

THE BOND
dissolution
OMEGAVERSE

THE

OF

PART ONE

ELIANA LEE

Scent of
Bliss

THE SCENT OF US

PART ONE

THE BOND DISSOLUTION OMEGAVERSE

ELIANA LEE

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For anyone still figuring out how to love all the parts of themselves.

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DEFINING ‘OMEGAVERSE’

This novel is set in a contemporary, alternate universe where humans have secondary biological traits. In addition to the gender spectrum, people fall into one of three categories — alpha, beta or omega. Alphas tend to be dominant leaders of packs and society at large. Betas form the majority and are everyday people. Omegas are the most rare and tend to have greater empathic insight into those around them. They are not shifters.

There’s scents, knotting, heats and all the primal fun that accompanies that. *The Scent of Us* sits firmly in the sweeter side of the genre but is not without its darker themes.

The Bond Dissolution Omegaverse explores and upturns conventions around scent matches and lifetime bonds.

CONTENT WARNING

Our heroine begins her journey as a forcibly bonded omega. This is an abusive relationship where she experiences physical abuse and sexual assault. Other triggers include murder and drug references. None of these occur with her pack.

The Scent of Us is a reverse harem romance containing multiple explicit sex scenes, intended for audiences 18+.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is written in Australian English. There are also a couple of English characters and their dialogue is written in British English.

Please don't mind our extra u's, our s's instead of z's and metric units of measurement.

Though you might come across the use of 'inches' for...spicy reasons.

JUNO

“I have a present for you.”

Well, of *course* Juno wanted it. She was an omega after all. But happiness was not a luxury she was afforded, especially when it didn't come from one of her alphas.

She took a deep breath before her emotions spiked. Her body calmed while her mind focused on her alpha bonds. Three of them, unwanted parasites rooted deep and thorny within her. She visualised a fine gossamer cloth and laid it gently atop them. It would dull the connection in a way that was indecipherable to her alphas. A survival tactic she had learned long ago.

She opened her eyes slowly to find Julian waiting expectantly, one hand behind his back. Juno sighed, feigning indifference. “Are you just going to flip the bird at me?”

He looked scandalised. “I would never!” he swore, before a dextrous flick of his hand revealed several pens. “Fine-liners,” he grinned.

“You got my favourite kind!”

“0.1mm nib.”

“Stop, you didn't.”

“In all the colours they had available. I think there's fourteen?”

“I'm dying, Julian. *Dying.*”

“I also got you this box of 60 coloured pencils from this expensive-ass brand I can't pronounce,” he finally added, pulling a slim red box out of his bag. “From Switzerland.”

Juno mimed stabbing herself in the chest with a sharp gasp. She let her body fall limp with her tongue lolling cartoonishly. Julian pulled out his phone and mimed typing on it as he recited *how to revive an omega after*

death by pencils.

“That’s weird, it keeps auto-correcting to penis,” Julian complained and Juno had no chance of keeping up her death charade after that. She sat up on the edge of her seat eagerly waiting for him to slide them over.

It was probably sad that stationary brought her such joy but it did.

“I wanted to get these for you for a while,” he admitted shyly. “Shipping took forever.”

All pretence was pushed aside as Juno fought the urge to squeeze him with a grateful hug. She settled for clasping her hands to her chest. “Thank you, Julian. Just...thank you.”

“It’s the least I can do,” he replied, not meeting her eyes. A thousand unspoken words hung heavy between them.

Julian was a beta, slender and soft-spoken in comparison to her alphas. Only slightly taller than her, with thick dark hair that flopped over his forehead and a chin that had never seen a trace of stubble. There was absolutely nothing about him that an alpha would find threatening, which was why he was tasked with watching her in their absence.

Juno thought he was beautiful. The genuine care and what little affection he could safely show her only deepened her infatuation.

The most subtle pine scent wafted across as he leaned forward to place his gifts on the table between them. Beta scents were faint compared to her own omega perfume. They weren’t designed to call to her like an alpha’s was — yet with Julian, she wanted to bury her face in his neck and inhale. Transport herself to a forest floor staring up at the dappled light through the trees. Juno waited until he sat back before reaching out and taking them.

The first and only time Julian had ever touched her was when she had stumbled going down the stairs their first week together. He had reached out automatically to steady her. Her prime alpha picked up his scent on her arm when he got home and rewarded Julian with a bloody nose for it.

They never touched again.

Juno curled up into a ball, resting her drawing pad on her knees before flicking to a fresh page. It had also been from him. She began to scribble aimlessly, forming shapes and hoping they would speak to her. Her eyes met Julian’s over the top of the paper.

“Will you read to me again, please?”

With a gentle smile, Julian plucked a library copy of Roald Dahl’s *Matilda* from his bag, flicked to the bookmarked page and began to read.

They had finished *The Witches* last week so *Matilda* seemed like an obvious follow-up. Juno usually requested books she had read when she was younger — he had even slogged through all of *Twilight* for her. They transported her to a time *before*.

Before alphas. Before her awakening.

She continued to sketch while letting Julian's smooth voice wash over her. Tension slid from her body, feeling calm for the first time in days. Either of them could have suggested audiobooks at any time but neither did. This is how they usually passed their time together, a couple of chapters at a time (sometimes more if it was a particularly exciting bit). Afterward, they would settle into a companionable silence with the latest playlist Julian curated for her or a funny podcast he'd found. Sometimes Juno would draw a little cartoon version of him and surreptitiously slide it over. Today's version of Julian was dressed like Santa.

The buzz of Julian's phone was an unwelcome reality check.

"I...I have to go soon. They texted saying they're on their way back." Julian had the same look on his face he always did when he had to leave her. Pain. Guilt.

Juno gave him a wan smile. "Thank you again for the pens and pencils."

"1 to 10?" Julian asked quietly.

This was how Julian checked in with her. 10 meant it was a fucking amazing gift of a day. 1 was a day that sliced off pieces of her dignity with every second.

"3 this morning." She wished she could reach over and take his hand but she could never risk it. "But 7 after seeing you."

"I'm an extra four?" he beamed. Juno loved the way his eyes disappeared into crinkles when he truly smiled.

"It was mostly the presents," she teased, waving a pen at him. "You add two points at best." He clutched his chest as if mortally wounded, exhaling noisily.

The remorse returned to his eyes and his smile dropped. "I wish everyday was a 10 for you."

Juno hadn't had a 10 day in two years. Not since she woke from her first heat, disoriented and aching, with a bleeding collar of bondmarks.

That was her first 1.

“God fucking *dammit!*”

Juno jumped violently at the savage roar. Her pen jerked, a jagged line running outside the confines of her outline. Fuck. *Why are you wasting time drawing when you can't even do it properly?* A small voice that sounded suspiciously like her Chinese Mama scolded her. A sour pang of resentment rose up in her throat before she could quash it. Her shoulders tensed, knowing what was coming next.

“Do you have to be so fucking emo all the time, omega?” Vincent snarled. The alpha was sprawled across the couch, his face lit up by the flashing gunfire from his game.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

She was once again as serene and innocuous as the wildflowers she was drawing. Vincent muttered inaudibly before thankfully turned his attention back to the carnage on screen.

As an omega forcibly bonded to three alphas, she no longer had the luxury of private emotions.

A tall shadow loomed over her page and she continued to inhale deeply to try and stay calm. Unfortunately it also meant she drew in the prime alpha's bittersweet scent. It was laced with pheromones designed to awaken every cell in her body. An involuntary shudder ran down her spine.

“Why do you have to go and ruin your flowers with that ugly skull?” Andrew sneered.

Juno looked down at her half-inked floral crown adorning the pencil outline of the skull. She liked to pair the beautiful and macabre in her work. Erotic and horror. Much like a trapped, heat-brained omega begging for the bite of her captors.

Maybe she would add a glossy spider crawling out of the skull's mouth, legs all thin and spindly. Andrew hated spiders.

“I suppose it's because I'm a garbage artist making garbage art,” Juno replied monotonously, continuing her shading.

Her third alpha, Eric, snorted from the kitchen. “At least she's calm in the bond when she's drawing that crap.”

Andrew, Vincent and Eric Zhao. *Pack Zhao*. Brothers, alphas and businessmen with quotation marks. They ran several illegal gambling dens in the city, feeding their loan shark business like an unscrupulous ouroboros snake. Not to mention several businesses that served as fronts to launder all the money.

So the fact that their acquisition of her two years ago was neither legal nor consensual wasn't a moral stretch. To them and her father, Juno was merely a product in exchange for an agreed upon sum. A rare omega for the cancellation of an insurmountable gambling debt.

Because there was no physiological or psychological high for an alpha quite like the knot-clenching orgasm you could get from a heat-induced rut. And when a heat lasts for days and your bonded omega was a begging, slick-soaked, grasping mess throughout the whole thing — you got a lot of those orgasms. You could even get a facsimile of it outside of heats if she sniffed enough of your pheromones.

Dealing with her emotions the rest of the time through the bond was just the inconvenient side effect.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Vincent howled at the blood-spattered screen. “I fucking hit him you stupid fucking piece of shit game!”

Only *her* emotions were inconvenient, of course.

“And no more *Call of Duty* for you.” Andrew turned the console off and extricated the controller from Vincent's grasp. Vincent's retaliation quickly died as a news anchor's voice cheerily filled the room.

“...scientists say that the first round of bond dissolution clinical trials have been successful, changing the concept of lifetime alpha and omega bonds as we know it. Joining us now is Dr. Anita Kokotis from the National Omega Commission.”

Every head whipped toward the screen.

“Turn it up.” Eric instructed coldly as Andrew pointed the remote at the TV. Vincent slid across the couch towards Juno, ignoring her flinch. He pulled her roughly against him and traced her ear with the tip of his nose. “Find the news interesting, omega?”

“Not at all,” Juno replied airily. “I wish I was watching you get sniped again.”

His grip on her shoulder grew painful and his teeth closed on her lobe. “Just for that, omega,” Vincent breathed. “You can choke on my cock later.”

Juno struggled not to voice several insults, mostly revolving around his cock size or lack thereof.

Shut up so you can listen.

“...have been seeing astonishing results between alpha and omega pairings who are both invested in and seeking the bond dissolution.”

She wanted to scream at the TV. *Both invested?* There was no way even

one of Pack Zhao would let her go, let alone all three. Where did that leave omegas like her?

The news about the trials was coming at an already volatile time. Social media was currently lit up with a heated debate over bonds. Word had gotten out that the box office magnet Sawyer Callahan and the significantly younger omega actress Sage North had an unbalanced bond. It shattered their *hashtag couple goals* illusion big time. Rumour had it that he didn't allow her to complete her side of the bond by bestowing her bite on him. The mental and emotional link between them had formed. But only *her* scent pheromones had changed to reflect that she was bonded.

The Alpha Brotherhood, an extremist group masquerading as lobbyists, were the loudest in defending Sawyer's rights. *He's the head of their pack, it's his right to make decisions as prime.* Speculation was rife amongst omega advocacy groups that Sawyer had bonded Sage during her heat. It was the only time alphas could bypass an omega's defence against non-consented bonds.

Juno understood it all too well. Bonds only formed if the omega receiving the bite was happy and content with their alpha. Heats were the most vulnerable time of an omega's life. It was no wonder almost every unbonded omega was on heat suppressants.

"But we are hoping to also make headway with nonconsensual one-way bonds. That will be the next stage of our trials."

The temperature in the room dropped several degrees. Juno felt Andrew and Eric close in behind her, their scents suffocating.

"And what has set you apart from the numerous other unsuccessful trials conducted here and overseas?"

"I firmly believe that it's been our holistic approach, targeting not just what physiologically makes a bond but also the mental aspect. Subjects with a particularly strong mindset — grit, focus and determination — were the most successful."

Andrew let out a bark of laughter, deflating the tension in the room instantly. "Did you hear that, Juno? A strong mindset." He switched off the TV and flung the remote past her head, eliciting a sharp gasp as it barely missed striking her. Her pen dropped to the floor, her fingers trembling. His smug satisfaction was unmistakable in the bond. "Guess that rules you out, huh?"

Once the three of them had left the room, Juno reached down to pick up

her pen. She focused hard on starting the shape of her spider so they could not feel the hope that sparked within her. She buried it deep, hidden from the alphas, where it burned and burned.

JULIAN

Being in love with a bonded omega was hell.

Being in love with a forcibly bonded omega while working for the alphas responsible? It sat at a similar humiliation level to cleaning Satan's gloryhole sex club every night. Not as the janitor — but the actual mop itself.

While Julian wasn't directly related to Pack Zhao, their convoluted connection was still familial. His aunt on his mum's side was married to one of their cousins. Or second cousins? Wait, he could've sworn there was some sort of in-law link he was missing too.

Either way, his extended family was in the Zhao's orbit. And like crabs in a bucket, they scrabbled desperately to be the one at the top to impress the powerful pack. His father worked days at one of their money laundering business fronts and nights as a dealer for their gambling houses. He must have been in the running for being their biggest bootlicking sycophant. It's why he offered up Julian's services — no specified service mind you, just eternal servitude apparently — for work experience, hoping to gain a foothold in their inner circle that way.

It would have saved a whole lot of time and heartbreak if his Baba realised that Pack Zhao thought of betas as little more than dirt.

Andrew had initially turned the offer down. But one morning after a wedding, Julian found himself hauled to the Zhao pack house. He wasn't sure how to tell his eternally grateful father that the likely reason Andrew changed his mind was because Eric had caught him on his knees in the garden with one of the groomsmen. "Yeah, you'll do." Andrew smirked. Julian could tell there was a slur hanging unsaid from the tip of his tongue.

Julian was intent on doing the bare minimum to appease his dad before

bailing. But everything changed when he met Juno.

He took one look at her, dark circles under haunted eyes and her neck oozing blood, and knew he was hers. Her small body curled protectively in on itself when she scented him. There was nothing he wouldn't do to bring her back to life again.

Every word he said that first day, that first week, was carefully practised over and over in his head. He forgot how to breathe when she first made eye contact with him. The first time he said her name brought the most melancholy smile to her face it shattered him.

“I like that you call me Juno and not...omega. Like I'm a person.”

He had known in a theoretical sense how much more complex omega scents were compared to alpha scents. And certainly beta scents. But nothing prepared him for how evocative simply being around Juno was. Especially in the brief moments when she was content. Peaches, velvet and plush, ripened in the summer sun. A bite of firm flesh seeking comfort from the searing rays, juice running down his chin. Then a burst of sugared sweetness, caramelised browned with molasses. Finished with a lush dollop of vanilla laced cream. She was the final temptation — *I couldn't possibly* — before licking the bowl clean.

It only made his job harder. He felt an immense responsibility towards her. Every time he'd get ice for a new bruise, walk her through wrapping a sprained wrist or push her to nap after they had exhausted her body the night before, his throat would burn from the inhumanity of it.

He dreamed of being able to free her. He remembered one misguided rescue attempt two years ago. It was back when he was still too scared to really talk to her much, and left her to her own devices. He occasionally checked in (i.e. hovered awkwardly), before leaving again to sweat profusely in private.

Heavy rain assailed the house, dark clouds blotting out all trace of the sun. He was on the second floor near Andrew's office when the power cut out.

Julian knew he might only have minutes — maybe even seconds — before the cameras rebooted and reconnected. He didn't even know what he could find, what use it could be. Despite being the most likely source of leverage, the laptop was out. Guaranteed to be password protected and Julian knew Andrew was not a *password1* kind of guy.

Top drawer revealed a lacy g-string. A *clearly worn* lacy g-string. Julian

flinched — was it Juno's? What if it wasn't Juno's? Julian took a photo in a panic, not knowing what on earth he could possibly do with the image.

“The fuck am I doing. They're going to kill you.”

He found some sort of leather-bound notebook in the middle drawer and flicked it open. Fuck, it was all in Chinese. His childhood tantrums over having to go to Saturday school were coming back to bite him in the ass. Though there were numbers that looked like monetary amounts in one of the columns. If it was financial evidence of their illegal activities it could be something. Julian hastily took photos of the first few pages as well as the last few pages. Wait, wasn't that the character for Zhao? Most of the lines had it. And he was pretty sure that said *shu shu*. Which was...uncle.

Another drawer held a mess of invoices. His hands shook as he tried his best to take non-blurry photos. They looked like purchases pertaining to businesses the pack owned. And also receipts for parts of Eric's PC gaming rig.

He was the worst rescuer ever. At best he could expose that Andrew Zhao had a panty-stealing kink, helped his family out with money and probably fudged his taxes a bit.

The photos sat on a hard drive in his home, collecting dust, as it became abundantly clear that bonded omegas do not get to leave their alphas.



Julian stared at the raw slashes of crimson burning her delicate wrists, trying not to let his distress show. Juno didn't need his anger or his pity. Vincent didn't use ropes often but when he did, Juno would be almost catatonic the next day. Usually, Julian would get an antibiotic ointment for her, all while desperately wishing he could do it himself and press a kiss to her bandage after.

But today she was drawing, uncaring that the abrasions on her wrists were grazing the paper with every stroke of her pen.

“Don't worry about me, Julian,” she said serenely. “I'm an 8 today.”

Juno had used the new pens he'd gotten her, creating an overlapping portrait piece in red and blue. A girl in red and a wolf in blue, staring out through the same eyes.

“I wonder what it would look like if you looked at it with one of those old

school 3D glasses,” she said, lightly tapping the page.

“Like those red and blue ones?”

She smiled approvingly. “Probably nothing special. I didn’t use it to draw so it probably won’t have any sort of cool effect.” She tapped the page again in the same spot, where the girl’s thick braid meshed with the wolf’s fur.

Julian knew Pack Zhao monitored her phone and internet usage. He knew they kept cameras in the house. It was likely why they left her alone with him because they could see he was too chickenshit to even go near her.

“Can I use this as a bookmark?” He pulled *Matilda* out, holding it loosely so the bookmark fell back into the bag. “I don’t want to dog-ear a library book.”

Juno waved her hand dismissively, “Take it, I was just messing around. It’s not one I want to keep.”

She watched him intently as he slid the drawing safely in the pages of the book and tucked it back in his bag.

CONTACT NOC GET ME IN BOND DISSOLUTION TRIALS

Julian stared at Juno’s drawing overlaid with the blue cellophane he’d picked up on the way home. With the detailed strokes of the wolf’s fur obscured, the girl’s braid revealed her hidden message. This was it. This was how he was going to get Juno out. He pulled out his phone, found a contact number and dialled immediately.

Hello and thank you for calling the National Omega Commission.

For event inquiries including courtship galas and fundraisers, please press 1.

For scent matching inquiries, please press 2.

For all inquiries relating to the Omega Village, please press 3.

For heat services please press 4. Be advised we are currently only accepting alpha applicants as heat partners.

For all other inquiries, please stay on the line and an operator will be with you—

The line abruptly cut out. Confused, Julian redialed.

Hello and thank you for calling the National Omega Commission.

For event inquiries including courtship galas and fundraisers, please press 1.

For scent matching inquiries, please press 2.

For all inquiries relating to —

Maybe their call centre was understaffed right now? It was after hours. Julian would try again in the morning.

He was summoned by Pack Zhao the next morning. There was no time to call NOC before he left, but at least he could subtly let Juno know he'd gotten her message and tell her he would call later today. Pride swelled in his chest — he was going to do it. He was going to free her and be her hero.

Looking back at that moment made him want to punch his past self repeatedly in the dick for being such a moron.

Julian pulled into the driveway and was greeted by Vincent at the door.

“Bout fuckin’ time,” the alpha grumbled, pushing past him. “She’s on the back deck.” Julian stepped through and Vincent shut the door behind him, the click of the lock echoing through the foyer.

Instead of Juno waiting for him, it was Andrew. He was staring out into the back garden, dressed in business casual with his morning coffee in hand.

“I’m sorry,” Julian faltered. “Vincent told me to come to the back deck. I’ll go find her.”

There was a predatory gleam in Andrew’s eye as he turned around. A lion, toying with his prey.

“No need. I know exactly where she is.”

Julian swallowed and inclined his head respectfully. “If you let me know

I can go find her and leave you to enjoy your coffee.”

Andrew was preternaturally calm as he placed his mug down on the table. Julian’s fight or flight instinct went haywire as every fibre of his being screamed.

“Do you know why Eric, Vincent and I trust you around Juno, Julian?” Julian was frozen by the door as Andrew walked over. His hands were in his pockets, posture loose and casual yet fear lifted every hair off the back of Julian’s head.

“Because I’m a beta? And g-gay?”

He stumbled over the lie. He could barely focus on Andrew, his heartbeat was pounding so loudly in his ears. They were face to face now, his broad frame and alpha dominance crushing him. He couldn’t meet his gaze any longer and dropped his eyes.

“Because we don’t, Julian.” He tilted his head towards the camera affixed to the ceiling. “We’re always watching.”

Dread iced his veins as Andrew reached down and plucked Julian’s phone from his hand.

“And we’re always listening.”

What a colossal fucking idiot he was. He had one chance to get Juno out and he blew it. He should have called using a different phone. Hell, he should’ve stormed the NOC offices themselves demanding they put her in the trials. How could he have fucked this up? His heart hurt at the thought of what this would cost Juno. The guilt rose in his chest like a tsunami. Choking, stifling, strangling him until he drowned in it.

“You contact them again and she pays for it.”

Andrew pocketed Julian’s phone, walked back to his coffee and took a sip; Julian’s betrayal just a minor blip to his morning routine. Julian staggered back, willing his knees not to collapse under him. The prime alpha sauntered back over to him, sliding a slip of paper into Julian’s still open palm.

“Also, my brothers purchased your family’s sorry excuse for a restaurant and that shoebox you call an apartment. Your former landlord was more than happy to sell to the right buyer.” He could see the sharp canines of Andrew’s teeth as he grinned. “Of course, you and your family will have to find other accommodations. Immediately.”

Julian stared down at the unmistakable red letters.

“Oh and one more thing?”

He had never felt smaller or more insignificant as the prime alpha's full power washed over him.

“Tell your father he's fired. He'll never work for Pack Zhao ever again.”

Guilt. Shame. Complete and utter devastation.

“Get the fuck out of here.”

Julian stumbled to his feet and ran.

JUNO

Juno had never been in the surveillance room at the house. She'd always wondered how many cameras they had, how much they captured and what footage the alphas actually kept. The annoyance of a locked door she wasn't allowed to access buzzed in her periphery like a mosquito every time she passed it.

Today was the day she finally crossed the threshold and she would have given anything to have never done so.

But there she was. Enveloped in Eric's sour scent from his arm draped over her shoulders. His fingers toyed with the ends of her hair while she sat ramrod straight next to him, staring at the nightmare unfolding in real time.

"...and we're always listening."

Juno could only watch as her only ally was banished from her life. For trying to save her.

Oh Julian. Her sorrow and heartbreak welled up unbidden as her eyes shone with unshed tears.

"He's an idiot," Eric said, unsympathetically. "You know that right?"

"Who, Andrew?" Juno sniped. Her head snapped down as his twirling fingers suddenly grasped and pulled.

