Behind the drum kit, Saffo couldn’t contain her laughter.

Cackling, she picked up the toy. With drumstick in one hand and sex toy in the other, she laid down a level beat to keep the show going while Kawaii fingered a complimentary groove on her bass guitar.

On rhythm guitar, Habit kept the flow that we were so rudely derailed from.

I cast a side-eye to the hired gun on lead guitar. This was all her fucking fault. Sure, we expected some hazing from the crowd, but not like this.

It was Hired Gun’s fault because she didn’t have the right vibe.

We all knew it, even she knew it. In the weeks of rehearsal leading up to this show, the tension between her and us had sizzled.

But the show must go on, or so said our manager, who reminded us daily of our contractual obligations.

Hired Gun knew the songs and she could shred. We thought that would be enough.

We were wrong.

I looked over to Hired Gun. If tonight ended well, then maybe I'd bother to learn her name.

"Babe," I said to her, trying to make it seem we were all buddy-buddy in case the mic picked it up. "Play us in again. I think this crowd is in the mood for some... 'Ball Gowns and Billy Clubs!'"

Hired Gun nodded and strummed the crunchy intro of the wild ode to an equally wild riot. We were halfway through the first chorus when I realized the roar of the crowd was discordant with the lyrics.

I wasn't thinking right, what with death and dildo distractions. This song had an explosive guitar solo, which I had no doubt that Hired Gun could pull off. That wasn't the point. Zenith had always added a unique flair all her own. It was never the same twice.

"Zenith! Zenith! Zenith! Zenith!" They chanted.

I glanced over at Habit. She had her back to the crowd. She was still putting her all into her performance, standing low in her power stance, or jumping and stomping around. But she couldn't bring herself to face our fans.

Zenith's fans. Habit was Zenith's biggest fan.

Fuck me. I should have picked something a little more primal. More fucking, less fighting. We were all still so raw from Zenith's loss that a song praising a riot was the last thing I should have sung.

I pivoted, searched for a matching note, and transitioned the song into...

“I know you want it, the way you whimper and whine. There’s no excitement. You’re a waste of my time. You’re doomed, darlin’, screwed to your role. The way you crave it...”

I held the mic out to the roaring audience, and they screeched back at me.

“SEX, DRUGS, AND ALPHAHOLES!!!”

“Poor omega, so clean and pretty. Bitten. Locked in. But not me, I’m free! The beta life must look so sweet and gold. I get my pick of...”

“SEX, DRUGS, AND ALPHAHOLES!!!”

Another fresh dildo hurtled toward the stage, and Kawaii batted it away with her bass guitar.

It arched in my direction, and I caught it midair.

It was a twelve-incher, neon pink with an LED light in the core and an alpha knot the size of a fucking softball swelling less than an inch from the balls. Expensive.

I held it up like a trophy.

“This what you want, you little maniacs!?” I screamed into the mic.

Thousands of voices, alpha, omega, and beta, all screamed back. An alpha could say whatever they wanted about control, but none of them had the kind of power we had when we were on stage. Sure, your omega might do whatever you ordered them to, but my little maniacs would, too.

And I didn't even have to bark.

Thousands of voices.

Thousands.

I slowly undid the button on my jeans, then pulled down the zipper.

I turned my back to the audience and when I faced them again, I had the toy flopping out of my jeans.

It was held there by jamming the fly into the narrow space between the knot and the balls, further secured by strapping my belt in front of the knot.

The crowd fucking lost it. In the sex-crazed riot way, not the violent grief-fueled riot way. Which was my intention.

I thrust my hips, and the dildo sprang up and down.

I hopped in place with the beat of the song.

I sang and strutted over to Kawaii in my best alpha swagger.

She turned away from me and jutted out her thick ass, shaking the fuzzy fox tail she always wore for performance.

She twerked her ass while I wrapped the tail around the toy and jerked myself off a few times, rapid and selfish, before tossing her tail away like a used sock.

I sauntered next over to Habit, who was not in the mood for my shenanigans.

Grief wracked her. She should be paralyzed, curled up in a blanket fort with tissues

and sappy movies.

But she had a job to do. Not missing a beat, she wrapped her fist around the toy and slid a few lavish palm strokes along the length.

Then she finally flipped me off and went back to playing her guitar.

Saffo gave me the come-hither finger. Almost exclusively interested in pussy, she couldn't stop laughing as I slid closer and closer. She tapped the toy a few times with a drumstick between giggles, but then dismissed me.

Finally, I marched toward Hired Gun, curious to see what she would do.

She looked at me with dead panic in her eyes, like she'd never seen a fake dick before. She put the pick in her teeth and mimed applause, bows and I'm not 'worthy gestures'.

What a wimp, but stroking my ego was always a smart move.

Maybe I'd learn her name after all.

Back at center stage, I clipped the mic back in the stand. Like always, my eyes scanned the faces at the edge of the stage, looking for the one face that would never be there. I squeezed my eyes shut, cursing the hope that would never die.