"You want to repeat that, you little bitch?" Eric moved so fast in front of her, obscuring her view of the screen as he fisted her hair even tighter.

Yes, she screamed internally. "No," she whispered, letting her eyes drop submissively the way she knew he liked. Stared at each individual curl of the plush carpet until her defiance wilted, replaced by a contrived subservience. She could sense his cruel satisfaction as he released her.

The door opened behind them and Vincent ambled into the room. "Aww,

show's over," he pouted theatrically. "I know!" he exclaimed as he clapped his hands, a deranged ringmaster lining up his next act. "Let's put on a movie."

The black and white security footage disappeared and another video replaced it. It was the nest, viewed through the lens of a shaky, phone camera. Juno's heart stopped as she recognised the naked, sweaty back on screen. Hers.

"Oh look, it's you." Vincent was positively chewing up the scenery. He pointed at the cock jutting out from the point of view of the person filming, disappearing inside her. "That's me fucking you." He pressed play and her moans filled the room. "And that's you absolutely loving it."

They had filmed her during her heat, the absolute fucking scumbags. She'd vaguely remembered bright lights pointed at her but she didn't connect the dots until now. Juno bit down hard on the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood, refusing to give them the satisfaction of her devastated rage.

Vincent watched himself on screen a few more moments, a manic grin on his face, before pausing it again. "Did you enjoy that? I have more if you want."

"No, I'm good," Juno replied coolly. Vincent's eyes narrowed at her tepid response, so disparate from her churning emotions. Before he could try again to get a rise out of her, the door opened and Andrew joined them. He glanced at the screen before staring down at Juno.

"In case you thought three alpha bonds wasn't binding enough to make you pack, think of these videos as shall we say, insurance? If you are anything but our sweet, doting omega, we'll make these videos public. Did you know 'omega heat' is the most searched term on porn sites? I mean, we'll be *furious* at the invasion of privacy of course and demand it be taken down but you know what they say about the Internet — it's forever."

Andrew ran his fingertips over her neck, tracing the raised scar tissue of their bondmarks.

"So you see, omega. You'll never be free of us."

Things were not the same after that. But not in the way Juno expected. Despite how viciously they staked their claim on her, the alphas were

unbalanced. They had always worked as a unit. Now that they insisted on always having one alpha guard her, the balance upon which their operations sat upon teetered. A new undercurrent of uneasiness infected all three of their bonds.

They would die before admitting a *beta* was what they had needed in their pack. And they got rid of him! Juno could gorge herself on the *schadenfreude* happily for the rest of her life.

“Do my head and neck next. And give me an update.”

“Yes, alpha,” Juno said placidly as she slid her hands up from where she had been massaging Andrew’s shoulders. She began to run both thumbs up and down his neck, eliciting a pleased grunt from him. It was late, the night about to tick over to a new day, and Juno was tired. Ever since Julian had been banished from her life, she had played the dutiful omega. She dared one time to suggest they leave her alone — at home with all cameras on, of course. Despite framing it as concerned sympathy — *it must be so cumbersome factoring her in around all their ‘business’ dealings* — they had snarled and dragged her to the nest until she was a pungent cocktail of their scents.

She wasn’t going to be doing that again.

Closing her eyes, she focused on her bonds to Eric and Vincent. “They’re both pretty excited. Eric feels...eager, I think. But Vincent is jittery. Practically giddy.” She mused as she began to press her fingertips into his scalp. She imagined they had tiny little snakes on them. Venomous ones. “I guess they’re having a good night.”

“What is going on?” Andrew muttered. “They’re meant to just be checking in on Spring Street. Routine.”

Their excitement simmered in the bond, sending phantom jolts of adrenaline through her system. A nervous sweat began to break out over her body as a result. She wished she could use her bond dampening techniques but she needed to be ready to report for Andrew.

Vincent and Eric without their prime was an unhinged combination.

Juno was about to move back down to Andrew’s neck again when the bitter tang of betrayal filled her mouth. It was coming from Eric and Vincent, acrid and sharp through the bond.

“Something’s happening,” she gasped. Andrew leapt up, scrambling to pull his phone from his pocket as he barked at her. “Tell me!”

A sudden sharp pain tore through her neck. Rage. Disbelief. Shock. She

was being bombarded on two fronts with multiple emotions, so strong and disorienting she wanted to vomit. Andrew was still yelling at her, his alpha bark demanding obedience. But his voice sounded distorted. Bubbled and thick like it had travelled through water. The command lost its power by the time it reached her.

There was a ringing in her ears as white spots began to form in her vision. Couldn't breathe; wheezing and gasping. Her fingers scrambled to her throat, trying to hold her flesh back together. She stared down in confusion when she only felt the soft collar of her T-shirt.

Eric's despair was so severe it felt like her ribcage was being cracked open. Andrew was there as well, his panic a high-pitched whine rattling through her. But Vincent was scared. Cold. Fading. It didn't matter that she held no love for him — he was still her bonded alpha and she was experiencing everything as he was violently torn from her.

A live vivisection.

There was immense pressure on her temples; drumming, drumming, drumming away a horrendous heartbeat. Three perfect circular droplets of blood stained the floor beneath her. She touched her nose and it came away red.

"I think Vincent's dead."

Juno took the full brunt of Andrew's disbelief and fury on her chin, knocked clean from her chair. She lay on the floor, her body limp and devoid of all strength. Blank, glassy eyes stared at the ceiling as her lips moved without sound.

Her alphas were distraught.

It was...annoying. A better omega would be driven to comfort and soothe them but Juno just wanted a bit of peace and quiet. At least long enough to figure out why she was on the floor. And why her jaw was killing her.

Andrew's face came into view above her, curses and spittle flying from his lips. Gross.

Oh that's right. He'd hit her. After she'd told him Vincent was dead.

Her eyes widened. Vincent Zhao, the psychotic alpha she had been tethered to was gone. No more groping hands just to see her jump, no more

senseless rages taken out on her body. One sadistic fucker down, two to go.

Holy shit.

“You’re happy?” Andrew was shaking her by the shoulders.

A thousand calculations and what-ifs ticked through Juno’s head in a single second. She chose the path of self-preservation.

With a relieved cry, she flung her arms around Andrew’s neck and pulled him down. She pressed her body up against his, as if desperate to feel every inch of him.

“You’re alright, oh god, you’re alive, it’s ok it’s ok it’s ok.” Juno blubbered incoherently into his hair. She felt his anger swing to confusion. Wiping away tears — *’cause talking hurt her jaw dammit* — she clasped her hands on both sides of his face and stared with what she hoped was the picture of anguish.

“Losing Vincent in the bond...was the most painful thing I’ve ever felt,” she sniffed pathetically. “Don’t leave me. Don’t ever make me feel that again. Please, Andrew!”

Juno almost felt guilty at the grief that crossed Andrew’s face. Almost but didn’t. “He’s really gone?” Andrew whispered.

She nodded, her bottom lip trembling. “Eric’s hurting. Go find him. Bring him back to me. To us.”

Andrew kissed promises and reassurances onto her lips. She wiped it away as soon as he left the room.

There was no discussing death at Vincent’s funeral. Not how he died, where he died and definitely not why he died. Spiced incense smoke swirled around her, mingling with the scents of her two remaining alphas.

Andrew was angry. He was always angry now. That oppressive kind of angry where you replay scenarios of what you *could have, would have, should have* done differently.

If Andrew had kept a tighter leash on Vincent in the last couple of months, Vincent would never have been able to rope Eric into dealing pills to their gambling clientele. He wouldn’t have gotten greedy from the insane money he was making when he cared less and less about who he sold to. He would never have been lured into meeting a new supplier, who could provide

Fentanyl-laced heroin. And he wouldn't have been his aggressively cocky self that night, saying the wrong thing to the wrong person and earning himself a knife thrust to the throat. Eric wouldn't have roared as he pressed his fingers to the gushing wound in a futile effort to stem the flow, before retaliating against his brother's murderer covered in his blood. And Vincent's funeral would not have needed a police presence to ensure an ankle-monitored Eric would return to house arrest without incident.

There were a lot of things that could have happened differently. But Andrew, Eric and Juno did not talk about it.

Juno did her best to soothe them through the bonds. It was imperative they didn't dwell on the true catalyst of all this — *her*. If she hadn't used Julian to attempt escape, the status quo would have been preserved.

Vincent would not have needed a closed casket.

"Can you both stay with me in my nest tonight?"

Lull them. Lie to them.

"Of course, omega."

"Tonight, and every night from now on. No more separate rooms."

They crowded her closer, gripping her tighter. She made herself soften into their touch instead of stiffening in displeasure. Trying to keep herself distracted, she looked around at the sombre faces. She was relieved that her family (*could she really still call them that?*) were not amongst them.

Their visit a few days ago was about as much as she could've tolerated.

Juno had been exhausted after a long week of visitors paying respects at the house. She patted concealer on her jaw each morning. Faces blurred as she moved on auto-pilot, offering tea and accepting condolences with rote replies. As Pack Zhao's sheltered omega pet, only three of those faces were familiar to her — her father, her mother and her brother, Ben.

"Hey. Are you doing ok?" Ben asked, eyes full of concern. "I've tried to come see you so many times but they always just—"

He was pushed aside and her mother grasped her arm, her nails pinching. "Are you making sure your alphas are looked after?" her mother hissed in Mandarin. "Don't give them a reason to regret our deal."

"Do whatever your alphas say, alright?" Her father implored.

Juno offered them tea and moved them into the house. They were strangers now, just like everyone else around her. It was sad how her parents' behaviour was completely unsurprising, though Ben's false empathy did sting a little. Maybe he was working a new angle to garner even more of their

parents' fawning attention.

Yes, it was a good thing none of them were here today. She continued to rub small circles with her thumb on Andrew and Eric's hands in what she hoped was a comforting manner, wishing the day was over.

"I think it's time to take your birth control out."

Andrew stroked the slightly raised bump on her arm. It had been implanted right after the first heat after they had all claimed her. Too busy wanting to get to knotting and biting to do it beforehand, Juno couldn't even describe the sheer relief she'd felt when tests afterward were negative. She was grateful every day for that blessed little rod.

"Yes," Eric agreed. "It's just what our pack needs right now after everything. It's a good thing I made bail."

Andrew and Eric exchanged a look implying they had taken steps to ensure that would be the case. But all Juno could focus on was the first part. Fuck no. A child? With them? She would never be free of them. Panic seized her.

Andrew's eyes narrowed, sensing her distress.

"I'm scared of giving birth," she blurted out. "And carrying more than one." She lowered her gaze, looking away timidly. "O-Omegas impregnated by alphas during heats almost always result in multiples. I mean, it definitely runs in your family."

Deceive them. Delude them.

"You were made for this," Eric leered, his hand sliding over her stomach.

"Made to be bred," Andrew continued. "Made to carry our future alpha sons."

The sharp sound of his hand striking her bare thigh splintered the air. "Present for your alpha," he barked.

Driven by the inescapable command, she did so.

Afterward, Juno lay in bed unable to sleep, the rhythmic snores of her alphas breaking the silence. Her fingers subconsciously traced her implant. She thought of the broken bond, of living Vincent's final moments horrifically alongside him.

Juno's mind turned as a plan began to form.

JUNO

Juno had been curled up in bed for most of the day. She made sure to respond with her most plaintive “*I’m fine*” when they checked on her. As the pain of her intensifying cramps fed into the wide open bond, so did their rising annoyance. Her fourth “*I’m fine*” was met with a scowled “You’re clearly not!” from Eric, ensnared unknowingly into her trap.

“Can we please see the omega gynaecologist soon?” Juno sniffed, clutching her middle. “We can get my implant out and I can get this pain checked.”

Juno certainly hoped so, she was sick of sneaking gulps of whole milk that sent her lactose intolerant stomach rioting. There were no cameras in the pantry to catch her filling her empty oat milk carton with the emergency stash of long life milk she had pilfered from the back. Her pain seemed to register through the bond as generic abdomen pain. She said the magic word (‘uterus’) and made Andrew and Eric’s eyes glaze over.

Eric snapped his fingers impatiently, “Who was the guy we got last time to put in the birth control?”

A desiccated husk of a man with a three strand combover. Juno was pretty sure he wasn’t even qualified for omega healthcare, just a general practitioner they had in their pockets. *Overheard at Vincent’s funeral that he died. Shame.*

“Dr Chua died three months ago,” Andrew said, without glancing up from his phone.

“Oh no,” Eric deadpanned without sympathy. “Who else then?”

“Aunt Viv’s daughter works reception at an omega health clinic. She’ll get us in quick.” Andrew gave her a suggestive look, and she fought the urge

to retch. “Guess your body wants to be bred as soon as possible.”

“Yes, that must be it,” Juno replied with a pitiful snuffle.

Her appointment was thankfully booked for the next day, which was a very good thing considering her secret milk stash was dwindling. Juno spent the time buried in her newest sketch, apparently caught up in a sudden burst of inspiration. She seemed to lose track of time the morning of, jumping up with apparent surprise when Eric barked at her to get ready. An outfit was hastily chosen and her hair was thrown up as quickly as she could, held in place with the closest thing she had at hand.

Her pencil.

It went with the torn scrap of paper she had stuffed in her chosen pants the night before. The pair she had thrown haphazardly on her bed so it could be picked up in a rush under their watchful eye. She didn’t dare write anything on it yet in case she was discovered. Paper could be explained away. *Get me the fuck away from these psychos* could not.

Juno was just about to step out the door when Andrew stopped her.

“You look ugly with your hair up.”

Fuck.

“I-It’s just a doctor’s appointment. I thought—”

A quick tug and a crucial part of her escape plan was thwarted. He threw the pencil carelessly over his shoulder.

“Let’s go.”

Juno wasn’t sure if Andrew and Eric could sense her intentions or whether their possessive tendencies were just suffocatingly extreme today for no reason. Both insisted on attending. Eric sat in the back with her in the car. Andrew filled out her intake form and handed it back to Aunt Viv’s daughter (her name was Sarah; he didn’t care). She never had a chance to even touch the pen, let alone try to steal it. An elderly omega tried to sit across from her in the waiting room and Eric gave her such a blistering glare she changed her mind and teetered off to the other side of the room.

None of it boded well.

They were soon ushered into a room where they met Dr. Singh, a nonsense battle-axe of a woman. She addressed Juno first — Andrew and Eric only got a cursory greeting — and informed her that she didn’t have to have her alphas present in the room. “Some omegas are comforted by the presence of their pack, while others prefer to discuss their health privately without being distracted and pulled in all different directions by their bonds.

It's completely up to you."

Despite being a beta, Dr. Singh's only reaction to the two alphas' warning growls was to give them a withering once-over.

Juno liked her. A lot.

"No, I'm happy to have Andrew and Eric here," Juno said, her tone falsely bright.

They discussed her birth control removal first, the whole thing making Juno queasy. It worked well when it came to discussing her 'unexplained' abdominal pain. Dr. Singh ordered her a blood test and handed her a little specimen cup for her urine sample. "I will do the removal procedure when you return," she said, directing Juno to the toilets with a wave of her hand.

Andrew followed her of course, but was forced to wait outside. The door was in full view of the waiting room. Even he wasn't brazen enough to walk into the ladies room in front of half a dozen omegas and their bonded alphas. Juno pushed the door open, her heart racing as it swung shut.

She was finally alone.

Her mind was scrambling, trying to figure out what to do while her body mechanically chose a cubicle and shut herself in.

Then she saw it.

Taped on the back of the door was a sign. And two pens.

A black pen to write her initials on the sample.

A red pen to write her initials on the sample *if she was experiencing domestic violence and wished to speak to her health provider alone.*

She was looking for a way out and here it was.

Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.

She plucked the red pen from the holder with trembling fingers. It wasn't enough to just speak to Dr. Singh alone. The alphas would be instantly suspicious and then who knew what they would do to her once they got her home. She needed to convey how urgently she needed to be freed from them *today.*

It was a massive risk but she had no choice. Instead of her initials, Juno shakily spelled out three red letters.

S O S.

She returned to Dr. Singh's office, eyes cast downward. She could feel Andrew behind her following her and focused on walking normally. One foot in front of the other. Hand the sample jar to the doctor. The red ink was hidden in her palm and she pictured how she would deliver it so it was faced

away from the alphas.

Dr. Singh gave her sample a cursory glance. Juno swore she was going to throw up.

“Wait here, I will get what I need for the procedure.” She strode out of the room briskly without a look back.

She had taken the sample with her.

She had taken the sample with her.

“What’s wrong with you?” Eric hissed. She’d broken out in a nervous sweat, her face and neck unbearably hot and she was pretty sure she was having a heart-attack. Well, at least then she wouldn’t be in this hellish limbo of wondering whether her cry for help would work.

“I-I don’t like scalpels.”

“Didn’t you hear what she said? They’ll put a numbing gel on you. Don’t be such a baby,” Andrew said, dismissively.

Two minutes passed. Then another.

“Where the fuck is she?”

Andrew stuck his head out the door but couldn’t see Sarah at reception. Her replacement called reassurances at him and he huffed, slamming the door shut again.

Another minute passed before Dr. Singh breezed back in, completely unfazed. She set up her tools and began to clean her arm with an alcohol wipe. Numbing cream was slathered over the area and they were ordered to wait for it to take effect.

Another five minutes. Andrew and Eric sat disinterested on their phones, their bodies languid in the uncomfortable plastic chairs.

“Do you feel that?” Dr. Singh poked her arm. Next to where she had applied the cream. Her stare spoke volumes.

“Yes,” Juno whispered.

“Ok, couple more minutes.” She gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t worry. It will be over soon.”

God, it had worked. *It had worked.* She couldn’t believe it.

Juno would remember the sound of the door crashing open to reveal officers from the National Omega Commission for the rest of her life.

JUNO

THREE YEARS LATER.

“I have a present for you!”

Juno was walking across the quad of the Omega Village, enjoying the crisp morning air.

“Biiiiiiiitch! Did you hear me? I said—”

The voice sounded closer now. And stilted, like the owner was running.

Juno whipped her head around and doubled over laughing at the sight of her best friend Hazel Wu. The other omega was chasing after her, holding her ample bosom with both hands so they wouldn't bounce everywhere. It was a dilemma she was wholly unfamiliar with as she jogged over, helping close the distance between them.

“Shit, Haze, sorry about that,” she laughed once she caught up. Hazel waved a nonchalant hand, not even a little bit out of breath.

Hazel and Juno were opposites in almost every way. Natural black to Juno's dyed blonde, Hazel's lush omega curves made Juno feel like a bridge troll beside her. To be fair, Hazel forged her body daily at the gym and Juno was deathly allergic to anything that elevated her heart rate. Juno would douse herself everyday in scent-neutralising products to minimise catching an alpha's (really anyone's) attention and saw it as a personal victory when she passed as a beta. Whereas Hazel made bank with her nudes as a top earner on OmegaFans and sold her used slick-stained panties as a side hustle.

And yet, upon leaving their first group therapy session in the bond dissolution trials almost three years ago, Hazel eyed her warily for a second before throwing her a lifeline. “Wanna get hotpot?” Sisterhood was born that day over spicy Sichuan broth and never being good enough for their Asian parents.

“I got you a present!” Hazel thrust a crumpled piece of paper into her hands. Juno smoothed out the print-out, eyes widening.

“You got me a ticket to the Van Gogh exhibit at the Lume?”

“Hell yeah I did! I’ve seen you sneaking looks at the site before shutting it again.”

Juno was elated and guilty all at once. Hazel had way more disposable income than she did — part-time barista did not earn as much as an OmegaFans creator, who knew — but she was always determined to pay her way around her friend.

“Don’t give me that look, Junie. It’s the three year anniversary of your freedom day!”

“My...what?”

Hazel cleared her throat, held a hand to her chest solemnly and began reciting. “On this blessed day, three years ago...NOC officers came to your aid, breaking into that doctor’s office and beating the Zhaos into a bloody pulp...”

“Detained only briefly before they had to release them for lack of evidence,” Juno corrected.

“The big alpha lawyer was there too. Looking delicious in his suit. He smelled like...justice.”

“Lawyer was a she, and that was days later and more for getting the protection order in place. But yes, I suppose she was an alpha so you got that right.”

“They all whisked you away to the nearest room. ‘Are you ok, Juno?’ they growled. ‘Why don’t you find out?’ you replied, as you grabbed the ties of your hospital gown and—”

“You really need to watch less porn, Hazel.”

“Sorry, I fell down the rabbit hole of OnlyA’s, you know — the alpha version of OmegaFans? It was...an experience.” Hazel’s eyes grew distant for a moment before she shook herself out of her daydream. “Yeah I’m definitely close to my heat. Gotta book in with heat services soon.”

“You don’t say,” Juno said, dryly.

Had it really been three years already? Her life with Pack Zhao didn’t feel real. A ghost haunting her memory, bearing her name and face but somehow wasn’t her. There was a pang of sadness as she remembered the one bright spot in that time — Julian. She had tried to find him online numerous times since then but was unsuccessful.

Hazel tilted her head towards the building Juno just came out of. “How was therapy?”

“Bonds are still very much broken, just like my capacity for physical and emotional intimacy.” Juno gave her a winning smile with a thumbs-up and Hazel clicked her tongue disapprovingly.

The bond dissolution trials were still ongoing, and Juno and Hazel’s cycle of participants were in the final phase — long term monitoring. It turned out everything Juno had been doing to dampen the bond between herself and the Zhao brothers — visualisation, meditative techniques — was actually part of the dissolution process. It was used alongside a two-pronged pharmaceutical approach with newly developed drugs. Juno would not miss the regular injections into the site of her bondmarks or the comically large bond-suppressant pills.

Despite needing to break the bonds of two alphas, Juno was one of the first of her cycle to be successful. Eric’s severed first after three months, like a rope being pulled in two directions until the final strand snapped. Andrew lasted another six weeks after that, shredding from her mind during a particularly gruelling visualisation session.

Though the injections and pills were long gone, she still maintained regular therapy sessions to ensure the success of the bond dissolution.

And to try and deal with the mire of issues being sold unwillingly to a pack by her own family left her with.

“Lunch tomorrow?”

“Can’t, I’m getting a tattoo.” Juno tapped a small bare patch on the side of her neck.

Since her emancipation from Pack Zhao, Juno had dyed her hair blonde and covered her neck, shoulders and collarbones with ink. Starting with a big fuck-off spider in the middle of her throat over Andrew’s bondmark. Was it smart to spend a decent chunk of her limited income from the trials on tattoos? Probably not, but she imagined her Mama clucking in disappointment and would develop the urge to get another. Plus, the thought of her heat videos surfacing still haunted her — no idea if or when that particular grenade would be detonating — so distancing herself from that girl on film partly drove her physical metamorphosis.

On the upside, it also felt fucking good to do what she wanted with her own body. To like who she saw in the mirror. To completely cover the area of her body where an omega traditionally received bondmarks with beauty

and pain of her own choosing.

She never wanted anyone to bond her again.

“Managed to get a flash day slot with an artist I’ve been dying to book with. Wanna come and pop your ink cherry?”

“Fuck no.” Hazel blew her a kiss. “Gotta run, I’ll text you later.” She left in a cloud of tropical, fruity sweetness. Juno didn’t get to yell “thank you again for the Van Gogh ticket” in time and swore under her breath.



Hazel had booked her a morning weekday session, knowing that Juno really only ventured out in public when she was likely to be around the least amount of people. She stepped into the vast gallery space, awestruck by how the light projections coupled with synchronised music immediately transported her. It was Arles, 1888. Flowers blossomed and grew up the towering walls and across the floor. There was a young family, parents and their toddler pointing excitedly. A couple of little old ladies seated together. A handful of other individuals were dispersed through the space, but it was mostly empty like she had hoped. Juno relaxed, and let herself focus on the exhibition instead of the possibilities of any alphas around.

She drifted deeper into the room, before deciding to sit on one of the benches in the middle. An asylum in Saint-Remy de Provence. Starry night. Luminous and turbulent.

Juno was unsure of how long she sat there before the scent of coffee curled around her, warm and inviting.

This was nothing like the coffee she smelled day in and day out on her cafe shifts. It was daybreak, greeting the morning sun as it peeked over the horizon. Rich with potential, promises and optimism. There was a bold undercurrent of macadamias, cosy and mellowed. A hug from a lover, a murmured good morning kissed into the neck and a mug slipped into the palm.

It made her heart hurt.

He was an alpha, her whole body knew he was an alpha. Juno ducked her head, surreptitiously looking over. Messy dark curls, a gorgeous smattering of freckles and a rounded pair of glasses she wanted to see fog up during heated kisses. *Oh fuck.*

She could sense her own scent blooming, unable to resist the siren call of this alpha seated on the next bench. He turned and their eyes met. Juno held her breath, completely torn.

Wanting him. Afraid of what it meant to want him.

He smiled and a dimple appeared on his cheek. How fucking dare he. Was the scent, his face, those shoulders arms legs hands not enough?

“I think this has ruined me for normal galleries,” he chuckled.

Juno was pretty sure he’d ruined a lot of things for her.

“Really? So you’re saying the moment you step into the Louvre, you’ll...”

“Wonder why there’s only one tiny Mona Lisa instead of fifteen projected on the walls and floor around me.”

“You should tell them that, I’ve heard the French are very open to constructive criticism.”

He shook his head frantically. “No, I would never!” he protested. “I like being alive,” he added after a beat.

Juno couldn’t help but laugh, his expression was so earnest and open. She looked over at him again and found him watching her, slightly awestruck. He gestured at the space next to her. “May I?”

She hesitated, her heartbeat thunderous in her ears, before nodding. They sat in companionable silence, watching old art become new again.

“I...have a mountain of work to do at home,” the alpha spoke, his voice quiet. “I have a meeting in two hours that I am totally unprepared for. But I can’t seem to leave.”

“It’s a beautiful exhibition.”

He turned to face her, his dark eyes ablaze. “It’s not the art keeping me here.”

Brown sugar swirled with caffeine. Juno felt like she was floating, untethered to earth. Having him closer was the best and worst thing. His lashes were so very long and his freckles resembled constellations. She needed him to not look at her with such intensity but would also die if he stopped. It would be so easy for him to lean forward and press his cheek against hers, leaving his scent on her skin. She craved it, wanted to carry the reminder of him with her all day and couldn’t for the life of her recall why she shouldn’t.

“What’s your name?”

Juno froze. What was she doing? She didn’t know this alpha at all, only

that he smelled good and looked beautiful. He had almost scent marked her. How could she be so careless to drop her guard like this?

Van Gogh's final works at Auvers-sur-Oise before tragedy surrounded them. Fitting, as she found herself standing.

“Wait I—”

She ran, both of them nameless, haunted by whispers of coffee and macadamias.

JUNO

Juno didn't tell anyone about the alpha from the Lume. Not her therapist, not Hazel or the other omegas she lived at the Omega Village with.

The Omega Village was a massive gated community managed by the National Omega Commission. Most omegas applied and paid to live there, drawn to the ways they could safely encounter alphas. Be it through heat services, pack scent matchmaking or the glitzy courtship galas that launched so many Cinderella stories.

But a small percentage like herself were there by the generosity of donors. Additional funding poured in from wealthy patron alphas and packs. Many of them had bonded former residents, and the regular donations were a way of thanking NOC for keeping their omega safe. Her participation and success in the trials ensured she'd always have a home there.

Her first year there was survival mode, reeling from the move interstate and throwing herself entirely into the trial. NOC had a Village in her home state but being 700 km away felt safer.

The second year was about healing. Therapy and lots of it. Moments of breakthrough and euphoria followed by periods of isolation as she closed herself off from the world. Afraid to live and preferring to be numb. Hazel would drag her out for a coffee as often as she could, undeterred by all the times she said no. The lovely older beta couple who owned the Omega Village's main cafe offered her a job — in the back, away from people. The extra money was great but the semblance of normality and routine it gave her was a godsend. By December, she had learned to operate the gigantic, noisy coffee machine and pumped out coffees four mornings a week.

The third year was about finding her feet again. She wanted to push her

art further, and applied for a Graphic Design course at the Southern Cross College of the Arts. NOC had pulled strings to get her special consideration and she completed her first year remotely.

This year, Juno was ready to attend classes in person.

Maybe.

Well, she didn't really have a choice so she would have to be. She'd apologised profusely to her bosses once she got her schedule, saying she would have to cut way back on her shifts and maybe even quit. All she got in return was a big hug, a promise that she would always have a job there and a box of muffins on the verge of becoming rocks.

Her first class was Art Direction for Branded Communication. It was her first chance to pick up an elective and she chose one that had potential for earning income in the future. No starving in a ditch for this aspiring artist!

She stepped into the mid-size lecture hall, trying not to let her anxiety get the best of her. Where was the best place to sit? How many of these students already knew each other? Was there some sort of social food chain that she would disrupt if she set a foot wrong?

Guess first day of school nerves was a cliché for a reason.

“Morning. Take a syllabus and grab a seat. We'll begin shortly.”

The voice was deep and smooth, with a lazy London accent. Its owner was unbelievably tall, slender bordering on lanky. Slightly scruffy and roughed up, from his thick full moustache and unkempt beard to the slightly frayed neckline of his khaki long-sleeve. He was the picture of an erratic creative and nothing like a university lecturer. His Earl Grey scent spoke of languid afternoons spent between books, then sheets; lost in abstract thoughts with no sense of time or place. Rich, syrupy honey centred him; sweet as a goodbye kiss on the tip of the nose. A secret note only she would understand slipped in the pocket to be found later. Their eyes met at the same time as he happened to push his dark hair back off his forehead.

It was goddamn sinful.

What the fuck was going on? She'd gone three years without a single alpha being noteworthy of a second look. Now she'd encountered a second one in two days that made her perfume right through her scent-neutralising spray like a freshly awakened omega.

Juno knew the moment he scented her because his head snapped up, nostrils flaring. His jaw hardened as his fist clenched tightly, crinkling the paper he was holding.

“Sit down,” he ordered her sharply, before blinking as he realised how he’d sounded. “Please,” he added with forced politeness.

Juno raced to the back of the lecture hall, completely mortified. She sat down hurriedly, a few seats down from a giggling group of girls.

“That man is a snack.”

“He’s so much taller in real life, don’t you think?”

“I can’t believe he’s here teaching, he just won the Cannes Lions Outdoor Grand Prix last year — you know, for that Coke ad? Last thing anyone expected him to do was leave his London agency.”

“Who cares, he’s here now? Think I can convince him to give me a *D*?”

Their muffled screeches were a welcome distraction while her perfume calmed down. Though a very unwelcome thread of possessiveness ran through her at their gossip. *The hell? You literally just met the guy 5 seconds ago.*

“Welcome to Art Direction for Branded Communication. I’m Ari Mehra but please, call me Ari. I’m not a Professor—”

“—but you are a daddy,” tittered one of the girls under her breath.

“—just an Ad man turned...teacher. I was an Executive Creative Director in London, but I started out as an art director. Hence...” He gave an irreverent wave of his hand at the title slide on the screen above his head. As an omega, Juno was always more attuned to emotions than most — probably an evolutionary trait borne from being the centre of a pack. She could detect an undercurrent of bitterness in his voice, tinged with resignation, as if he were making the best of a bad situation.

“As art directors, we have an entire visual language at our disposal to communicate our message. Photography, illustration, film, animation, graphic design — our list of tools is endless. I hope to give you a foundational understanding of choosing the right medium for your message and executing it as effectively as possible.”

“Oh my god, Priya, what have you gotten me into?”

“Yeah, what the hell. I swear, if this tanks my GPA...”

Juno couldn’t disagree with them more. She loved the sound of the class.

She just had to quash the sudden crush on her lecturer she had managed to cultivate from a single whiff of his scent.

There was really nowhere to hide in the tutorial. She'd managed to grab a slot in the one immediately following the lecture and only got lost twice on the way there. Juno joined about fifteen other students in the small classroom, including one of the chatty girls from earlier, keeping her eyes down as she selected a seat.

She was so focused on not drawing Ari's attention she didn't realise she had sat down next to an alpha until it was too late. He looked like he'd stepped directly off a surfboard into the class and he smelled of patchouli. It did nothing for her.

He gave her a once-over, lingering on her tattooed neck and smirked like he relished a challenge.

"Hey Princess Peach."

"Yeah, that's not my name," Juno bit back.

Completely undeterred, he mimed a cat scratching its claws before lounging back in his chair. He threw his arm over the back of it so his fingertips dangled close to her shoulder. She glanced over at Ari, who was watching them looking murderous.

She slid away from the other alpha, squashing her body into the far side of her seat as much as possible. Ari watched her movements and it only seemed to anger him further.

Fuck, she didn't even do anything and she was pissing him off.

Thankfully the rest of the class settled in and he was forced to start. They went around in a circle introducing themselves with an icebreaker exercise — *what's an ad you've seen recently that you liked and why?* Ari had shown himself to be a benevolent teacher, letting them know at the end of the lecture that they would be asked this so they had time to think it over.

Now that she was in close quarters with less people around, Juno could tell the ringleader of the girl group was a beta, with a light jasmine fragrance. She introduced herself as Priya, she was studying Marketing and said in a voice loaded with innuendo that her favourite ad was "this amazing interactive billboard for Coke in London."

Without missing a single beat, Ari simply asked for a more recent ad she would have seen locally. That, coupled with Priya's stammering reply, shouldn't have pleased her as much as it did.

Patchouli alpha was a Media student unsurprisingly named Bodhi. He named a Pixelgram ad he'd seen and said it must have worked because he could still remember how hot the chick was in it.

“It’s the tattoos that got me,” he said with a wink in her direction. Juno rolled her eyes. *I miss remote learning.*

“If your answer is an indication of how seriously you are taking this class, feel free to leave now. I believe you can still drop my class without penalty.” Ari rose up to his full height from where he had been leaning on the desk. “In fact, if I get another answer along the lines of that one, I’m going to have to insist on it. So what’s it going to be, Bodhi?” He laced his name with utmost contempt.

“Staying,” he grumbled under his breath. He thankfully did not try to make another pass at her, slumping back in his chair.

Then Ari’s attention was on her, and she tried (and failed) not to think about what those miles of tawny olive skin would feel like pressed against her. The bitterness of his tea scent sweetened as the sugar in hers called to him. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Priya staring at Ari and then back at her.

“My name’s Juno. I’m studying Graphic Design,” she said quickly, hoping no one else noticed anything amiss. “Um, that new crazy hyped season of that fantasy show that’s coming out, *Shifter Moon*? They repurposed an entire facade of a train station to mimic one of the major locations in the show and it changes depending on whether it’s day or night. You know...cause of the moon...like in the show.” She wasn’t used to so much attention on her and faltered. “I-I thought it was done well,” she finished lamely.

“Do you think it was an effective activation, considering it was only in one location?”

She thought about it for a moment before answering. “I think the point of it is to get people excited enough to talk about it — both in person and online. It feels much less like an ad if you’re seeing photos from a friend of yours interacting with it. It’d probably lead to you discussing theories of the upcoming season or just how excited you are for it. So yes, I think that means it’s effective.”

His approving nod was much too fleeting.

They focused on outdoor advertising for the rest of the class. “Art direction in its most basic form — image, copy and logo” as Ari described it. They took ten minutes on their own to address a simple brief before pairing up to critique. Bodhi leaned in but didn’t get a word out before he was interrupted by Ari’s bark.

“Bodhi, pair up with Tom over here. Juno, you’re with Priya.”

Priya watched her the entire time as she made her way over and sat down. She felt like a mouse in the sight of a swaying cobra.

“It must be nice to be able to attend classes for fun instead of actually preparing for a career.”

Juno stared at her incredulously. “Excuse me?”

“I mean, that’s what you omegas do right? Find ways to pass time while hunting down a pack so you can be a little kept pet?” Priya’s wide eyes and false smile was unnerving. Her scent-neutralising spray must have expired if Priya could scent her.

“You know nothing about me,” Juno replied coldly. “Now do you want to go first with the critique or should—”

“Don’t think you automatically get him ’cause you’re an omega.”

“What?” Juno snapped back, quickly losing her patience.

“Don’t act stupid.” Priya tilted her head in Ari’s direction.

Juno refused to back down, meeting that poisonous gaze directly. “He’s our lecturer.” She tapped her notebook. “Are we doing this?”

Priya sighed exasperatedly as she snatched the notebook from her, and Juno knew without a doubt that this was far from over.

JUNO

“What do you mean I have to go off heat suppressants?”

It was supposed to be a routine check-up. Twice a year she had bloodwork done as part of the trial’s ongoing monitoring of her health. Based on Dr. Mahoney’s endlessly sympathetic look, the results this time were very different.

“This is something we have unfortunately seen in a few other omegas who have undergone bond dissolution. Particularly in those who were bonded to two or more alphas and have never been on suppressants. We believe it’s a combination of the drugs and the body being used to going through heats. The suppressants would normally regulate the hormones responsible but your body is starting to overproduce them instead to compensate. Have you felt different recently? Responded to any alphas?”

Of course she had.

“A-An alpha at an art exhibition I went to recently. And...” Juno didn’t even want to say it, it was so mortifying. “My lecturer. At Uni.”

She nodded compassionately. “Yes, it does sound like your reproductive system is preparing to go into a new heat cycle again. I also noticed your scent-neutralising products have lost their effectiveness. Your body is fighting against anything that prevents you from seeking out potential partners.”

Great. Just one blow after another.

“Can’t I just take stronger suppressants?” Juno asked desperately. But she already knew the answer before it left Dr. Mahoney’s mouth. Already knew what this would mean. Suffering through heats on her own, locked away for days in pain or...

Alphas.

Vulnerable and dependent on rutting alphas.

“I can refer you to heat services. It’s all very safe, trust me. Heat partners are vetted and wear teeth caps to prevent bonding. There are interviews beforehand so you wouldn’t be meeting them for the first time when you’re in heat.”

She knew how it all worked already of course. Hazel had told her a more colourful version of her experience with heat services. By the end, Juno had to plug her ears and sing over her to block out the endless descriptions of knots.

“I don’t think I could go through with it. I know I meet them beforehand and choose them myself but that doesn’t mean I’d feel safe with them.” Juno wrung her hands, trying not to panic.

“It’s ok, Juno. That’s only one option. We should absolutely find a solution you are comfortable with. Have you considered the courtship galas? I’m sure if you speak to a NOC representative they can include you in the next—”

“No,” Juno interrupted, shaking her head. She couldn’t imagine anything worse than wearing an uncomfortable dress surrounded by packs of alphas. Fending off unwanted advances while competing with omegas far more alluring, beautiful and *less damaged* than she was.

Dr Mahoney tried a different tactic. “Well, we also have the scent matching system. The omegas who run that are lovely. They’ll be more than happy to help you. Perhaps you can track down your mystery alpha, and meet on your own terms.”

She’d heard of it before, of course. Not all alphas could afford the tickets to the galas, but many paid a yearly membership to have their details and scents on file with NOC. They could also opt-in to heat services if they wished, and have their scent cards added to a separate collection for heat partners.

Was there a coffee scented card in those binders? Juno supposed if she was going to try and find an alpha, sniffing cards was the least intimidating way to go about it.

“I’ll...I’ll make an appointment for scent matching. Thank you.” Juno glanced at her bag where her useless suppressants lay. “How long do I have?” she asked quietly.

“Until your next heat?”

Juno dipped her head, staring at a slightly uneven tile on the floor. Her ears were so full of white noise, she could barely hear Dr. Mahoney's reply.

"It's hard to say for certain but based on your previous heat cycles, I would say three to six months."

The omegas in the scent matching department *were* lovely. Aisha, Marco and Layla exuded serious fairy godmother energy, flittering around her offering compliments and reassurance. Each had found their alphas through scent matching. Aisha rubbed her pregnant belly the whole time, Marco had been happily bonded for over 30 years and Layla had created her own pack after being drawn to two individual alphas.

"There's much less pressure."

"You can take as much time as you need with the cards."

"Trust me, darling, it's much better this way."

Still didn't make it any easier though.

Despite the name of the department, they told her that the cosmic idea of 'scent matches' was more of a Hollywood thing. "Good for movies and TV shows, not so much how it works in real life." NOC preferred the term *scent sympathetic*, where both the omega and alpha had a strong physiological reaction to each other's scents. But the romanticism of scent matches was hard to erase from the public sphere and unfortunately many still felt it was fated, leading to pack tensions when other aspects of the relationship were not in sync.

"The point is," Marco summed up. "Whatever happens here is completely up to you and your comfort zone. You are not obligated to meet an alpha just because they smell good."

Layla explained their system — for each new incoming scent card, their team of omegas would sniff and come to a consensus on the scent profile before meticulously categorising. Alphas scents were characterised by two distinct fragrance notes (omegas had three, and betas one for those playing at home), so both were analysed and cross-referenced.

"We usually give a varied range of scents to see what you're leaning towards before narrowing it down further from there. Or...is there a scent you'd like to start with?" Aisha gave her a knowing look.

She suddenly thought of fresh pine needles, warmed in the sun.

“You don’t happen to have beta scent cards do you?” she asked tentatively. They exchanged a quick glance before Aisha shook her head. “NOC doesn’t allow us to carry beta scent cards. To be fair, our system wouldn’t be able to handle an influx of that many new profiles. Plus we work with heat services and only alphas can be heat partners.”

Marco scoffed. “Tell that to Antoni.”

Layla leaned in. “His bonded beta.”

“Was there someone else?” Aisha asked kindly.

Juno swallowed nervously. “Coffee with...I think, macadamias.”

They all clapped excitedly and leapt up from their seats.

“Coffee, yes — just like my Luis. I could drink that man up.”

“You *do* drink that man up.”

“I’ll cross reference with all nutty scents, not just macadamia. Just in case!”

Moments later, she was ushered into a small room with a stack of crisp white cards in individual clear sleeves on the table and blessedly left alone. “As much as we would love to watch you find your person, we know it’s a private thing. We’ll be right outside if you need us,” Aisha assured her before shutting the door.

Juno had no idea there could be so many variations of coffee. Freshly roasted coffee beans, just brewed coffee, cold drip coffee; sweet, bitter, intense. Not to mention the ones that really put her off — burnt coffee, left to sit too long coffee, way too milky coffee. Even when cross-referenced with nuts, she swore she ran the entire gamut from hazelnuts to almonds to newly shelled pistachios.

She was about halfway through when she found him.

Of all the reactions she thought she might have, tearing up out of sheer relief was pretty low on the list. “What the hell,” she muttered as she wiped her eyes.

Maybe this could work after all.

But you still never want a bond.

Juno stared down at the card, labelled only with a long reference number that would match up to a profile in the system. Was it fair to him?

She was teary again when she opened the door, her voice wavering. “Do you think it’s cruel of me to reach out to him even though I don’t think I have it in me to bond anyone ever again?”

The three of them swarmed her.

“Oh honey.”

“As much as most bonds usually happen during heats, it doesn’t mean they aren’t discussed and consented to beforehand.”

“This alpha clearly could come to mean something to you. You deserve a chance at happiness, whatever that may look like.”

Juno handed the scent card over with a tremulous smile. Layla tapped away on her tablet for a few moments before sliding it over.

“Oliver Rivera. Preferred name Ollie,” Layla said with a gentle smile. “Of Pack Rivera-Gunnarsson.”

“We’ll get their scent cards while you look.” Marco winked.

Juno ran a finger over the photo. God, he was cute. Definitely an Ollie and not an Oliver. The photo was a little dated, his hair was much scruffier now and she was pretty sure he had a few extra freckles too. But that boisterous smile, those shining eyes behind glasses — it was him.

He was 27, Filipino/Australian and a photographer. Juno swiped across and it was a new profile.

“Oh, sorry I—”

Aisha glanced over. “That’s the other members of the pack.”

Juno stared down at the piercing gaze of Ollie’s pack mate.

Isaac Rivera. Prime alpha. 34. Filipino/Chinese Singaporean. CFO.

Where Ollie was wild and untamed, Isaac was all structure and sharp edges. His jaw, his neatly styled jet-black hair and crisp shirt collar. She could see a slight familial resemblance there — the same golden tan skin and dark brown irises, but they were clearly half siblings at best.

Juno swiped to the last profile.

Everett Gunnarsson. 32. Swedish/Australian. Civil Engineer.

Could someone look tall in just a photo of their face? Because Everett looked *tall*. His dirty blonde hair was closely cropped and his icy blue eyes were electric. He was also the only one of the three that was tattooed. There was what looked like the start of full sleeves peeking out from the arms of his T-shirt. Juno stared more closely at his ink in the frustratingly small photo.

“Quite a choice you’ve made there zooming in on his biceps,” Layla observed over her shoulder. “Not that I blame you.”

Juno yelped and hurriedly pinched the screen to zoom back out. “I was looking at his tattoos!”

“Mmhmm.”

Layla squawked as Aisha flung a pen at her head. “Stop teasing her!” Aisha turned back to Juno, pointing at her computer. “My notes say they also have a beta in their pack. All we have is a name — Miles Sullivan.” She tapped away a few more times. “Ooh interesting, Rivera is their omega mother’s surname.”

Hearing this gave Juno a tiny surge of hope. Most packs were named for their prime alphas, but there was a growing trend towards taking their omega’s name to symbolise their central role at the heart of the pack. It wasn’t the norm but it was slow and steady progress towards tipping the scales of power symbolically. For a pack from their mother’s generation to have done so would have been almost unheard of.

Marco had returned with two scent cards. “For the other alphas.”

Juno was about to sniff the first one when she paused. “Is it a problem if I’m not drawn to the other pack members?”

“Oh god no, honey.” Marco waved away her concern. “Luis is bonded to a beta in my pack and I’m not. She’s like a sister to me.”

Aisha nodded sagely. “Same for me with one of my alphas.”

“Packs look very different these days. Sure, there are some still centred around an omega but more and more it’s become like the family you’ve chosen.” Layla patted her hand. “But you also never know. One of my alphas had a friend whose scent I wasn’t drawn to...until one day I was.” She coughed, going slightly pink and Marco cackled.

Feeling mollified, Juno brought Isaac’s card up to her nose.

Rum, spiced and burning, grounded by the earthy scent of leather. A clandestine midnight meeting, two glasses clinked and tipped back, a pact made.

“Woah.”

“You like it?” Marco peered at her over his glasses, eyebrows raised.

“Yes but...” Juno took another sniff. “Not in a romantic attraction way. I feel like...I’m safe with him. That he’s capable of protecting me and would do anything to do so.”

They looked pleased. “He would be your prime alpha if you joined the pack. It’s a good thing that you feel that way about him.”

Layla handed her the second card. “Mr Biceps over here.”

Sharp biting eucalyptus carried on a salty ocean breeze. A frozen morning, noses red, looking for fins on the distant horizon.

Juno smiled pensively. “He’s lovely. Deep, like there’s so many layers to

him. My instincts are nowhere near as strong with him compared to Ollie's but there could be something there."

All three omegas were beaming at her.

"*Please* say you'll reach out."

"You must — Marco will have a fit if you don't."

"God, you have to invite us to the wedding!"

Juno sank back in her chair with a huff of laughter. "Yes. Yes, I will. Just tell me what I need to do next."

"Well first you decide whether you want a church or civil ceremony..."

"I meant contacting them, not the wedding thing!"

As Aisha shooed Layla and Marco away and began to talk her through the process, Juno thought bemusedly that she had never felt so light.

ISAAC

When Isaac selected Ollie for his pack, one of the reasons was because he was the least dramatic of all their siblings.

He was making Isaac reconsider things today.

“Ollie, go finish getting changed and come back. You look like a lunatic.”

Ollie had three shirt buttons undone, his tie loose and flung over his shoulder and one scuffed dress shoe on. He was pacing back and forth in front of them, his steps making uneven clunking sounds. Isaac resisted the urge to tell him off for wearing shoes in the house.

“How could she not be there? Never thought we’d go to another one of those awful gala things again but I was so sure this time.” His hair was sticking up at strange angles because he’d been tugging on it so hard.

“I wore a suit,” Everett interjected morosely. “I never wear a suit.”

“You don’t like suits?” Miles asked with a curious tilt of his head.

“Neck’s too fat for the collar.”

“It’s not too fat, it’s too tree-trunky,” Miles said matter-of-factly, as he made a gesture at his own neck as if to indicate the width of Everett’s in comparison. “You can skip neck day at the gym next time.”

Isaac was surprised Miles’ face wasn’t blistered off with the force of Everett’s withering stare.

“It was a gamble.” Isaac stopped Ollie with a firm hand on his chest before plucking his shoe off for him like a child. He also untangled Ollie’s tie and pulled it off his head. “We have no idea if she’s even at the Omega Village.”

Ollie grasped his shoulders desperately. “I have to find her, Isaac. I’ve never—”

“Never reacted to an omega like that, I know. Ollie, I know.” Isaac was trying to be patient after hearing about this omega for two weeks now. “What do you want me to do? Track down everyone who booked a ticket at the Lume on that date?”

“Yes.” There was a crazy glint in his eye. “That’s *exactly* what I want you to do.”

Isaac gave a sideways glance to Miles, who was unsuccessfully trying to stifle his laughter. “Do you think he actually thinks I’m capable of that?”

Miles mimed shaking a magic 8 ball in his hand, pausing to read the apparent prediction. “Signs point to yes.” He held out his hands like he expected Isaac to take it from him.

The fucking cheek of him. Isaac’s eyes narrowed. “You’re such a brat.” Miles blew him a kiss in reply and Isaac suddenly had a very clear idea of what he wanted to do to that insolent mouth later. Miles’ complete lack of remorse coupled with horny excitement in their bond meant he was very much on board.

“Hello?” Ollie stuck his head in front of Isaac, disrupting the eyefucking Miles was giving him. “How can you be CFO and not be able to help me?”

“Do you know what a CFO is? I’m basically an accountant. It’s not *my* money.”

“Then why is our house so big?!” Ollie threw his hands up in exasperation as Miles lost his battle with the giggles.

Isaac looked back and forth between a shaking Miles and Everett being a silent statue. “Help me,” he demanded through clenched teeth.

Everett shrugged but Miles stood up and slung an arm over Ollie’s back. “Ok Ollie, let’s calm down and go with a new plan tomorrow. Yes, the courtship gala was a bust but I did end up chatting with one of the officers for a bit. I’ll see if I can get in touch and maybe find her that way.”

“You’d do that for me?” Ollie’s frazzled expression melted into a puppy dog stare.

“Of course. You’re my brother.”

Ollie squeezed the life out of Miles with a crushing hug. “Thank you.” He released him, looking much more calm. “I get sad when you send peach emojis in the chat, by the way.”

“I know I’m sorry. I’ll stop.”

“Don’t stop.” Everyone turned to look at Everett, who had the sense to look slightly abashed. “I think it’s funny.”

Isaac wondered if this omega was even aware of the seismic earthquake she'd set off in his pack.

“Yes, please courier it over ASAP. The address you have on file is correct. The cost is no issue, just send me the invoice. Thank you.”

Isaac hung up the phone, staring at the screen in disbelief. Miles hit a wall that morning getting in touch with the NOC officer (he cited ‘privacy and security reasons’ for being unable to talk about any of the omegas at the Village and Ollie screamed into a pillow), so the last thing he expected was a call from the scent matching department.

There was no way to tell if the file on its way over to the house contained details of Ollie’s mystery omega but something in his gut said it did. He left work immediately with a rushed request to his assistant to block out his day, dialling the others as he did so.

“Pack meeting at the house. Now.”

Isaac very rarely, if ever, pulled rank as prime alpha of their pack. Everett and Miles agreed immediately, with Miles even managing to forgo any sort of impertinent quip. Ollie was already home working, or rather ‘working’ with quotation marks because he had been unhinged for the last fortnight.

He probably broke several traffic laws doing so, but Isaac managed to beat the courier home. He found Ollie in his room lying facedown on the bed.

“Ollie.”

“Mmfmm? Shouldn’t you be at work?”

“We have a courier arriving with a file from NOC’s scent matching department.”

The last time Isaac had seen Ollie move that fast, he was 10 and their Nanay asked who wanted the last lumpiang shanghai.

“Is it her?”

“I don’t know.” Isaac placed a calming hand on Ollie’s shoulder. “It could be. I’ve called Everett and Miles home as well. We’ll open it together.”

“*Kuya...*”

Hearing Ollie call him big brother like he used to as a child tugged something in his heart. Isaac pulled him into a hug.

“Come on, I’ll make you something to eat while we wait.”

The courier arrived at the same time Miles did. Everett joined them shortly afterwards. They all gathered around the dining room table, staring at Isaac as he opened it like he was diffusing a bomb.

Isaac slid the contents out on the table — a sealed scent card, a USB stick and a glossy photo. Blonde, tattooed, defiant and utterly beautiful.

“It’s her.” Ollie looked like he was about to cry. He picked up the photo reverently, before turning it over. “Her name is Juno Liu. She’s 24.”

Miles gave a low whistle. “She’s gorgeous, Ollie.”

Everett picked up the scent card. “Can I open this?”

Ollie smirked, his expression brighter than it had been in days. “Only if you want to be completely knocked on your ass.”

Everett tore the perforated edge of the plastic and Juno’s sweet peaches and cream omega scent emerged. It was so discordant to the girl who wore her ink like armour in the photo. Soft and intensely vulnerable. *A late night secret indulgence shared in the dark, lit only by the refrigerator and eaten straight from the bowl, used spoons quietly stuck in the sink without clattering.* The urge to care for her and see her happy sat restlessly in his chest.

Isaac could tell the others weren’t having the same reaction.

Ollie’s eyes rolled to the back of his head and he hit the table with his fist. “God if her scent smells this good, I can’t even imagine how she tastes.”

Isaac knew what Everett looked like when an omega was a scent match. This wasn’t it. But there was a tightness in his jaw, his expression calm on the surface, tumultuous beneath.

He looked over at Miles and was surprised at how tense he was. Betas weren’t as strongly affected by omega scents but it didn’t mean they were immune. Desire simmered in the bond.

But not for Isaac.

“Miles.”

They’d talked about it before, of course. Early on before bonding, Miles asked if he was just a way to pass time until Isaac found his omega. But as their relationship grew, it was clear they had found something that was uniquely theirs, beyond designation and unable to be replicated. Sometimes in the quiet of the night curled together, they spoke about what their pack might look like in the future, deciding that there might come a day when Isaac would find an omega. But it wouldn’t diminish what the two of them shared.

They never imagined a scenario where *Miles* would want an omega.

“Isaac, you know I—”

Isaac cupped the back of his neck, turning their bodies slightly to give the two some privacy. His next words were low, just for Miles. “What we’ve spoken about in the past...I didn’t make it clear but it does go both ways. Of course it goes both ways.”

“It’s nowhere near as strong as what Ollie feels ’cause you know, I can’t really biologically have a scent match,” he said with a matter-of-fact sort of laugh. “But it’s also not nothing.”

Isaac sent reassurance down the bond to him. “Then you should be given the chance to explore it. I think it’s pretty clear we’ll be courting her as a pack regardless.”

Miles gave him a discerning look. “You’re not drawn to her scent?”

Isaac hummed. “Not romantically. She feels like she belongs though.”

Ollie cleared his throat, clearly impatient but wanting to be respectful of them. “What’s on this?” he asked, picking up the USB.

Isaac took it from him. “The woman from the scent matching department said it was a video message from her.”

They piled around the TV as Isaac slid the USB into the slot, getting it right on the first try. Miles called him a warlock.

Juno appeared on screen, larger than life as she seemed to be adjusting her phone. Her brow was furrowed and she had her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

“Is it recording? Shit, let me check.”

She reached towards the phone again but knocked it to the floor, the screen shaking as it fell.

“Fucking hell.”

“I love her,” Ollie whispered, earning a light smack on the back of his head from Everett.

Juno reappeared and shook off her technical mishap, seating herself down so she was centred in frame. It looked like she was in her bedroom, soft daylight streaming in and the edge of her ruffled bed in the corner. The wall behind her had sketches taped all over it, filled with skulls, insects, flowers, birds and a whole host of other similar imagery. She gave a nervous wave and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Hi, I’m Juno. I’m 24 and live in the Omega Village.”

Miles perked up. “Hey, she *was* there, just not at the courtship gala.”

Ollie shushed him, waving his hands frantically.

“I’m studying Graphic Design at SCCA. I also draw creepy beautiful things. I hope you like spiders.” She chuckled lightly. “I found your pack through the scent matching department here at NOC. Ollie, it’s nice to put a name to the face and the scent. I hope you remember me.”

Everett huffed. “He definitely remembers you.”

“I’m...sorry I ran from you that day. The truth is the only reason I’m seeking a pack is because my heat suppressants are failing. I know on paper I’m not the most ideal omega. I’m older. I’ve been bonded before. It was not my choice. Any of it.”

She put on a brave smile, subconsciously rubbing her neck. No one made a sound, the air thick with tension and fury.

“I’m not sure if you heard of the bond dissolution trials NOC are running but I went through it. I’ve avoided alphas since. Couldn’t even imagine stepping into the door of one of those courtship gala things. Still not even sure if I’ll ever want to bond anyone again. Don’t worry, I’ve been working on it with my therapist.”

Juno scrunched up her nose. “Is that TMI? Sorry. I want to be honest with you all even if it hurts my chances. The scent matching department omegas said I should put my best foot forward with this video but I’m not trying to be the perfect omega. I just want to be...me.”

Her expression was so pure and unguarded a lump formed in Isaac’s throat.

“My life as an omega hasn’t been the best one, and I can’t promise a normal or easy courtship. But I would like the chance to build a home, a family. I’ve never really had that.”

The video ended, frozen on her gentle, slightly melancholy expression.

“Isaac, please. She’s mine.”

He’d never seen his ordinarily carefree little brother like this. A hungry desperation on his face, limbs coiled like he wanted to leap into the TV and comfort the omega on screen.

“I’ll call NOC now,” Isaac promised.

Isaac didn’t have to turn around to know who had stepped into his office. He

poured a second glass of whiskey and slid it over to where Everett's large body sank in the chair across from his own. He took a sip as Everett threw his back, his blunt face expressionless as he set the empty glass back down again.

"She's not your scent match, is she?"

Everett let out a humourless laugh. "No. You know she's not."

"There's no rule that says you only get one." Isaac watched Everett pour himself another glass and pointedly moved the bottle out of reach after he was done. Everett glared at him over the rim as he dutifully sipped. "Will it be a problem?" Isaac asked directly.

"No, of course not," Everett replied without artifice. "I wouldn't deny Ollie the chance to know his scent match. She's not yours either, I take it?"

Isaac shook his head. "I'm surprised Miles reacted to her though," he said after a beat.

"Yeah, didn't expect that one." Everett gave him a side-long look. "Jealous?"

He thought about it for a moment. "No," he replied honestly. "Curious more than anything, really."

"I guess the chances of all of us finding our scent match in one omega was pretty slim," Everett admitted.

Scent matches were so arbitrary. There was no litmus test for it nor a universally agreed upon checklist for the phenomenon. Some professed to have an entire pack of them while others went their whole lives without encountering one. Others left (usually beta) partners when they found theirs. How much of it was biology like they all claimed and how much was an easy cover for shitty behaviour? Or just plain old wishful thinking? But his Nanay and Ba were scent matches — the only one in their family's pack — so Isaac couldn't discount the value of them completely.

"First impressions?" Isaac prompted.

"Her scent is pleasant but nothing like...you know," Everett averted his gaze but continued. "But I'm not immune to how vulnerable she was in that video. Bonded against her will and going through experimental treatments to break it? Christ. Gives me heartburn just thinking about it." He rubbed his chest in discomfort. "What about you?"

"Similar," Isaac replied. "It's like I know her, even though we've never met," he said quietly, almost to himself.

"I guess we won't really know until we see her at NOC in a few days."

They drank their whiskey in silence, contemplating the new trajectory

their pack was now taking.

OLLIE

Ollie was fully aware of how feral he had been over Juno the last couple of weeks.

Despite being an alpha, it wasn't his natural state of being. Things felt much more settled now that they had a meeting arranged with her at NOC in a couple of days. But the frenetic feeling of incompleteness was being taken over by creeping anxiety instead.

“Are you sure you want me going in there first on my own?”

Ollie knew Isaac didn't mean to, but his exasperated *we've talked about this already* look made Ollie's balls shoot back up inside his body.

When you're the youngest of 9 siblings (an omega mum bonded with three alpha dads make a lot of kids) and your eldest brother is so dominant he could roll another alpha with a single glance, you didn't really make your designation your main personality trait. Was there such a thing as an opposite of a prime alpha? Because Ollie was pretty sure that's what he was.

He could have very easily gone down the self-loathing route; but a chaotic, altogether loving pack family upbringing, coupled with the fact that Isaac lived up to every idolised big brother stereotype imaginable meant he had found his feet in his own way.

Still, Ollie wasn't sure why Isaac chose *him* out of all their siblings for his pack. He'd asked Isaac once, years ago, and only received a stern, “You should really think better of yourself, Oliver.” He'd been full-named and it was embarrassing. He never asked again.

It didn't mean he was immune from moments of doubt. When their pack first formed 8 years ago and before Isaac had met Miles, they did what most newly formed packs did. Registered their scent cards with NOC and bought

exorbitantly priced tickets to a season of courtship galas.

It was a disaster. Several omegas wanted to climb Ev like a tree but cared little about what else he had to offer. Isaac was put off that so many had no ambitions beyond wanting to find a pack. And as for the fresh-faced, newly awakened Ollie, he was so overwhelmed by the competing alpha packs and the drugging cocktail of omega scents he was basically wallpaper the entire night.

Never again.

So they dated, loved and lost over the years. Grew up and felt less like imposters playing house. Isaac met Miles, and they became four.

It felt monumental that Juno had come to them because of *him*.

“She’s ready for you.”

Ollie leapt up, turning to face the others in the waiting room. He adjusted his glasses and smoothed his hair back nervously even though he knew it would spring back to the exact same position it was in before.

“How do I look?”

His pack replied with a chorus of *greats* and encouraging smiles.

“Hot as shit, brother,” Miles added and Ev put his head in his hands.

The very pregnant omega — Aisha, she’d said her name was — was accompanied by a uniformed NOC officer. They led him down the hallway together. “We’ll both be in the room for safety purposes. But it’s a large space and you’ll have your own little area and we’ll give you as much privacy as possible,” she rattled off briskly.

Right before they reached the door, she turned around. Her expression lit up, completely different from earlier. “I’m so excited for you all. Juno is just the most...oh, you’ll see.” Ollie was slightly alarmed to see her tear up, completely unequipped to deal with a strange pregnant woman’s tears. But she mercifully spun back around, muttered something about *stupid baby hormones* under the breath before opening the door.

“She’s in the far corner.”

If they ever made a film about his life, this would be the moment when everything would slow down. The only sound would be the pounding of his heartbeat. Time and space would compress leaving two pinpricks of light.

One would be him and the other would be...

Her.

The brown sugar in her scent hit him first. His body immediately recalled their first encounter and electrified his nervous system, putting his alpha instincts into overdrive. Hot sun beating down, skin sticky with sweat and the first delectable lick of vanilla ice cream, chasing melted rivulets. Secret jewelled peaches throughout for wandering tongues to find before meeting in a sweetened kiss. She was a perfect summer day, the magic of golden hour crystallised.

Breathe. Don't scare her away again.

Her blonde head whirled as he approached. Too perfect. How was she real? All Ollie wanted to do was spoil her and cater to her every whim and desire. Cocoon her in blankets (that smelled like him) and feed her bonbons. He didn't even know what bonbons were but he was going to find out and get them for her.

But right now he needed to say something before she thought he had malfunctioned.

"I brought you cupcakes."

His voice cracked slightly and he wanted to die.

"I asked them to put spiders on them."

Ollie held out the white box he had brought with him and felt thoroughly stupid.

"I'm Ollie."

Should probably have led with that.

Juno's plush pink lips lifted into a shy smile. "I'm Juno." She stood up gracefully and tilted her delicate chin towards the box. "Can I see?"

Ollie blinked, hurriedly lifting the lid. He'd found a custom bakery that specialised in realism to make them, hoping she would appreciate how lifelike the brown painted fondant spiders looked on the airy frosted webbing.

She looked inside and gasped. "That was not what I was expecting."

"Too creepy?"

"Nah, just the right amount."

There was a delightfully mischievous look in her eye as she rewarded him with a crooked smile. It made her nose crinkle. Fuck that was dangerous. No more blankets and bonbons. He'd ripped them to one side so he could flip her skirt up and suck her clit until her cunt was swollen pink. Fucked her sopping wet hole with his fingers until her release dripped all over his face and neck.

Repeated until her legs wouldn't stop shaking.

But then an image rose up unbidden. Her small voice and fragile expression. *I've avoided alphas since.*

Ollie pushed away his lewd thoughts, feeling guilty. Juno deserved a lot more than an alpha who only cared that she was omega.

“Did you design your tattoos? I love the little skull moth.” He gestured in what he hoped was a respectful way at her chest. “And the detailing on the snakes on your shoulders is unreal.”

She glowed at the compliments. “Yeah, some of them. I also sought out omega artists whose work I loved.” She eyed him astutely. “You know, you're not what I expected, Ollie.”

“I'm really fucking nervous.” The confession burst out of him. “Isaac said I should come in first before the others and I'm still not really sure if that was the best plan. 'Cause everyone else in the pack is so great, you'll see. You smell even better than I remembered and somehow got more beautiful even though I've been dreaming about you non-stop since that day at the Lume. But most of all, I want to get to know you and court you and I can't do that if I scare you again, which right now is my biggest fear.”

Juno looked stunned, blinking at him as she took everything in.

“I'm going to hold your hand.”

What.

“What?”

“I think it would make both of us feel better. Is that ok?”

“Is it...”

“I'm nervous too, Ollie.”

Then her hand found his, slender fingers sliding into his palm like she belonged there. He ran his thumb across her knuckles gently.

“I'm glad I found your scent card,” she murmured. Then she laced their fingers together, forearms brushing and any coherent thought he possibly had in his head promptly flew away.

JUNO

Her therapist was going to pass out when she heard about this.

Juno, holding hands with an alpha. Juno *initiating* holding hands with an alpha. Her omega instincts had been nudging her the entire time to soothe Ollie's nervous energy and she had followed through.

Hazel would probably faint dead away when she heard. Then she would need a detailed play-by-play, as if Juno and Ollie had a sordid encounter instead of doing something even toddlers were capable of.

No matter, she was proud of herself. Considering Ollie had approached her in public and even came close to scent marking her, he was way more awkward than she had expected. There was one moment when his scent had turned dark and fierce but for the most part he had been adorably shambolic.

He was nothing like what Juno thought an alpha would be. It was perfect. "Would you like to meet the rest of my pack?"

She'd almost forgotten that was the point of the whole exercise. He squeezed her fingers reassuringly and she gave him a tiny nod.

He looked past her shoulder. "Aisha, do you mind bringing the others in?" he called.

God, she'd totally forgotten Aisha and the NOC officer were in the room with them. Juno turned around and was greeted by what could only be described as heart eyes from Aisha. *This is amazing*, she mouthed to Juno as she was leaving.

Ollie, sensing Juno's rising nerves, initiated a game of thumb war and let her win every time.

Juno knew the second the rest of Pack Rivera-Gunnarsson entered. The room felt like a vacuum, all the air rushing out to accommodate the

magnitude of the alphas present. She was immediately drawn to Isaac at their head, though Everett cut an imposing figure to his side. Miles was the furthest back, and she got her first glimpse at the bronze-haired beta with irreverent, carefree eyes.

Their scents mingled with Ollie's at her back. *Salted ocean air and sand between her toes, still warm from the day's sun. Drinks pressed into her hand — liquor, coffee, a sip of wine and citrus. Her head lolled back onto a firm shoulder as another set of lips found her neck.*

"Shit." Her knees buckled slightly and Ollie released her hand to place a steadying palm on the small of her back. The others halted their advance, responding to Isaac's curt nod.

"Juno, I know this must be overwhelming. Take your time." Isaac's rum scent burned her throat but brought clarity afterwards. "I'm Isaac. Ollie's brother."

It was impossible to look at him for too long. Was this how peasants felt in the presence of a king? His quiet benevolence and assured voice didn't help either, only making her feel more outclassed.

"You're their prime." It was more a statement than a question. He nodded and Juno gave him a wry smile before staring at his pristine shoes. "Bet this is not how you imagined meeting your potential omega would go."

Isaac tilted her chin up to face him. She felt like her entire psyche was laid bare before him. It was disconcerting.

"I hoped we would find someone who would bring the very best out of all of us. I'm not disappointed. Far from it."

His thumb was still holding her head up as his eyes bored into her. Fuck, was he going to kiss her? That wasn't what she wanted. At all.

"I don't know if I'm attracted to your scent!" she cried out, her neck and shoulders turtling up to avoid his touch. *Ok that came out wrong. Really wrong. Fix it, fix it, fix it.* "For now?" she added, her rising voice trailing off into the stunned silence.

Isaac looked completely dumbfounded and Everett was blinking at her like a goldfish. Miles let an *oh shit* slip out before clapping his hand over his mouth.

Jesus Christ, she could not have fucked that up more if she tried.

Suddenly, Isaac's eyes crinkled at the corners. One corner of his mouth lifted up, completely transforming him. "That's...actually good." He looked utterly relieved. "I also felt the same way when we got your scent card."

“So you...weren't about to kiss me.”

Isaac shook his head, stifling his amusement and Juno wanted a hole to appear beneath her and swallow her whole.

“Did he do the eye trapping thing,” whispered Ollie from behind her.

“Yes!” she hissed.

“Yeah, that's just Isaac being too alpha for his own good.”

Isaac had moved to one side, allowing her to see Everett properly for the first time. Tall, broad and probably had enough muscles to turn a street lamp into a pretzel. Juno would not be at all surprised if a textbook existed somewhere with his stony glare in the alpha section as a classic example of a peak specimen.

“I'm Everett,” he grunted, looking intently at her left earlobe.

She glanced up at him timidly. “Hi.”

The silence between them grew until Juno was convinced the awkwardness had manifested itself as a high-pitched ringing in her ears. His eucalyptus scent sharpened almost painfully, pricking her eyes and stuttering her breath.

“Shit,” Everett said hoarsely. He turned away abruptly. “Miles, you go.”

Juno had heard many successful pack stories in her time at the Omega Village and most were a variation of “he scented me, I splashed slick everywhere and then he went all growly and said *mine*.” Where were the stories of awkward as shit first encounters and disastrous first dates? Of one-sided affections and pack implosions?

Or maybe she was just defective. That was a fun thread to start pulling at.

“I'm Miles.”

The smiling beta interrupted her thought spiral before she completely unravelled. Juno got that slight pang in her chest she always got when she had a fleeting reminder of Julian. Miles' faint sangria scent was so different though. *Tantalising and sensual, the two of them tipsy and giggling, heads close. His fingers lightly trailed down her shoulder as he whispered something only for her. Lips grazed her ear and she shivered.*

Maybe there was something realistic in all those success stories. Just cross out alpha and write *hot as fuck* beta.

“Juno,” she replied breathlessly.

“I know.” She got a glimpse of his tongue as he wet his lips and wondered what else he could lick.

“You're the only one who didn't have a profile.”

“Mm, NOC doesn’t accept beta scent cards.”

“Their loss.”

“Is it now?”

He was very close now. His hazel eyes had the most beautiful flecks of gold.

“Also, I think it’s a logistical thing,” Juno said, with an offhand shrug of her shoulders.

Miles threw his head back laughing, the spell broken. “It’s true, there are a lot of us,” he said, good-naturedly. “Miles Sullivan. I’m 28 and I’m an architect.”

“How did you join this pack, Miles Sullivan?”

“He’s mine.”

Isaac’s voice cut through their little bubble like a blade. Juno suddenly noticed the edge of a bondmark peeking out from underneath Miles’ shirt collar.

Shit. *Shit*. She flinched like she’d been burned.

So much for fairytale pack introductions.

“Isaac, seriously?” Miles said exasperatedly. “Now is not the time to get all possessive.”

In her limited experience, betas did not talk like that to alphas. Especially not alphas like Isaac.

“Sorry,” Isaac muttered, looking slightly sheepish. The expression was strange on his imposing face, like he had a stomachache.

“You’re his bonded?” Juno asked weakly.

“Is that an issue, Juno?” Isaac was watching her intently. Her next words were important to him, she could tell.

Juno’s shoulders slumped. “I didn’t mean to disrespect your relationship. I’m sorry, Isaac.”

He tilted his head at her curiously. “You’re upset because you think you got between us, not because we’re together?”

“You didn’t, by the way.” Miles turned back to her. “Get between us. I have permission to court you, just as Isaac would if the roles were reversed and he liked you.”

Juno’s omega brain latched onto only one thing. “You like me?” she asked in a small voice.

He ducked his head so their faces were level as he whispered conspiratorially. “Maybe even *like like*.”

His utter childishness had no business giving her as many butterflies as it did.

“Thank you for accepting us, Juno,” Isaac said quietly. He watched as Miles took her hand gently in both of his.

“So, how does this all work now?” Juno asked, shyly, her eyes darting between them. “I-I’ve never...”

“We court you. Each of us will take you out individually so you can get to know us. Somewhere in between we’ll show you the pack house as well.” Isaac had stepped towards her again, the dark musk of leather wrapping around her comfortingly. “There’s no expectations, romantic or otherwise, on these dates. I want you to know that if you are uncomfortable at any stage you can come to me.”

His voice took on a hard edge. “I won’t let anyone hurt you again, do you understand?”

Juno could only nod anxiously. She looked around her, wondering if she was staring at the faces of her future pack.

JUNO

“So who’s coming to pick you up?”

“Isaac. The prime alpha.”

Juno was feeling out of sorts in a black cocktail dress, red lipstick and hair in a sleek low bun. She had ordered it because it was both long-sleeved and high-necked, thinking she would feel more comfortable being a bit more covered up. Too bad it was sinfully short and outrageously figure-hugging to compensate.

“Fuck me, I can’t wear this. It did *not* look like this on the model in the picture,” Juno swore as she glared at her reflection.

“Well it should have. They would have sold many more,” Hazel said, adding that she’d kill Juno if she changed and bury her in that dress. “It’s even black, Junie. It’s perfect!” She clapped her hands gleefully as Juno cursed some more.

The two of them were currently waiting in the lobby at the entrance of the Omega Village, the only place alphas were allowed.

“He’s not one of the ones you had a scent attraction to, was he?”

Juno shook her head and Hazel’s eyes narrowed. “And he is aware and won’t push things?”

“Yes! I swear. We’re on the same page.”

“Ok good.” She seemed satisfied. “Weird though, usually primes are the hottest alphas in their pack. Based on my extensive research,” Hazel tittered.

“Dunno what to tell you, Hazel,” Juno shrugged.

“Obviously, I mean from reading Page Slick,” Hazel corrected lightly. “And from banging them,” she added a moment later.

Juno giggled helplessly, thankful for Hazel’s moral support. It did a good

job at keeping her distracted from the fact that her butt was going to fall out of her hemline.

They both flicked their heads around upon hearing the squeak of the lobby door opening. Isaac stepped through, wrapped in a tailored-to-perfection dark emerald suit paired with a black shirt, left open at the neck. He greeted the doorman amicably, tilting his head towards Juno in response to his inquiry.

Hazel grabbed Juno's arm urgently and spun her so they were face to face. "Juno, are you blind and just haven't found the time to break the news to me yet?" she asked, her tone simperingly sweet.

"What? No?"

Hazel shook her slightly, her voice growing more and more high-pitched. "Because that is a *fuck-me-daddy* alpha coming towards us and you failed to tell me?"

The strangest sensation of jealousy spiked at Hazel's description of Isaac but Juno quashed it immediately. "I-I don't see him that way."

Hazel stared heavenward, eyelids fluttering. "Don't see him that way. Lord have mercy on this child."

Isaac had almost reached them when Hazel stepped forward purposefully.

"Hello, Isaac is it?" she asked brusquely, with zero trace of the flirtatious omega Juno was familiar with. "I'm Hazel. This girl is my best fucking friend. Where are you planning on taking Juno tonight?"

To his credit, Isaac seemed to take the sudden appearance of a strange indignant omega with ease. "Hello Hazel. I'm glad Juno has such a good friend to support her. I've made reservations at Babylon."

Hazel's demeanour changed markedly upon hearing the name of one of the most high-end, intimate restaurants in the city. "*Babylon*, huh?" She elbowed Juno, mumbling out the corner of her mouth. "Not a date my ass."

Juno had to claw herself out of whatever grave Hazel had dug for her. "I know it's not a date," she assured Isaac hurriedly. "I mean, it *is* but—"

"A platonic one." Isaac briskly finished for her.

"Yes! More akin to a, to a—"

"A business meeting."

This was going very well. "Yes. Perfect. A business meeting." Juno realised she'd forgotten something very important. "Hi Isaac. Should have said that first. It's good to see you again."

His expression softened considerably. "Yes, you too, Juno. You look

beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Juno blushed. “I love the green on you.”

Hazel’s gaze darted between them like a Wimbledon match. “Ohh, I see. You’re both in denial,” she declared conclusively, folding her arms and leaning against the wall. “That’s hot. Wonder who’s going to crack first. I wish I could bet on this with someone but somehow I don’t think Doorman Dan over there will be a taker.”

Both Juno and Isaac stared at her like she had just announced she had a family of mice living in her hair.

“Is she usually...?”

“No, but the evidence is building.”

“Ahh.”

Hazel pinched the bridge of her nose and Juno only just caught her muttering something about idiots.

Juno felt the need to clarify something further with Isaac. “I’m not, by the way. In denial.”

“Oh, I know. Me neither.”

“I mean, we barely reacted to each other’s scents.”

“It’s true, we did not,” Isaac acquiesced.

“You’re with Miles.”

“I am with Miles.”

“Probably don’t have the right parts for you anyway,” Juno added with a nervous giggle.

“Well...no that’s not the issue.”

“What?”

“Hmm? We should...”

“Yes. Reservations. Let’s go.” Juno looped her arm around Isaac’s proffered elbow, noting that his scent, while obviously not attractive, was nevertheless extremely decadent. She turned to say goodbye to Hazel, who was looking at them like she expected them to start stripping off right there in the lobby.

“Good night you two.” Hazel gave them a dainty wave with her fingers. “Have her back by midnight. Or don’t.” She shrugged, flouncing off before either of them could reply.

Isaac cleared his throat. “Shall we?”

Juno dipped her head and allowed Isaac to lead her off into the night.

ISAAC

The looks and double-takes Juno was getting were extremely irritating. Only because he wanted her to feel safe, of course. Why couldn't an omega wear a gorgeous dress she looked poured into without attracting unwanted stares everywhere she went? Isaac felt the need to write a strongly worded letter, though he was unsure exactly to whom he would address it. Anyone with eyes, he supposed.

They were seated in the far corner of Babylon's lush interior against a floor to ceiling window. The glittering city below put on a truly stupendous view for them. Juno had been overwhelmed by the fancy setting but also completely awestruck by each dish that came out.

He'd have to strike a better balance next time.

Turned out their initial conversation *was* like a business meeting, so Isaac had been entirely truthful to Hazel. Juno was both interested and not at all surprised to find that he ran the pack like a corporation, their assets tied up in a private company structure. Each member served as equal shareholders and they all contributed the same percentage of their income into a pack account. Isaac was pleased to see Juno's determined expression. "I would want to do the same. Absolutely."

Stimulating stuff.

But things had moved into more personal territory now.

"Nine siblings?" Juno's eyes were wide as she reached for her wine glass.

"Yes. We were like puppies in a basket, all wriggles and teeth."

"I can't even imagine it. I just had my brother. Your mum must have just been constantly pregnant."

Isaac noted the first mention of a brother and filed it away carefully.

“Well, yes and no. We were all multiples. Triplets, twins then triplets again. Plus Everett makes nine.”

Juno choked slightly on her wine and Isaac handed her his napkin. “There’s...two more? Of this?” she said, her voice strangled as she gestured up and down at him. “Of Ollie? No way, you guys *must* be fraternal.”

He waved his hands hurriedly. “Yes, definitely. We had different fathers as well, which can happen when an omega conceives during...erm—”

“Yes of course, that’s what I figured,” Juno quickly and blessedly interrupted. “And Everett?”

“He was adopted after his parents tragically passed away when he was thirteen. I’ll let him tell you more if he wishes. But he is without a doubt my brother as well, just as Ollie is.”

It wasn’t any big drama. Isaac for some reason did not feel like discussing another man — even if it was his packmate — at this dinner right now.

Juno dabbed her napkin to her lips, her eyes darting. “Is it...common to add more people to a pack?” she asked. He could tell she was trying to keep her voice casual.

Interesting. She didn’t seem to be referring to herself. Was there someone else she was seeing at the same time? Based on what Isaac had gleaned from their brief acquaintance, this did not seem like her. “I would look at it on a case-by-case basis. It’s not something I take lightly.” He took a sip of his dark wine, studying her over the rim of his glass.

Her body crumpled slightly. “Of course. That makes sense.” She began smoothing down the already flat surface of the tablecloth with restless fingers.

Isaac reached across and gently laid his hand atop hers. “Whatever you *truly* want to ask, ask it. Please.”

Juno swallowed, before turning her palm upwards to cradle against his. “When I was bonded before, I was not allowed to leave the house. They would take turns watching me. But if all three were busy...” She took a deep, tremulous breath. “They would call Julian. He was a beta and they thought he was gay. Pretty sure that’s the only reason they left him alone with me.”

Juno looked up at him, her eyes luminous. “He tried to save me, Isaac. They rewarded him by taking away his family’s livelihood.” Her lids fluttered as she stared at her lap. “I never saw or heard from him again. I’ve tried to look him up online but...” Her voice trailed off as her shoulder lifted in a disheartened shrug.

She loved him. It was abundantly clear to Isaac. He fought two opposing emotions; a blind, white hot rage as small details of Juno's abuse came to light, and an inescapable drive to wipe that desolate look on her face.

Juno came first.

"I'll find him, Juno," he promised her. "I have a contact who can help you. Send me everything you can remember about him. Even details you might think insignificant. I'll put it in motion."

Her cautious hope bloomed as such a sumptuous vanilla cream he could almost taste it. A stolen spatula, a stripe licked along it, letting the sweetness coat his tongue.

Isaac shook his head slightly, clearing it. There was still something he needed from her.

"One more thing," he added, his voice dangerously low. "Your previous pack. I want their names."

Juno stilled, pinned under his fierce gaze. *Fuck*. There had been absolutely no trace of a bark in his words yet he could still sense her capitulation.

"Juno, I'm sorry." He grasped her other hand across the table in an attempt to recentre her. "I should have asked, not just demanded. I would never—"

"I know. I wasn't scared just...overwhelmed, I guess? Shit, you're potent," she faltered, not meeting his eyes. "I know how it feels to be barked into submission and that wasn't it."

Rage again. This time it razed his throat with its righteous fire. He released one of her hands so he could take a large gulp of wine hoping that would douse it. *It did not*.

"I'll send you their names along with Julian's information," Juno offered quietly and determination swelled in Isaac's chest. "But they're in my past now. Honestly."

Isaac would make sure they remained there.

He asked about her classes at SCCA over a shared dessert. He was content that Juno was so caught up in talking she didn't notice that he had saved the best parts of it for her. Isaac felt strange watching her chase the last of the dulce de leche sauce around the plate before spooning it into her mouth with a satisfied moan. It must be because he was disappointed their pleasant evening was drawing to a close.

Isaac paid and led her back to his car. One hand on the small of her back,

shooting daggers at whoever dared to give her a second glance. He let her connect her phone up and play whatever she wanted at an atrociously loud volume as he drove her home.

They lingered when they reached the door of the lobby. Juno turned to him as she played with the loose strands of hair at the nape of her neck shyly. “Thank you for tonight, Isaac.”

“Of course.” He wondered if what he was about to ask next was appropriate. “Some omegas who are being courted like to be scent marked by their alphas. Makes them feel safer when they’re out and about in the world. I could do that for you if you like.” He clasped his hands behind his back to look as non-threatening as possible.

Thankfully, Juno looked relieved instead of mortally insulted. “Yes, please. If it’s not too weird for you.” She rubbed the middle of her chest and huffed. “My omega hormones are making me loopy knowing you were about to leave. I wasn’t sure why until you asked. Biology sucks sometimes.”

Isaac moved in closer to her, watching as her head instinctively lifted up towards him. The frothy, confection-laced vanilla cream was back, clouding his senses. His mouth watered as his gaze drifted down to the delicate curve of her tattooed neck. Isaac blinked furiously, forcing his focus back up towards her face, as he leaned in and pressed his stubbled cheek against hers. Caramelised dark sugar and sticky peach nectar assailed him and he had the sudden urge to lick. Which he fought valiantly because that would be completely improper.

Juno’s eyes were glassy when they separated. “Yeah...that’ll do it.”

It was actually a relief when she made a quick getaway, a mumbled goodbye and a flash of blonde hair disappearing behind a door. He would really have to do better to try and get his alpha-ness (for lack of a better word) under control next time so he wouldn’t disorient them both.

MILES

Isaac walked in smelling like a divinely boozy peach dessert. His and Juno's scents were so intermingled it made Miles' head spin.

"Yeah, you can't be near Ev and Ollie right now." Miles halted Isaac's progress with a hand on his chest. Unable to resist, he dipped his fingers underneath the open collar to caress the bare skin beneath. "Also, hi. Have a good night?"

He was unprepared for how fiercely Isaac pulled his body flush against his before capturing his lips with a rough desperation. Miles felt Isaac's palm against the back of his neck and he tipped his head back, surrendering to his touch.

"So I take it the 'we're not drawn to each other's scents' ruse with Juno is over?" Miles murmured between kisses. "That didn't take long."

Isaac stopped abruptly, his head jerking back sharply. "What? No. Nothing happened with me and Juno. And it doesn't need to because there's no *ruse*." He seemed offended at the thought.

"Well, I'm not telling you that you should avoid Ev and Ollie because you smell bad, Isaac." Miles raised an eyebrow at him. "Even *I'm* affected by the sheer amount of omega perfume you've managed to bring home."

"I scent marked her right before I left, that's all," Isaac explained, looking at Miles like *he* was the daft one. "It helps omegas during the courting process."

"Ahh, so it was just for her."

"Of course, who else would it be for?"

"Absolutely no one at all, love." Miles leaned back in and kissed his oblivious bonded some more.

It was strange to think that an omega entering their lives used to be Miles' biggest insecurity. Isaac and Miles met four years ago when Miles' architectural practice won the account for the redesign of Isaac's company headquarters. Isaac had still been a CFO then, but of just one business (what a schmuck) instead of an entire umbrella of them like he was now. Miles was a junior associate keen to find a way to make his mark from within a larger team.

He did not think his director would find sleeping with the man who held the purse strings of the project the right way to go about it, so they kept their late night office fucks a secret. Sleepovers started to occur as well, then clandestine dinners followed in a backward sort of progression that somehow worked. The official line was that the relationship only began once the project wrapped. But they both knew it blossomed somewhere between sharing midnight tapas on a rooftop bar and being bent over Isaac's desk.

It was harder before the bond. Isaac was so very alpha it was hard for Miles to believe he would be enough for him. Miles knew intellectually that he challenged Isaac in a way that very few people dared to and only he could do it without consequence (except for fun ones). It wasn't that Isaac's dominance didn't affect him — it 100% did — but it didn't stop him from going right back to pushing Isaac's buttons the way he needed once Miles had shaken it off.

Some might say he had a death wish, but Isaac apparently thought that meant 'good boyfriend'.

But matters of the heart are never easy, and Miles couldn't help but feel like a square peg in a round omega-shaped hole in their pack. After a deprecating comment in bed that Miles honestly could not even remember now, Isaac had taken his face in both hands, bared the slope of his neck and struck.

"Do you see now, love?" Isaac had whispered as he ran his tongue over the fresh bite. "Whether there is an omega out there for me or not, I will never stop wanting you. Needing you. Loving you."

As a beta, the bond would slowly fade over the years — this was true whether a beta bonded an omega or an alpha. But Miles now knew for certain that Isaac would be claiming him again the moment they felt it happen.

"Date went well then?" Miles asked, trailing behind Isaac as he made his way to his room. The jacket came off, followed by his shirt and he was hopelessly distracted.

“Sorry what?”

Miles was almost certain Isaac had been talking the entire time but for the life of him could not recall a single word.

“Did you hear a word I said?” Isaac was getting annoyed but he also had no pants on. His thighs were fucking magnificent. Miles swore any part of Isaac could turn him on. His eyes drifted over to his elbow and as if to prove a point, his brain immediately decided to imagine sticking his tongue in the little dimple that formed when he straightened it.

“Miles,” Isaac warned darkly.

Ok, maybe he needed to focus.

“Hmm?”

“I was saying I never got around to having the...” Isaac’s lips pursed like he had eaten something sour. “*Safe sex* talk with her.”

“You mean it somehow didn’t just come up organically in between the entree and mains? I’m shocked.”

“It’s probably best that it didn’t come from me, anyway,” Isaac reasoned, more to himself than Miles. “You should do it, since your date is next. As there could actually be the possibility of sex.”

“How should I do it?” Miles asked, flopping on the bed and holding up an invisible quill. “Dearest Juno,” he began to recite grandly. “Feel free to bang any and/or all of us as we have been tested and are cleaner than a house before a mother-in-law visit. Do you require testing also? In addition, please advise if you are on or are seeking birth control, otherwise we are happy to wrap our dongs up like Christmas presents.” He dropped his ‘quill’ and propped his head up with his elbow. “Then I’ll play her that dick in a box video.”

“You will *not*—”

“Can if I want — it’s *my* safe sex talk.”

Isaac’s eyes narrowed. “You’re joking.”

“Obviously.” Only about some of it though. Miles still hadn’t decided how much to revise.

Isaac joined him, wrapping an arm around him and pulling him close. “I think you’ll be good for her, love,” he said as he pressed a sweet kiss on Miles’ hair. “I don’t think she’s had a lot of lightness in her life.”

The thought cracked a tiny fissure in Miles’ heart. He breathed in that intoxicating blend of rum-soaked peaches and prayed he wouldn’t let either of them down.

Miles was giddy at the thought of what was coming next. A strange emotion, considering he was pulling up outside an old crumbling jail.

He and Juno had just come from demolishing a wholly unsexy amount of hot wings. Isaac had mentioned that Juno did seem a bit intimidated by how high-end Babylon was. But Miles was pretty sure taking her to a bar with all-you-can-eat wings wasn't what Isaac had in mind when he suggested 'something a little more casual'. Luckily for him, Juno's eyes had rolled to the back of her head when she found out, declaring in reverent tones "I love wings with blue cheese dip."

This girl was made for him.

They had both agreed during dinner that the only bad part of eating so many wings was that you could clearly see the evidence of your own gluttony piling up in the form of picked clean bones. This ended up resulting in a game where they each spent the rest of the meal trying to sneakily move wing carcasses from their own pile onto the other persons. Miles finally called a truce, and dumped all of them onto a 'communal plate'. Juno's sad assessment that "it looks so much worse now" and forlorn expression just made him laugh.

"Miles...where are we?"

He turned to her with barely contained glee. "Ever done a ghost tour?"

Juno's eyes were wide as they stepped out of the car, taking in the historical building that loomed before them. Night had well and truly fallen by now, the facade only partially visible from low spotlights. "This is amazing," she whispered in awe. Juno looked up at him, eyes shining with excitement and her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

"Organised a private tour. It's just you, me—" Miles gestured over at the entrance where a grizzled old man now stood, his face shrouded in shadow. "And that guy." Juno made a strangled noise and clutched her chest at their guide's sudden appearance.

"Oh my god, and he's actually alive," she muttered to herself. "I'm going to shit myself."

Miles flung his arm around her shoulders. "No, we're going to shit ourselves," he corrected her, cheerily.

The tour guide, whose name was Clarence, intoned about the rich history of the jail as he led them inside, his deep voice as rough as sandpaper.

Housing some of the most dangerous criminals the state had to offer since it opened in the 1850s, at least 40 of its inmates remained interred on its grounds. He led them to the main cellblock and stopped outside the rusted gate.

“Some receive a welcome from the inmates as they enter,” he stated ominously.

Despite the mild evening, they both clearly felt an icy cold blast of air hit the back of their necks as they crossed the threshold. Juno emitted a small squeak as she leapt closer and wrapped both her arms around his elbow, pressing her cheek against his shoulder.

Best date idea ever.

Clarence continued the tour; pointing out guard quarters, describing a regular day in the life of an inmate and listing the crimes committed by its occupants. Juno spent the entirety of it clinging to Miles, though as the tour went on, Miles wondered if *he* should be the one clinging to her. A door slamming in the distance made both of them jump again. Clarence checked his watch and mused that it could be the changing of the guard, which would occur right around this time.

“Or just the wind,” he added offhandedly, before moving on.

As they neared the end of the tour, Clarence guided them to the cell of inmate Harry Snell. Already thoroughly spooked by the eeriness of the entire place, stepping into a small enclosed space did not appeal to Miles. Juno stepped through and waved an urgent hand at him.

In it was, then.

“Harry was only eighteen when he began his sentence. Records show he gave the guards a lot of trouble — insolent, combative, un-cooperative. Harry Snell met his end in this very cell. Written records indicate heart failure but his body...”

Miles swore he could hear the sound of footsteps. A quick glance at Juno confirmed he wasn't alone. Multiple footfalls, made by several men, with government-issued boots pounding on the concrete. Coming closer, closer, closer until—

“No, I can't!” Miles wailed, leaping behind Juno and burying his head into her back. Juno laughed and patted his arm, breaking the spell Clarence had so skilfully weaved. “There there, Miles,” she reassured him.

Clarence wrapped up the tour and guided them back outside. “Leave us a review on Google,” he said monotonously, before lurching away. Miles was

torn between wanting to tell everyone to stay away and saying he did an excellent job.

“Thanks for taking me here even though it creeped you out,” Juno said, grinning profusely. That made it worth it, seeing that mischievous twinkle in her eye. He didn’t want the night to end yet.

“Come back to the house,” Miles blurted. “For ice cream,” he added hurriedly.

The corner of her lips lifted. “Is ice-cream a euphemism for something?”

“What? No! I really have ice-cream.” His traitorous brain added an enthusiastic *in my pants*, which he had to mentally swat away.

“Yeah...ok,” Juno agreed, sounding bashful. “I’d like that.”

As Juno got in the passenger side, he quickly pulled out his phone and messaged the rest of his pack.

Miles changed the group chat name to *Juno’s Fan Club*.

I’m bringing Juno back to the house for ice cream.

OLLIE

WHAT

WHAT

WHAT

ISAAC

I hope you remembered to clean the shambles you call a bedroom like I told you to.

OLLIE

When did we get ice cream?

EVERETT

Is ice cream code for sex?

Amused, he pocketed his phone without replying and turned back to the beautiful omega waiting for him.

JUNO

Juno wasn't sure if Miles was actually eating his ice cream pornographically or if her hormone-addled brain was seeing it that way. Watching the loaded spoon disappear in his mouth, his tongue swirling around it before he pulled it back out again clean...

She hoped he wouldn't get any on the corner of his mouth because she would probably hurl herself across the kitchen bench and lick it off him.

Living under Pack Zhao's repressing surveillance was wholly uncondusive to the production of happy hormones. Living her best life, suppressant-free Juno however, was a very different omega.

She kind of got an inkling of what to expect without medication dulling her instincts when she suddenly felt very strongly about expanding her vibrator collection. She'd had her second class with Ari between Isaac's date and this one. Sitting there listening to him discuss storyboarding commercials while trying not to think about how those expressive hands would feel sliding down her back to cup her ass was increasingly difficult.

Then the twinge of guilt came — she shouldn't be thinking about Ari this way while she was being actively courted by another pack. It led to her shrinking away and not participating much in class that week.

But here and now, without any moral dilemmas to blue-ball her, was a very different story. Even though they had been scared shitless, the ghost tour had given her plenty of excuses to touch him, inhale his tipsy scent and casually mark him in return. Catching whiffs of her own scent on him was an utter aphrodisiac.

It wasn't enough that it was on his clothes, she wanted it on his lips, down the smooth planes of his chest, and licked up his cock. She also suspected

Miles was not completely oblivious to her thoughts, based on the way his gaze darkened as he watched her.

“You should know that we’ve all been tested for STDs and are clean,” Miles said with infinite casualness.

Her desire flickered out of her body, like a buzzing neon sign dying, leaving her in the misty fog of her past. The last time she had taken an STD test was when she first entered the Omega Village, to check if Pack Zhao had left her with more than their bites. She hadn’t needed another since. It was just a painful reminder that there were things her body seemed to want that her mind wasn’t ready for.

Juno caught a muttered *Isaac’s going to kill me for fucking this up* before she was pulled against a solid, wonderfully warm chest.

“I’m sorry, Juno, I shouldn’t have pushed.”

“No,” Juno lifted her head. She hated seeing that guilty, distressed look on his face. “Don’t be sorry. I’m realising now that this process is probably a bit like combing a landmine field.”

“If it’s too much or too hard—”

“The last time I took an STD test was after NOC officers rescued me,” she explained, willing her voice not to waver. “I need to do this. I want to do this.” Despite only spending a brief amount of time with this pack, Juno felt like her once black and white life was slowly transforming to technicolour. For the last three years, she had hidden herself away to heal but there were long dormant parts of herself now desperate to live.

An awful thought suddenly occurred to her. “Unless it’s all too much for you?”

“Never,” he replied firmly. “And I don’t need to check with the others to know they would feel the same way.” Miles brushed her hair back off her face tenderly. “Any other triggers we should be aware of?”

Juno thought for a moment before answering quietly. “No barking. No pain of any kind, especially hitting or hair pulling. I don’t like feeling trapped. And don’t ask me to present.”

“God, Juno.” He pulled her even tighter against him. Despite the heaviness of the moment, Juno couldn’t help but recognise how very safe she felt right there in Miles’ arms.

A quick tour of the house served as a welcome distraction from heavier topics. Some of Miles' terms went over her head (she was still not convinced mezzanine wasn't a type of pasta) but she adored how passionate he was about the home. The omega in her was dying to throw cushions on every surface to soften the concrete and industrial feel of the whole house. But she had to concede it was impeccably designed.

Miles' room was immaculate — whites, greys and textured wood with the barest of matte black accents — but it was also sparse. A crisp white bed sat at its centre and the concrete wall behind had recessed shelving, three rectangular hollows cut into dark grey. There was a floor-to-ceiling window, similar to many others throughout the house. Miles was very insistent that she return during the day so she could see how beautifully the natural light came through.

That wasn't him fishing for a second date — he sincerely wanted her to see the sun shine through his window. Juno bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

There was probably a wardrobe on the right wall, judging by what looked like inset handles, but Juno could not figure out where it started or ended. Most of the house had a similar colour palette and minimalist design (thankfully with a few more soft furnishings and homey touches) but Miles' room seemed to take it to the extreme.

"Miles..." Juno took one more glance around the room before turning back to where he stood in the doorway watching her. "I hate it."

He burst out laughing, hiding a sheepish grin behind his palm. "Yeah it's pretty much an omega's nightmare, huh?"

"You have two pillows and they're purely functional." Juno was scandalised.

"Isaac and Everett said I could do whatever I wanted in my own room. I designed this in a 3am fever dream after they made me make a bunch of changes to my original vision for the house. Which I'll only admit to you would've been a nightmare to live in. But god, the design awards it could win," he said, his eyes growing distant and dream-like.

Juno slapped her forehead with a huff of laughter. She wandered over and examined the books — a mix of sci-fi and high fantasy — stacked neatly on the bottom shelf. Her fingertip came away free of dust. "Does your room really look like this all the time?" she teased.

He leaned against the door frame, regarding her with a lopsided smile.

“You want the cute answer or the honest one?”

She was in the middle of inspecting the spines of his books and paused. “Honest answer. Always.”

“I’m usually in Isaac’s room.”

Juno felt like she’d been doused in ice water. “Oh.”

“Whatever you’re thinking, Juno — don’t.”

Miles removed his hands from his pockets and walked over to her. He made a motion as if to cup her face but changed his mind and cautiously held her hands instead. A few strands of golden hair flopped down slightly over his forehead and Juno wondered how it would feel to run her fingers through it.

“He’s the one who told me I better fucking clean my room in case I’m lucky enough to have you see it.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “He did, did he?” Juno arched a brow. “So what you’re saying is usually...?”

Miles walked over to the far wall and gave one of the indents a little push. His wardrobe door glided open to reveal absolute chaos. Everything that probably sat in his room before today was now stuffed inside. There were clothes obviously. Not folded though, but rather squashed in gaps between larger objects. Rolls of old blueprints. A deflated T-Rex costume. Collector figurines still pristine in their box. The remaining volumes of a high fantasy series that did not aesthetically fit on his pretty bookshelves.

A half-empty bottle of lube unable to be contained in the precarious configuration any longer dislodged itself, rolled out and stopped between their feet. A salacious little traitor.

“Is that—”

“Sure is,” he smirked without a trace of shame. “Did I scare you?”

“The opposite, weirdly enough.”

“I knew Isaac was just being neurotic then.” Miles brought one hand up to his lips and kissed her fingers, his expression serious. “Juno, you’re wanted here. By all of us,” he promised. “And especially by me.”

He was so earnest, those hazel green eyes shining with sincerity. And that faint but intoxicating scent of sangria — red wine with a hint of citrus. A dark summer night, sea air kissing bare shoulders, alluring and filled with promises.

After the quickest of glances down at his mouth followed by one heady shared breath, Juno’s lips met his. He made a hungry noise at the back of his

throat and Juno wanted more of it, tilting her head and pressing their bodies closer together. It didn't feel like enough, not when he cupped her cheek or curled his arm around the small of her back and pulled her against him.

Juno broke the kiss with a gasp, feeling lightheaded. "Just one more," Miles whispered, tipping her chin back up with his thumb and consuming her utterly. Sugared peaches perfumed the air and she could feel slick pooling between her legs. A small whine escaped her throat.

"What do you need, beautiful?" Miles asked, his lips never leaving hers.

"I-I..."

"Hey." He pulled back and she felt bereft. "We don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with." His thumb lightly drew circles on the apple of her cheek. "I want you to be able to say no or ask us to stop at any time. Doesn't matter if you've said yes once, twice, a hundred times before that, ok?"

It struck her that this was her first *consensual* sexual encounter. Used to men who simply took, she had never had the chance to wonder what she wanted. And now that she was being asked, she was lost.

God, she was a mess.

"I want more..." She looked down, embarrassed. "But I don't know what I want," she whispered, unable to meet his eyes.

He placed a tender kiss on the tip of her nose and her anxiety subsided. "Would you like to sit on the bed with me? I can offer you an extremely average pillow."

Juno muffled her giggle in his chest and nodded. Miles led her to the edge of the bed before pausing and sliding behind her. She bit back a moan as he wrapped her arms around her waist and nuzzled her neck. "Or I could be your pillow," he murmured.

She watched as he sat on the bed, one elbow propped up on the shelf behind him and a lazy smile on his boyish face. Magnetised, Juno found herself stepping forward, letting him take her hand and guide her to sit between his legs.

His touch was light and teasing. Up and down her arms, along her thighs, a gentle massage of her neck and shoulders. Kisses on her cheek, her jaw, the shell of her ear. He fisted the hem of her dress. Lifting it up, up until it bunched around her waist. The scent of peaches blossomed, decadent and melting with Miles' bright tartness. Being held, adored, pleased like this was like a drug, her synapses flaring in every part of her omega hindbrain. A

small desperate whine escaped her lips.

“You need more, gorgeous?”

“I-I need to come,” she choked out.

The first slide of his finger through her bare slit was electrifying. Her hips bucked involuntarily as he groaned so *wet* followed by a cascade of expletives into her shoulder. He traced infuriating figure eights. Circling her clit, dipping down to her entrance to gather more wetness before circling her clit again.

Unable to take the teasing anymore, on the next wayward stroke downwards she thrust her hips forward, fucking herself on his fingers with a satisfied moan.

Miles cupped her breast, flicking a thumb across her nipple and eliciting a whimper from her. “Was I taking too long to fill this needy little pussy?” He added a third finger and curled them, applying delicious pressure that sent white-hot sparks of heat up her spine.

She wasn’t just sitting between his legs anymore but hauled up onto his lap. One hand was splayed across her stomach, pressing her entire back against his chest as her ass ground directly over his rigid erection. The sound of his fingers moving in and out of her soaked pussy was utterly obscene.

“Oh my fucking god.” His other hand joined the first, rubbing frantic circles on her clit. Juno’s fists were clenched — one in the bedspread, the other in Miles’ hair — as her legs began to shake.

“Fuck yes.” Miles sucked her earlobe between his lips as his hands continued their punishing pace. “Make a fucking mess of my bed, beautiful.”

Juno moaned, her hips grinding, grinding, grinding against his fingers as she rode out her orgasm. She felt suspended, her body tight with pleasure for seemingly forever while he fucked her through each wave. His hands only stilled once her body went limp. She was dimly aware of him lifting his glistening fingers up to his lips and licking them clean.

“I’m dead. You’ve killed me,” Juno muttered as he laughed and kissed her hair.

Feeling crept back into her limbs slowly and she could feel tingles beneath her skin as Miles lightly ran his fingertips up and down her arms. She soon grew aware of his still-hard length pressed into her back and turned to face him.

“What about...” She took in the awry collar of his shirt and glanced down at the impressive tent in his still-zipped pants. God, she hadn’t even managed

to get anything off him before she'd ended up coming in his arms.

Miles chuckled and slid his hand into her hair, pulling her close. "I want tonight to be for you," he said with a light kiss against the corner of her mouth. She shuddered as he ran the tip of his nose along her cheek so he could whisper in her ear. "Though I'd be lying if I said I won't fuck the hell out of my hand the second I've taken you home."

Juno laid a tentative hand on his thigh, looking up at him through lowered lashes. "I want to see."

Miles held her gaze as he reached up and undid one shirt button. Her breathing grew shallow at every inch of revealed skin. His hand trailed down his bare stomach before resting at the band of his boxers peeking out the top of his waistband. "Is that what you'd like?" With a quick flick, his pants were undone and fingers slid underneath. Juno bit her lip as he grasped his length, the fabric torturously hiding the view. "To see how hard I come thinking of you?"

Unable to stand it another second, she reached over and pulled his boxers and pants down. Juno threw them behind her without looking and Miles snorted when it landed perfectly on the corner of the TV. She looked down and her first thought was weirdly that his cock was beautiful — not too thick or too long. Just perfect, hot and hard in his lazily moving fist. She'd never seen a cock without a knot before and she found it reassuring. This wasn't about designation. They were just Miles and Juno, desperate and hungry for each other.

"Show me," she said, unable to disguise her longing.

Instead, he leaned in and laid a soft kiss on her lips. Then another. She kissed him back and was rewarded with more along her neck. All this easy affection was making an addict of her. Miles placed two fingers on her mouth, tugging her bottom lip down slightly.

"May I?"

Juno opened obediently, a quiet moan escaping as she tasted herself on him. She glanced down at the pearlescent bead of precum shining on his tip and her tongue swirled around his fingers instinctively.

"Fuck, you're killing me."

Juno was transfixed as he lay back, fingers shining as he took his cock in his hand again, gripping harder this time. He closed his eyes and groaned as her saliva coated his length, his hips snapping up as he fucked his fist. "I'm going to embarrass myself. I'm already so fucking close," he said through

gritted teeth.

How fast could she make him come? She wanted to drive him out-of-his-mind crazy. “Will this help?” she asked innocently as she threw one leg over his so she was straddling his thighs. Bracing herself on either side of his head, she lifted her hips up and slid her dripping slit along him in one smooth motion, coating him from balls to his angry red tip. “Fuck,” he swore, bashing his head against the wall. “Oh, *fuck.*”

His hand was a blur and every muscle in his body was taut. She dipped her head down and pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss in the juncture of his neck and shoulder.

“I’m coming so fucking hard, Juno. Holy sh—”

Watching Miles come apart was the hottest thing she’d ever seen. Spurt after spurt of cum coated his stomach and chest as he groaned, his hand gradually slowing along his length. In what seemed like a Herculean effort, he tilted his head up to meet her lips for a chaste kiss before collapsing with his arms and legs splayed like a starfish.

“Now I’m the one who’s dead.”

Juno curled up against his side, pressing her nose against his shoulder and inhaling his delicious, warm scent of citrus and wine. He also smelled strongly of her and that was intensely satisfying.

“We’ll haunt the others together then,” she decided and was rewarded with Miles’ deep chuckle and his fingers laced in hers.

OLLIE

Hearing about Juno's triggers from Miles made Ollie angry in a visceral way that he had never experienced before. He bent forward, carding his fingers through his hair as he tried to process the maelstrom of emotions inside him.

"How can you stand this?" Ollie asked, pressing against his eyelids to try and ease the hollow ringing in his head. He didn't know if he needed to hit something or throw up. One glance over at Isaac and Everett told him they weren't experiencing the same dilemma. They were having a silent conversation with their eyes.

Murder?

Of course.

Good.

Miles smiled sadly, "It's not about me. I just try to do what's best for her."

That brought things back into focus for him. He could do that. Leave the vengeance and fountains of blood to Isaac and Everett.

"I know where I want to take her for our date."

"We're going to the zoo?" Juno turned to him excitedly before her expression faltered. "I don't think I've ever been to the zoo. My parents never brought me. They probably thought it would've been a waste of time and money." She let out a half-hearted sigh.

"We're going to spend as much time and money here as you want." Ollie

wondered if Juno knew just how wrapped around her little finger she had him already. Would she use her powers for good or evil?

She tapped her chin, pretending to be deep in thought. “And if I want every soft toy in the gift shop?”

Ollie pulled out his phone. “Gotta organise hiring a truck then. Think they’ll be happy to wait for us in the parking lot?” he asked, as Juno shrieked and batted his hands away from his phone telling him to stop.

It was funny that she thought he wouldn’t actually do it.

Juno bounced through the main gates and gasped when she saw the giant elephant statue.

“Take a picture!” she shouted, as she wrapped her arms around one humongous leg.

Ollie quickly lifted his camera up to his face. “I’m not sure you know this but the rest of this place is filled with real animals,” he teased as she stuck her tongue out at him. *Click*. Perfect.

As they made their way through the different trails, Ollie soon realised Juno’s pure and unfiltered joy was utterly addictive to him. It was actually dangerous.

“Oh my gosh, I can’t deal with how cute these meerkats are! I want to put them in my pocket!”

Was there some sort of meerkat fostering program that existed?

“Look, that koala has the tiniest baby on her back. I’m going to die.”

Should he find out if any other koalas were pregnant and time their next visit for after the birth?

“Ollie, I can’t believe how close the giraffe is! This is amazing!”

Could he possibly organise to get her into the enclosure? Surely you couldn’t get closer than that?

Before he was able to voice what he later realised was a very dumb thought, Juno leapt up onto her tiptoes, pointing excitedly. The movement caused her baggy T-shirt to ride up, exposing her bare narrow waist for a brief moment. Ollie felt like a Victorian lord who’d gotten a glimpse of an ankle for the first time.

But his favourite photos came from inside the butterfly enclosure. He would swear up and down that those delicate, beautiful creatures sensed a kindred spirit in her, surrounding her like colourful little satellites.

“Ollie, come see,” she whispered, staying incredibly still as one landed on her outstretched arm.

He drew closer, taking in her radiant smile bathed in golden sunlight.

“Beautiful,” he whispered back.

Throughout the morning, their hands had accidentally brushed around five times and he almost followed through with taking hold at least twice. Plus, there was that time when she was trying to get a better look at the giant tortoise and leaned against him, the entire right side of her body suddenly pressed against his left. His arm tingled for ages afterwards and he was high on peaches for at least a full minute.

So maybe he was not progressing like *Miles* had progressed but still. It felt right for them.

“An otter?”

Juno looked down at the sketchpad she was proudly displaying under the chin and back up at him.

“Yep. Look how cute you are!”

Alright, maybe being an otter wasn't so bad. Juno had drawn his glasses, freckles and mop of dark hair on top of the small furry thing and even Ollie had to admit the resemblance was uncanny.

They had been enjoying a picnic lunch Ollie had organised, sprawled in the stippled shade of a native gum. Juno was propped up on the majority of the pillows while Ollie suffered with a single cushion.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

“What about the others?”

Juno tapped her pencil against her chin, lost in thought for a moment. Inspiration clearly struck and she began sketching. Ollie tried to look and got a territorial hiss so he laughed and fed her grapes instead. She was so preposterously beautiful like this, focused and doing what she loved. He lifted his camera and clicked right when her tongue made an appearance out the side of her mouth and it was a frontrunner for *Best Picture He'd Ever Taken*.

“Done!” she announced proudly, turning her book around. Ollie took one look at the three figures that had joined his otter and lost it.

“Is, is that Ev as a—”

“Super muscly alpha kangaroo? Sure is.” It looked ready to fuck up your

day, just like Everett. She had even drawn tattoos down his impossibly jacked arms.

“And Miles is that monkey that we saw earlier stealing food and running away. The uh—”

“Capuchin monkey,” Juno answered fondly, giving the little white-faced monkey wearing one of Miles’ trademark loose linen shirts an affectionate pet on his head.

Ollie pointed to the black panther with Isaac’s perfectly groomed stubble and a single lock of hair curling over his forehead. “And Isaac’s just a sleek, apex predator that we can’t make fun of. Seems accurate.”

Juno sniffed as she idly added more shading to his glossy fur. “I think my pencil would have spontaneously broken itself if I tried to draw him as anything else.”

She really was talented — he’d known exactly who each animal was immediately. Not only that, she was incredibly fast. Yes, it was rough but the idea was more than conceptualised.

“Do you want to be a character designer? Or maybe a storyboard artist?” Ollie asked her impulsively. “Not that I don’t think you couldn’t also make a living as an artist with your creepy drawings either. And I don’t mean creepy in a bad way, I mean in a beautiful, amazing way. You know, I fully support your right to...” he trailed off once he clocked Juno’s bemused expression from watching him flounder. Ollie tried to start back up again but she pressed a strawberry into his open mouth.

Her pencil continued to add details across the page as she answered. “My art direction class discussed storyboarding a bit this week actually. I know I want to make a career out of this.” She gestured vaguely at her page. “But I want something stable. I’m still not sure what would suit me best. That’s what I’m hoping to work out at SCCA.”

“I’ve done some commercial work. It pays well and it’s consistent.” Ollie loaded a cracker with prosciutto and brie and brought it to her lips. She ate it almost absentmindedly and his alpha hindbrain purred with delight. “Sometimes I get storyboards as a reference. It’s usually what the agency’s commissioned to help get the idea across the line with the client. I mean, you wouldn’t be drawing the most boundary pushing art, though.”

“Oh, that doesn’t bother me at all. I can draw what I like in my own time. I want to be able to pay the bills.”

Ollie wanted to say that Juno would *never* have to worry about paying the

bills if she joined their pack, but didn't. He could see the determined fire in her, to be independent and earn her way. He would never deny her that.

"You're fast, and your work is clear and detailed. There's no reason you couldn't give it a go." Ollie was unsure if he was pushing too far. "I...have some contacts if you ever want to explore it."

She laid her hand on top of his and he didn't even care that the pencil scratched him slightly. Ollie wanted her sugar scent on him forever. "You're sweet, Ollie. Thank you. I'll think about it for sure."

He glanced at her sketch again and noticed a grave error.

"You should add yourself, too."

"Yeah?" she stumbled, not quite meeting his eyes. "And what would I be?"

He mentally flitted through a million permutations of every fluffy cute thing imaginable, his mind resembling a toddler's stuffed animal collection.

"A puppy. No, a kitten. No, a bunny! Shit, but birds are pretty cute too. Baby chick, baby owl, baby penguin..."

"I'm sensing a theme here."

"You could even be a snake and I bet you'd look like the cutest little danger noodle I'd ever seen."

"Danger...noodle?"

"You know...cause," Ollie trailed off as he made a slithering motion with his arm before hissing and nipping her with his fingers. She stared at him incredulously and Ollie was certain she was about to get up and flee (he would completely understand and not blame her one bit) but instead she broke out into the most wonderful giggles.

Her cheeks were tinted slightly pink when she spoke. "I kind of like the idea of being a snake."

Ollie wasn't sure where his next words came from but it felt very important to say it. "Then you should be a snake. I know you've gone through some things that probably make you feel safer being a snake, all poisonous and scary but I want you to know that if there's a part of you that wants to be a cute soft thing then you can be that too. But I like you no matter what you are and I'm sure I can figure out how to cuddle you regardless."

Juno's eyes glimmered with a myriad of emotions. "You know it's just a drawing, right?"

He carefully tucked the pencil that had fallen from her grip back into her fingers. "Of course."

Ollie watched her draw and the urge to kiss her grew wild and unchecked within him. Unable to contain himself any longer, he leaned in, his eyes beginning to close. His entire body froze when Juno inhaled sharply, her breath stuttering with fear.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

They spoke over each other in a rush of apologies.

“I’m sorry, Ollie, I didn’t mean—”

“No, I’m sorry I shouldn’t have, it was too soon and I should’ve known that—”

Juno cut off his self-flagellating diatribe with a clear voice. “I want you, Ollie. I’ve been wanting you to kiss me all day.”

His brain short-circuited.

“I think if that butterfly wasn’t on my arm earlier I would have.”

And this entire time I thought that butterfly was a friend. The betrayal!

“My reaction just now, it was nothing to do with you. I swear. I didn’t use to care that I had this...mental block with alphas. But now, I hate it.” She fisted the hem of her dress in frustration. He gently took her hands and unwrinkled the material.

“Yes, I’m an alpha,” he conceded. “But I’m also Ollie.” How could he make her see? He pointed at the otter version of himself she had drawn. “Did you know otters fall asleep holding hands? It’s so they don’t drift away from each other in the water. Isn’t that just the best thing ever? I think I would be happy just holding hands with you for as long as you wanted.”

He resisted the very real urge to pull out his phone and start showing her otter videos. “What I’m trying very badly to say is — even though I’m an alpha and you’re an omega whose scent makes my brain go stupid, it’s not the reason I want you. You’re worth the wa—”

Ollie didn’t have very long to wait at all. One moment he was talking, and the next, Juno had wrapped her arms around his neck. Her lips finally, finally found his and his heart almost burst from how right it all felt. His hands slid around her waist and their breaths mingled as they took sips of each other, growing more lightheaded with each passing second.

If Ollie had once thought her happiness was addictive, it was nothing compared to this heated sensuality. He was gone for her. Absolutely gone for this girl.

“That was...” Her eyes fluttered as she was lost for words. She stroked his cheek, a sweet intimate caress. “You’re wonderful. Kiss me again.”

Ollie took the melting omega back into his arms, as rich caramel sugar melded with vibrant espresso.

EVERETT

Everett had been here before.

“Here” being omega courtship.

Her name was Emma and their meeting was utterly magical, lifted straight out of a film. It was a few weeks before Christmas, in the chaos of a department store. They both reached for the last shaving gift set, their hands touching.

“Oh! I’m so sorry. Go ahead,” she said, demurely. “I can get my brother something else.” Her eyes flicked quickly over to the alpha chaperoning her from a distance.

“No, it’s yours. I insist.” Everett scratched his chin, ruefully. “My prime will hate whatever I get him anyway.”

She giggled, covering her mouth politely with dainty fingers. “I can’t imagine anyone being disappointed in you.” Her gaze drifted purposefully over him, evaluating his towering height and the wide breadth of his shoulders. “Or that you’re not the prime yourself,” she added, her rose and botanical scent flourishing and making his head spin.

Scent match.

Her fingers casually swept across her low neckline as she tossed her fiery red hair over her shoulder and left Everett unable to focus on anything else.

Emma was spellbinding and the whirlwind dates that followed, a dream. Everett left each interaction dreaming of flower gardens, and every night jerking off to the thought of her huge tits and impossibly lush curves. After the disasters at NOC’s galas, Everett was so sure he had managed to do the impossible — serendipitously find the perfect omega. He eventually helped her ease her heat and knew he wanted to do it for her for the rest of their

lives.

Things moved fast but it was because they were *right*.

Until he brought Emma home. The questions were innocuous at first. How long had Isaac and Miles been together? Then they grew pointed. Was it weird having a beta in their pack? Did he know that packs were traditionally comprised solely of alphas? Would Miles leave if Isaac got an omega? When he finally asked outright if she had an issue with Isaac and Miles, she simply said “I just think an omega should be the centre of a pack.”

Nothing got past Isaac Rivera, so Everett was hardly surprised when he got pulled aside for a talk.

“If she’s your omega and you want to leave to be with her, we understand.”

Everett lashed out immediately, unable to deal with being pulled in two different directions. “So what, I’ve found my omega so you don’t want me in your pack anymore, is that it?” he blustered.

Isaac saw right through him, the way he always did. “You know that’s not what I’m saying. That’s beneath you. Beneath us.” Everett couldn’t look him in the eye, thoroughly reprimanded.

When he had been adopted into the Rivera pack at the age of 13 (orphaned, mad at the world and no idea he was on the cusp of the biggest growth spurt of his life), he and Isaac got into a fist-fight almost immediately. He could still see the holes in the wall because of their Dad’s shitty plastering job.

The fights continued almost daily, their relationship like kindling and any perceived slight, the match. After one particularly brutal bout left Isaac bleeding from the scalp, Everett demanded to know why Isaac hadn’t made his parents kick him out yet. 15 year old Isaac replied, blood running into his eyes and a voice like thunder to Everett’s young ears. “We could beat each other up every fucking day of our lives and you’d still be my brother. See you tomorrow, asshole.”

That’s when Everett knew Isaac was his prime.

Everett’s indecision ruined New Year’s Eve. He brought Emma and she was horrifically rude towards Isaac and Miles’ displays of affection. He hated it. Hated it so much bile rose up in his throat. How could she be so cruel? This wasn’t the Emma he knew and he couldn’t reconcile the omega he’d laughed with and held in bed with this twisted one.

Everett asked her to leave and she appeared in Page Slick less than two

months later bonded to a traditional, heteronormative alpha-only pack. It had been short-lived beta hookups only for Everett since then.

This time around with Juno, it was different. It was worse.

She came to them through the National Omega Commission, just like most omegas matched with packs these days. Though she'd triggered his protective instincts like crazy, he knew that was more because of what she'd survived rather than any sort of fortuitous connection. They were certainly not a scent match the way he and Emma were. He'd fucked up their introduction and wasn't sure if she even liked him. Having gotten used to women being drawn to him, his hubris had been thoroughly punctured this time round.

He felt truly out of his depth.

And now he had to take her on a date.

They were at a food truck park, surrounded by delicious aromas, pretty lights and live music. None of it mattered though, because Everett had found a way to make every conversation starter come to a screeching halt.

“Do you come here often?”

“Nah.”

“How'd you hear about this place? I love the vibe.”

“Oh just...around.”

“Well, what do you feel like eating?”

“Whatever you want.”

It was a gift, really.

Understandably frustrated, Juno stood up, peering at each truck's signage trying to get a better look.

“Why don't we get a bunch of stuff to try from different trucks and meet back here?”

“No.” Juno winced at his sharp tone and Everett regretted his hasty reaction immediately. “I mean, I don't want to leave you alone. It's not safe.”

She looked at him like he was crazy. He *was* crazy. “It's a weeknight, there's not that many people around. It'll be fine.”

How was he supposed to explain that letting her wander around alone, talking to strange vendors, was going against every alpha instinct in his

body? Why had he picked this venue? He saw that it was dog friendly and thought Juno might think that was cute. Never mind that the logistics of actually getting food was sending his blood pressure through the roof. Also, there was only one dog here at the moment and it was a psycho yappy one.

He was being insane and unreasonable and he knew it. But he needed her to be safe. So he sat there, unable to answer her while the silence stretched between them.

“Scent mark me.”

Everett stared at the defiant lift of her chin. “What?”

“Scent mark me. If it’ll make you feel better. Then we’ll go off separately, order a bunch of stuff, bring back all those pager things that light up and buzz when your order’s ready and you can go fetch them while I sit *riiiight* here so you can see me the whole time.”

She was a bloody saint for tolerating him.

“You don’t...think I’m being unreasonable?” Everett hedged and she looked up at the sky, muttering something about murdering him not being worth the jail time.

“Of course you’re being unreasonable,” she said when she’d decided to let him live. “But I can tell it’s important to you and it doesn’t really cost me anything to do it so...come on. Scent mark me.” Juno had her hands planted squarely on her hips. Everett wondered how quickly her bravado would melt if he kissed that insolent little pout off her lips.

Ok, that was a thought he definitely needed to keep locked up. She already thought he was irrational. No need to add lecherous to the list too.

He stood up, their height difference growing more and more apparent as he towered over her. Juno held his gaze obstinately the whole time. Slowly, deliberately, he slid his hand along the curve of her jaw until his fingers tangled in her hair. His thumb found the base of her chin, turning her face slightly. Cheek against cheek, coarse stubble against satin skin; eucalyptus, stone-fruit and a deep inhale.

It was a mistake because he was ensnared. A freshly plucked peach, teeth breaking through velvet to consume the sweet, tart flesh. A bond, a covenant, a promised thread connecting two souls. Juicy slick running down a shaking thigh, begging for his tongue.

What the fuck. That was not how he reacted the first or second time to her scent. But this time it was so vivid, it felt like a memory.

Or a premonition.

Everett pulled back abruptly. “That should do it,” he said gruffly, with a slight shake of his head as he tried to clear the haze.

“Ok,” Juno replied, brightly. “I’m going to get satay skewers! Ooh, I wonder if I can ask for extra peanut sauce...”

He watched her bound away, completely unaware of the rattled alpha she’d left behind.

Juno had her chin resting on her hands, palms flat down on the table as she stared at the huge stack of pagers they had accumulated. Her face was so close she was going cross-eyed.

“Do you even remember which pager goes with which truck?”

She gave Everett a narrow glare and pointed at each pager.

“Souvlakis, dumplings, skewers, loaded fries, and lobster rolls,” she rattled off without a single pause. She then flexed claw-like fingers while grinning maniacally, and gnashed her teeth like a gremlin. Everett was a little turned on and decided he needed his head examined.

Loaded fries began vibrating madly, causing the entire stack to collapse and eliciting an excited squeal from Juno. “Go, go, go!” she flapped her hands at him urgently.

Soon they were surrounded by what could only be described as a blasphemous amount of food for two people. Everett had managed to remember how to converse like an actual human being as well, so things were looking up.

“So you’re technically cousins.”

“Yes.”

Everett was explaining how he came to be adopted by Isaac and Ollie’s family. After his alpha father and beta mother tragically passed away in a fatal car accident, the Rivera pack took him in straight away. His uncle — dad’s brother — was one of his Nanay’s bonded alphas.

“Mum’s my mum but my Nanay is too.” He felt exposed but Juno had nothing but soft encouragement in her expression, like she understood how his heart could hold space for two different mothers. “But with my Uncle, I still call him that even though he’s been a dad to me for longer than my actual Dad. But I think we both prefer it that way, ’cause it’s like we’re...”

Everett struggled momentarily to explain.

“Honouring him. Remembering him.” Juno finished with a nod. “I get it. I think that’s admirable. And obviously works for you both.” This was far from his favourite topic but Juno had a way of making him feel reassured.

“That’s also why Isaac hyphenated our pack name.” Everett felt his neck grow hot. “Even though I’m not the prime,” he mumbled.

“I was wondering about that,” Juno commented. If she was aware of his nerves she didn’t show it. “I think pack name traditions are overrated. Let people decide what fits them best.”

She smiled, all grace and light.

They had made a truly impressive dent in the mountain of food when both their forks speared the last dumpling at the same time. Juno whipped her head up, game face on.

“Tell me why I should let you have this.”

Everett threw his head back with an incredulous laugh. “I’m sorry, *let me?*”

“You heard me.”

“Don’t tell me you’re pulling the *I’m an omega, I should have it* card.”

“As if you weren’t just about to pull the *I’m an alpha, I’m so big and strong, need more food* card!” She bashed an unwieldy fist on the table and clearly thought he was some sort of cave-dwelling barbarian.

“*I am* big and strong,” Everett mumbled under his breath.

Juno pressed a fingertip into the dumpling. “You should hurry, it’s getting cold.”

“Did you just touch my dumpling?” he asked incredulously.

“No, of course not. I touched *my* dumpling.”

His eyes narrowed before he carefully sliced it in half with the side of his fork. Without breaking eye contact, he speared one piece and ate it.

“Ok, Solomon,” she grinned before popping her half into her mouth.

God, he was having fun. When did that happen?

They cleared their table of baskets and wrappers and made their way over to the bar for one last drink. A coke for him because he was driving and some sort of fruity concoction for her that the bartender slid over with a *for you, darling*, setting off Everett’s growl.

“I’m sorry,” Juno apologised breezily to the bartender, who Everett had only just registered was busy undressing him with his eyes. “It’s his first day in modern human society.”

He had a flash of her on her knees as he fed his cock into that bratty mouth.

“I like your tattoos, by the way,” she said, sipping on her drink with plump, rosy lips. “Name the most painful spot to get inked — go.”

Demanding little creature. He pulled up the hem of his shirt, showcasing the nightmarish kraken coiled around a trapped ship adorning his ribs. It also conveniently displayed the cut lines of hard muscle on his abdomen.

Juno bent down to get a closer look. *Can't resist, can you? Soon you won't just be looking, but touching and licking, right before you—*

“Oh, that's really lovely work.”

Everett pulled his shirt back down with an agitated tug.

Juno caressed the spider at her throat. “I think it's worse here, though.”

“You got a tattoo on your ribcage, baby?” He would later wonder where the hell that *baby* came from but right now he was enjoying the thought of riling her up too much.

“Well, no but—”

“Then you can't really argue, can you?”

“Same goes for you, technically,” Juno sniped back, gesturing at his bare neck.

“I'm actually getting one there soon,” he replied blithely, “So don't worry, I'll know for sure that I'm right.”

“Oh are you now.”

“Fuck yeah,” he asserted, lying through his teeth. Why did this feel like foreplay?

“What are you going to get, since you've clearly been planning this for a whole 12 seconds.”

“Just a middle finger, flipping you off.” Everett positioned his hand carefully so she could get a proper visual.

She burst out laughing and it sent a frisson of pleasure through his gut. “I think you would somehow pull that off,” she conceded.

Everett pulled his left sleeve up slightly, and flexed his bicep. But only because his spider tattoo was on it and that was the best way to show her. “We can fight over who has the best spider though, if you want.”

Juno ran her fingers over it and Everett felt pinned by her gentle touch. “No fair,” she pouted. “Yours has a rose for a body. It's beautiful.”

It was his Emma tattoo, the harsh reminder that things in pretty packages could be deadly. But right now, staring at Juno with her morbid ink and

amused irreverence was somehow more dangerous. He wanted to know what she looked and sounded like when he finally pushed his knot into her slick, hot pussy. Locked together, fingernails digging into his ass, begging for his bite while he filled her over and over with his seed.

Branding her.

Marking her.

Claiming her.

He met her cat-like gaze with his own, burning up from the inside out.

JUNO

Her hand was still running along his arm, but it wasn't just the ink that was mesmerising anymore. It was all of it. How hard the muscle was, the way the little fine hairs rose up behind each caress. And his *scent*. Whatever he was thinking and feeling right now must be intense. How could she have ever been neutral about it? He was the ocean — not the calm froth lapping the shore, but the wild unknown. Crashing, dark and deep. And just when her head sank under the waves, the eucalyptus struck, defibrillated her heart and revived her. She filled her lungs with life and death all at once.

Then the cramp hit.

Juno knew exactly what this was, and with it came icy dread. A pre-heat spike. Pack Zhao liked to find ways to set them off, falling on her ravenously when they succeeded.

“Juno, what’s wrong?”

“When I get close to my heat, I sometimes get these little...spikes. It lasts until I...until I...” Her voice was thin and ragged and she couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence.

Until I come.

Everett was unerringly calm, almost clinical, contrasting with his heavy scent. “What do you normally do during these?”

She paused. The truth or a lie? “I haven't been getting them the last couple years while I've been on heat suppressants.” Another cramp and she winced, her next words coming reluctantly. “But back when I did I... didn't get to choose how I dealt with it.”

There was the briefest, chilling flash in his eyes followed by an almost imperceptible tic in his jaw. A lightning bolt striking a merciless sea. Then it

was gone, disappearing as he took a deep breath, his features softening.

“I can take you home to the Omega Village...” There was a question in his eyes. Omega Village meant her own collection of vibrating and silicone *assistants* in her bedside table.

“Or back to the pack house to get Miles,” Everett finished.

“Miles. Please.” She couldn’t even look at him.

He bent down into her space ever so slightly and it was a painful kind of bliss. “I know you and I aren’t there yet, Juno. I’m sorry I set you off.” A thumb gently grazed her cheek and was gone in the next breath, as if that was all the contact he’d allow himself. “You’re safe with me. I promise.”

Juno didn’t understand why the alpha in the front seat was swearing and swiping through his phone contacts instead of pulling over and fucking her brains out. There was nothing in this cursed backseat to grind against — just her insufficient hand shoved between her legs as creamy peaches and sugar filled the small space.

“Evvvvv!” Miles’ tinny voice came through the phone. “I know you have no game but calling your brother’s boyfriend for advice during your date is pretty poor even for you.”

Miles. Yes, she wanted him too. Both of them. At the same time. The delicious beta fucking her mouth while the big cursing alpha pushed his thick cock into her dripping pussy until his knot—

“I set off a fucking heat spike, Miles!”

“What? What do you mean? How?”

“She was touching my tattoos and smelling really fucking good and I don’t know, it just went straight to my head.”

“Which head?”

“This is not funny, fuckhead! You need to help her through it, I’m on my way home.”

“Shit ok, put me on speaker and I don’t know, think about furniture polishing or something.”

“Furniture polishing? Like rubbing shiny wet shit on wood back and forth? That’s the furthest away from sex you were able to get?”

The alpha’s voice is at least 20 decibels louder now and it was confusing

because he could be using that energy to bounce her on his cock instead. There was a thump as his phone landed near her head.

“Juno. You there, beautiful?”

“Mmm...need you.” Where was he? Didn’t he know she wanted to ride his face?

“I’m right here waiting for that pretty pussy to get home so I can have dessert.”

He did know! He really was the best.

“Been dying to taste you, gorgeous. Fuck you with my tongue till your slick is running down my face and neck. Then I think I’ll suck on that needy little clit and finger you just right till you’re begging to come.”

She could hear that the alpha was busy praying — he was saying Jesus Christ over and over — so maybe religion was why he wasn’t giving her what she needed. Luckily the delightful beta seemed to have it sorted.

“I want it,” she whined, sliding two fingers inside herself. “It’s not the same when I do it.”

“You fucking your fingers?”

She moaned, adding another.

“Good. I want you soaked and ready for me when you get here.”

Juno was so feverish she was only vaguely aware when the car stopped. She felt like she’d been writhing in the backseat forever. The alpha threw himself out of the car, slamming the door and leaving her in the dark again. She whimpered — where was he going? Moments later, light flooded her as the door swung open and someone crawled in with her. *Beta. Sangria. Yes.*

He was kissing her lips, her face, her neck, leaving her breathless as she tried to keep up. Her fingers were yanked from between her legs and sucked into his mouth.

“Mm, dirty gorgeous girl. Should I clean you up?”

Was he serious? Why hadn’t he started already? With a frustrated little mewl, Juno grabbed him by the shoulders and roughly manoeuvred him onto his back, her thighs on either side of his head. Perfect. Now she could pull her irritating underwear to the side and let him feast on her like he’d promised.

He rose to the challenge magnificently, grasping her ass with both hands, spreading, stretching her pussy wide open for him. Then he attacked, a frenzied assault of lips and tongue. Fucking, licking, stroking her higher and higher. She was close, so fucking close to what she needed.

Then he slid three fingers home, curling them against the desperate part inside her that craved a knot and she screamed, her hips surging over his face and pumping hand. His hair was fisted in her white-knuckled grip as he wrung every last bit of pleasure from her. Finally her movement slowed as something inside her settled and she looked down, flushed with embarrassment.

“Miles!”

“Juno.” His slick covered grin was positively debauched. “Want another?”

“Th-the spike is over, you don’t have—”

“Mm, you misunderstand,” he said, flipping her on her back and licking a hot stripe down her stomach. “This one would be for *me*.”

Everett was *never* going to get her scent out of his car.

“I’m so sorry, Everett, I-I shouldn’t have—”

“Not your fault,” he replied briskly.

“Can I get your car cleaned for you? I-I think I’ve seen a place along the highway I could—”

“Already booked in for tomorrow morning.”

“Oh ok good, yes you probably want to get my scent out as soon as possible, which I totally—”

“Scent doesn’t bother me, but I can tell it makes you uncomfortable. I’d like to take you out again and can’t have you turning into a tomato every time you get in my car.”

“A tomato?”

He reached over and gave her cheek a light pinch. Juno screeched and clapped her hands on her face, feeling the heat radiating through her fingers.

“Hey look, it goes right up to your forehead.”

She pulled the neck of her top up over her face. *You live here now, Juno. From now until you die.*

“Juno.” A big finger hooked into the top of the neckline and Everett’s blue eyes peered down at her. “I’m just glad you felt safe enough with our pack to help you through it and come back home with us. You’ll stay with Miles tonight?”

She was hit with the realisation that she was ending their date in another man's bed. "I'm the worst fucking date ever, aren't I?"

He carefully tugged her shirt back down to reveal her still-red face, sweeping her hair out of her face gently. "Not if you let me make you breakfast tomorrow. Just us, on the little balcony on the second floor."

He didn't seem real, this gruff verbal-sparring giant of an alpha with the most gooey of soft centres.

"You're dangerous." Before she could overthink it, she rose onto her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I'm going to have to watch out for you."

She could see his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. "Get out of here, trouble. I'll see you in the morning."

MILES

Miles was waiting for Juno in his room and had changed positions four times already. He'd vetoed waiting on the bed (too *come hither*) and didn't trust himself not to accidentally knock his (securely wall mounted) TV over with a nervous twitch if he stood near it.

He'd settled on hovering by the plant, pretending to inspect the leaves.

"You can eat a girl out twice in the back of your packmate's car but *this* is what you're shitting yourself over," he muttered to himself.

The *snick* of the door opening had him whipping around immediately. Juno slid into his room through the tiniest gap possible like she was in stealth mode. She nervously tucked her hair behind her ear before stopping short, a tiny gasp escaping.

"Do you like it?" Nice, he sounded about 20% casual and only 2000% desperate for approval.

After her last visit, he'd thrown himself into redesigning his room, adding the soft touches an omega craved while still making sure it fit what he loved. There was now a circular oversized armchair perfect for curling up on, with two of the cosiest blankets he could find draped over it. Warm beige linen sheets replaced stark white on his bed, and while he couldn't bring himself to add a chaos of cushions, he did add several thick pillows to his two sad ones. A sculptural terracotta floor lamp cast the entire room in a diffused orange glow. Even he had to admit it was nicer to be in his room now compared to before.

"You did this for me?"

She was wearing one of Everett's oversized shirts (he had insisted and Miles wasn't about to go head-to-head with whatever alpha idiosyncrasy he

was dealing with), having just showered in the guest bathroom. It was attached to a guest bedroom that Miles had designed to be able to convert into a nest if needed. But she didn't need to know that.

Yet.

"I wanted you to be comfortable here." An errant hair on her neck was gently brushed away and she shivered at the graze of his fingers on her skin.

"Yeah? And why is that?"

"To hopefully convince you to stay the night." His hands were at her waist now, lightly massaging her hips.

"And what would I be doing if I stayed?"

His grip suddenly tightened as he pulled their bodies flush together, grinding his hard length against her. She moaned, arms flying around his neck and her lips finding his.

"I could eat out your pussy again?"

She made a distinct noise of dissatisfaction, kissing him harder. It forced him backwards and his legs hit the edge of the bed.

"Or maybe I could jerk off while you finger yourself?"

Juno pushed him on the bed with an angry shove.

"Miles, I want you to fuck me," she ordered him, eyes ablaze as she whipped off Everett's shirt and tossed it over her shoulder before descending on him.

Fuck, he didn't get a good enough look at those bouncy little tits. He'd have to settle for tasting them instead. Sliding downward, he took one dark brown Hershey Kiss nipple into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue. His other hand found its sister and gently squeezed. So soft. It was a crime he couldn't have both in his mouth at once.

Juno was working very hard to divest him of his clothing and he was doing his best to be as distracting as possible. Kisses, licks, nibbles everywhere.

"You want me to put on a condom, beautiful?" he asked. She shook her head, pulling his face back to hers for a bruising kiss. "I've got an IUD in." Another kiss and the scent of sweet peach nectar everywhere. "Now, Miles. I want to feel you."

A more sane man would have obeyed the omega lying in their bed, legs spread and eyes bottomless with want; but Miles was clearly not that man. "Well, the last time you were in this bed..." Miles held the base of his cock and gave her clit a light tap with the head. She twitched, her hips thrusting

involuntarily. “Your wicked little ways gave me an idea.” Her pussy was glistening and dripping slick as he notched his cock at her entrance.

“Miles, *please*.”

He bent down to give her a filthy kiss, tongue invading her mouth. “You asked so nicely,” he murmured against her lips. “But I want to have some fun first.”

Instead of pushing forward into her tight wet heat, he thrust upwards, sliding his cock along the lips of her pussy. Fuck, what a visual — seeing himself almost, *almost* enter her before he denied her, her pussy lips hugging the sides of his dick. One glide and he was already saturated. He angled his tip on his next thrust, grinding along her clit. Another thrust then another, rougher, over and over her swollen little nub.

Her hands slid down his back, and on the next press of his hips she pulled him closer, trying to seal their bodies together. In a flash, Miles had her hands in his, loosely pinned over her head. Making sure she could feel that she could slip free if she wanted. He gave her a decadent kiss on her neck, ignoring her aggravated little whine. His length lay hot against her thigh leaving a streak of wetness.

“I’ll fuck you when I’m ready, gorgeous.” He could just live on the pleasurable torment on her face forever. Seeing her so desperate for release that only he could give her was a drug.

Miles guided her hands down to her thighs, spreading her even wider. “Hold yourself open for me, won’t you?” His tone was mild but his searing gaze was anything but.

“*Fuck, you’re evil,*” Juno bit out. Tight hardened nipples arched into the air as she displayed her drenched slit for him. He took hold of his shaft again — one more little clit tap that had her cursing at him — before gliding the head down through her slick folds and letting the tip push slightly in before withdrawing again.

“Miles, your cock, I need, I can’t, fuck, *please*.” She was barely coherent and his bed was now flooded with her arousal.

He continued his tormenting little presses — *just the tip* — while his fingers found her clit. Small, tight movements up and down, up and down, mimicking the slide of his cockhead earlier to kick her pleasure to new heights until—

“I want you to come on my cock, Juno,” Miles demanded as he slid home. She shattered and very nearly took him with her. He was so focused on

driving her to insanity he wasn't prepared for how hot, soaked and perfect her cunt was as it pulsed over and over with her delayed orgasm. He held her, raining light little kisses across her cheek and fucking her in long strokes until her tensed body finally relaxed.

He felt her mouth graze his ear. "My turn."

She guided his still hard cock out of her, and gave his shoulders a hard push. The momentum carried him onto his back, catching him off guard as she swung one leg over, lined him up and sank down. They both let out twin noises of satisfaction.

Then she began to ride.

There was no more teasing, only her vicious single-minded determination to get him to come as quickly as possible.

"Fuck, I'm not going to last." She took that as a challenge and rode him harder, her ass cheeks slapping loudly on his thighs. Miles sucked in a sharp breath and her scent hit him like a sledgehammer. It was dangerous, so fucking dangerous, because he would do anything to relive this again and again. "You want my cum in this pussy, gorgeous?" Miles managed to grit out.

She leaned in close. "I want to feel it inside me."

He was done for.

Miles could feel the pressure building to the point of no return. Gripping her hips, he fucked her deep, groaning as he filled her. Was he going to come this hard every fucking time with her? He could feel her watching him, this satisfied little omega getting everything she wanted.

"I was meant to make you come again," he mumbled, fighting to keep his eyes open.

Juno kissed his forehead and held him against her sweat-sheened chest. "If you think I'm in any way disappointed with the amount of orgasms I've had tonight, there's something seriously wrong with you."

He managed to muster up the strength to clean the both of them up before spooning Juno against his chest. His final thought before he drifted off was how he really did like having soft things in his room.

ARI

She smelled different every week now. Numerous alphas and Ari could've sworn he picked up a whiff of beta as well.

It wasn't his business. And he wasn't supposed to care.

He definitely shouldn't speculate. But if he hypothetically did, he assumed that she probably had a pack. Her scent was still that of an unbonded omega, however. It wasn't his place to wonder what circumstances led to an omega tattooing her neck so heavily, so he did not dwell on this at all. Under no circumstances did he catch himself staring at the dark artwork she had chosen to permanently mark her skin with.

That would be inappropriate and in poor taste, two things Ari most certainly was not.

Yet he was still haunted by that very first day when she stepped into his lecture hall. One inhale of her scent and he was suddenly 25 again, spending an endless summer in the South of France. A farmer's market in Provence. Blush pink peaches bought by the boxful to throw in sparkling punch, bake laden with vanilla and brown sugar or just consume fresh on a whim. Every pretty girl was somehow blonde and tattooed. Beckoning with sultry eyes to spend a summer night consumed with good food, a bit too much drink and the sweaty slide of bodies together.

Despite weekly exposure to the mix of her omega perfume with foreign alpha scents — a hint of sea air, a shot of rum, a warming sip of coffee — Juno remained evocative as ever. It frustrated Ari to no end. After all, had he not escaped London to get away from omegas, packs and all the drama they wrought? He didn't need this constant reminder, especially one as maddeningly beautiful and brilliant as she was, sitting in his class. He almost

launched himself at that scraggly alpha student who dared antagonise her on her first day.

This version of himself was wholly unwelcome.

“Ari?”

His head snapped up. How long had this student been talking to him for? He’d wrapped up his lecture, dismissed everyone and apparently his attention span along with them.

“Pardon me, I didn’t catch that.”

Priya giggled, “Gosh you sound so dapper, sometimes.”

Did he? Surely an afternoon spent in an English pub watching the football would dissuade her of that notion quite quickly.

“How can I help, Priya?” He glanced at his wristwatch briefly.

“I just thought you might like some company on the way to our tute.” She was doing something to her bottom lip with her teeth that looked painful.

Ari glanced up at the door, noting the silhouette of his friend. Head of Advertising Alistair Reed who helped him land this job, and could not sink a pool ball to save his life after two beers.

“I’m spoken for already,” he replied, gesturing to where Alistair waited. “Maybe next time.”

There would be no next time but his unerring need for politeness afforded him few other options for responses.

Alistair had a coffee for him because he was an utter paragon of humanity. “Does your wife know you do this for me every week?” Ari asked, taking a fortifying sip.

“Hilarious,” Alistair replied drily. “Beth won’t care, you know you have a standing invitation to dinner at ours anytime.”

An evening with a bonded alpha and beta couple in a happy marriage? Even if it was one of his oldest friends, Ari would sooner stab himself in the eye with a fork.

“One day,” he said noncommittally instead.

They discussed the latest shocking showing their football team made on the weekend while they walked (Ari thought the gaffer was long overdue for a sacking but Alistair remained the eternal optimist) before parting ways outside his classroom.

Now that they were in closer quarters, Ari could definitely tell there was a beta scent clinging to Juno today.

If he were to notice. Which he *didn’t*. Because he was good at his job and

focused solely on his syllabus. He made sure to do just that for the next hour, trying not to dwell on how much he liked that Juno was so set on succeeding in his class.

As his students made their way out afterwards in a flurry of papers and packed bags, he heard an astonished little giggle. He knew immediately it was *her*, as if his ears were tuned just to her frequency. For some odd reason, it was imperative for Ari to see who had gotten that reaction out of her. He hurried his movements, shoving everything in his bag in a rough swipe before charging through the door.

Juno was entwined around an alpha, his nutty coffee and her sugared sweetness melding perfectly. Ari caught the tail end of their conversation.

“Good surprise, I hope?”

Why did that voice sound familiar?

“Very good.” She rose up on her tiptoes to give him a light kiss, her fingers caressing his cheek affectionately.

Bloody hell, he *knew* Juno’s alpha. Ari’s mind rifled through faces at a million miles an hour, trying to place him.

“Holy shit, Ari, is that really you?”

Two years ago, a lavish vodka campaign shot in Bali and the happy-go-lucky photographer brought on to capture content for print and social media. Ari was fairly certain he’d been six shots deep and roped into singing a horrific karaoke rendition of K-Ci & Jojo’s *All My Life* with him at the wrap party.

“Ollie.” Slightly stupefied, he allowed Ollie to give him an excessively hefty smack on his palm that turned into a rather boisterous handshake.

“Last time I saw you was in Bali! You’re teaching now?”

Ari nodded before bracing himself for the inevitable avalanche of questions. *How come? What happened in London? Are you ever going to return to advertising?*

Instead, Ollie turned to Juno with a radiant smile. “Juno, you’re so lucky. Ari is a gun. Best ECD I’ve ever worked with, hands down,” Ollie enthused without a trace of sarcasm in his voice. How he did that, Ari had no idea.

“He is exaggerating, obviously.”

Ollie waved his attempt at modesty aside. “You’re gonna learn so much, Juno. Probably already have!”

Of course her alpha was one of the nicest humans he’d ever encountered. He would already be an asshole if he disapproved of whomever Juno had

chosen but disapproving of Ollie Rivera would be like admitting he kicked puppies for fun.

“Oh! Do you have time now for a quick catch-up?” A moment of realisation gave Ollie pause as he looked at Juno. “Sorry, I should’ve checked with you first. Is that ok?” Juno told him he was being silly and didn’t even have to ask, giving him a familiar rub on his shoulder.

Ollie turned back to him. “Want to grab a coffee with us?”

Ari wasn’t sure what possessed him when he replied. “I’m long overdue for one actually.” He cast a furtive glance over at his desk and was relieved to see he had the foresight to put the coffee cup from Alistair in the bin. When he turned back, Juno was watching him with an indecipherable expression on her face.

Ollie whooped and took Juno’s hand. He started to lead her down the hall before pausing suddenly. “I don’t know where I’m going,” he admitted contritely. Juno laughed and gave him an affectionate kiss on the back of their clasped hands (Ari experienced a strange swoop behind his navel) and assured him she knew where to go.

Ari followed a beat behind them. A stray thought crossed his mind as he noted how easily it would’ve been to slot right in beside them on Juno’s other side.



Despite the close proximity of another alpha to Juno, Ollie did not partake in any alpha posturing or overt displays of affection. Ari wasn’t sure how he made denying his instincts look so easy, considering it was now clear they had not bonded yet. Ollie always made an effort to include Juno in the conversation as well, despite the discussion revolving around projects and people she wasn’t familiar with.

They seemed extremely well-adjusted. It was sickening, really.

“How’s it been having this one in your class?” Ollie gave Juno’s shoulder a teasing nudge with his.

“Oh, now you’ve made it weird reminding me that I’m having coffee with my *lecturer*.” Juno stuck her tongue out in feigned disgust.

Ollie looked panicked. “Is it against the rules? Have I gotten you in trouble? I’ll dig up those Bali photos and prove we knew each other already.”

“Don’t you dare,” Ari said warningly. “Those photos ought to be deleted off the face of the Earth.”

“Wow, you didn’t like the one of the two of us in the giant swing?”

Juno asked Ollie where she might hypothetically find these photos. Ari pinched the spot between his eyes, heaving a big sigh and Ollie just laughed. “And to answer your previous question, no, I don’t think there’s any rules against me having coffee with a student. We’re both adults after all.”

“Yeah, it’s not like I’d do anything to try and get a better grade.” Juno huffed exasperatedly at how ludicrous that sounded, as if she did not just try to ascertain where to get incriminating photos of him moments earlier.

But also, what *would* that look like — Juno doing anything for a better grade?

Fucking hell, where did *that* thought come from. Ari tried to think of something else to urgently stop his brain from constructing what he knew it was about to construct but failed miserably. A flipped skirt, her soft body bent across his desk, his hand tracing down her shivering spine.

Juno gave him a quick double-take, her breath catching slightly.

Shit, your scent.

“You sticking around for a while or heading back to London after a bit?” Ollie asked without a trace of judgement in his voice, just natural curiosity.

Yeah, that killed the fantasy. A myriad of emotions churned in his gut, as it always did when his old life came up. “Here for the foreseeable future.”

“Ahh.” Ari could feel the unspoken question on the tip of Ollie’s tongue but he simply took a sip instead.

“Just time for a change, I guess,” Ari added lamely.

He was surprised when Juno spoke up. “Change can be good. Even if we think we’re not ready for it.” Her eyes quickly flicked to Ollie and back to his, a small smile now gracing her lips. “I hope it’s the same for you.”

It was penetrating, the way she looked at him. Ari didn’t think she was doing it purposefully, but he somehow knew that the turmoil quashed deep inside him called to her. Even her words were a subdued attempt to soothe him, just like an omega would.

His hackles went up immediately.

He made his excuses shortly afterward and left.

After a twenty minute tram ride, Ari arrived home to his dark apartment. There was no cacophony of voices and laughter, no music or TV playing way too loudly, no one rushing him in telling him dinner would be ready soon.

And that was fine. He had a pack and now he didn't. He'd been in love and it had been ripped from him. Years of brotherhood flushed away, a potential future lost, all because of one volatile omega.

It was much better this way.

JUNO

Juno found herself at the pack house more and more over the next couple of weeks. Weeknight dinners with whoever was around became part of her routine. Everett let her have food off his plate one time and Isaac asked if he was experiencing some sort of mental episode. “Ev never shares his food,” Ollie explained in an awed whisper. Miles, of course, felt the need to test this theory and got a fork imprint in the back of his hand.

Ollie had offered to help her on a photography assignment after class one night, but they lost track of time entirely and Juno ended up crashing on his bed. He’d been the perfect gentleman — one enthusiastic make out session in the morning notwithstanding — and had left Juno slightly off-kilter. When she asked him a couple days later why he didn’t try anything more, the last thing she expected was for his face to go beet red and for him to mumble something about wanting to do something special for their first time. That was a significant problem for her because it only made her want him more.

Miles, however, was more than happy to scratch that itch for her. He took full advantage of betas being allowed to visit the Omega Village to show her new and inventive ways to use her vibrator collection. They’d eaten lunch with Hazel afterward once, who was perfectly polite while giving Juno comedically suggestive smiles and eyebrow waggles whenever Miles wasn’t looking. “Hazel seems nice,” Miles commented afterward as she walked him back to the lobby. “I’m glad you have a friend who’s so supportive of you having sex,” he added with a cheeky grin and Juno wished a localised tsunami would come and just carry her away.

Juno had insisted on a second date with Everett, only for it to be promptly ruined when her period arrived that afternoon and she turned into a cramping

blanket slug. Everett had brought her to the house and told her he wanted to just watch movies on the couch anyway, then proceeded to build what could only be described as a snack moat around her.

She fell asleep in the middle of the extended version of *The Two Towers*, and woke up in Everett's bed where she had left the biggest drool patch imaginable on his pillow. Because apparently leaving her fluids on his things was just something she did now.

He'd slept with his giant body squashed on the couch for her, and she felt guilty all over again. When she told him this, he just replied gruffly, "I like taking care of you."

She didn't even recognise herself sometimes, didn't realise this effervescent hopeful version of herself could exist. Needless to say, her therapist was thrilled. Hazel liked to check in and ask if she'd banged Isaac yet. Apparently "no and I'm not gonna" wasn't an acceptable answer judging by Hazel's aggrieved sigh.

Still, there were some aspects of pack life that she wasn't quite prepared for. Isaac had approached her one evening and asked in a stilted robot voice if she'd be willing to 'discuss next steps'. Because according to the omega cycle tracker he'd downloaded, "your heat will be imminent once your period finishes." She'd let out a banshee-like shriek and launched herself at Everett.

"Did everyone know I was on my period?" Juno beat tiny, useless fists on his wall-like chest.

"No!" Everett bellowed.

"Yes," Miles coughed into his hand.

"But only because we wanted to do nice things for you during it," Ollie added, as if that made it all better. No wonder he sent doughnuts to her after her second 'date' with Everett. Juno did not want to admit it but they came at just the right time and she did not share them with anyone.

Isaac was trying to explain that periods and heats were not a big deal to them considering it was pretty obvious growing up why they were banished from the house every three months or so. He only shut up when Miles gave him a firm elbow to the side.

Despite the unintentionally humiliating way he went about it, Isaac was right. Her first heat since escaping Pack Zhao was coming. The first time she would be vulnerable again to bonds.

The thought made her feel sick.

Also, she had only taken that crucial step with Miles so far. But she was

fairly certain she wanted Ollie too. But Everett...she liked the pace things were going at with him. She didn't want to rush things for the sake of her heat. Would he be offended? Would Isaac be ok with Miles tending to her during her heat, separated from him for so many days?

She also hadn't even begun nesting yet. Where would she even nest? Her room at the Village wasn't an option but hiring a room with heat services didn't appeal to her. She also never really felt safe enough to nest properly in the past. Certainly never sought out items belonging to the brothers to fill her nest with their scents. Would she even know how to or was that fundamental part of herself broken?

Her therapist certainly had her work cut out for her this week.

Once she had worked herself into a sufficient frenzy over how to bring this all up tactfully (turns out Isaac was right to want to discuss it because he was a wizard of the highest order), Ollie and Miles invited her to the house for a surprise.

The two of them led her to a closed door at the end of a corridor, shuffling along with a vibrating sort of nervous energy. Miles went to turn the handle but paused, glancing back at her.

"What is it, Miles? This is where I showered that other night, wasn't it?" Juno asked, her brow furrowing. His lips lifted in a suggestive smile briefly — oh, he was fully aware of which night Juno had showered in that room — before he gave his head a small shake and cleared his throat.

"We know your heat is coming up and we want to be here for you during it." The formality sounded strange coming out of his mouth.

"We?"

Ollie's hand slid around her waist, reassuring and comforting. "Miles and I." His cheeks went pink under his dark freckles. "If you'll have us."

Juno covered his hand with hers, lifting it up to kiss his fingers and tame the trepidation he was feeling. "Heats have always been a scary time in my life," she admitted quietly. She sensed their rising indignation over her past and continued quickly. "But I'm not scared this time. I won't lie, I can't say I'm excited or looking forward to it because of, well you know," she trailed off and felt Ollie grip her tighter. "I'm glad it's you two."

Miles drew close and kissed her lingeringly, his mouth languidly moving over hers. She could feel Ollie against her back, lips feathering over her neck. She couldn't stop herself from imagining them in the same position but naked, trapped between the heat of their bodies and feeling their hard cocks

against her skin. A soft whimper escaped as her scent bloomed between them. Overripe peaches bursting with juice and sugar caramelised till shards, it was growing more and more indulgent closer to her heat.

“As much fun as this is...” Miles’ voice sounded strained as he reluctantly pulled back and Juno did not miss the way he discreetly adjusted himself. “This wasn’t why we brought you here.”

Miles pushed open the door and Ollie guided her inside with his hands on her shoulders. What was previously a guest bedroom with rudimentary furnishings had been completely transformed. A wide mattress now spanned almost the entire floor of the room. It curved upwards at the edges, forming a low wall. One edge rose much higher than the others to form the headboard. Layers of sheer, feather-light curtains formed a canopy above it. Miles flicked a switch near the door, the gossamer fabric glowed with a soft golden light.

A lump formed in Juno’s throat, her eyes stinging with unshed tears. “A nest?” She couldn’t stop her voice from wavering. Not just any nest either. The kind of nest she’d seen other omegas huddled over the latest Nest Emporium house tour video cooing over.

“*Your* nest,” Ollie confirmed, quietly.

A tear escaped, sliding down her cheek. She quickly brushed it away and gave them a tremulous smile. “Happy tears, they’re happy tears, I swear.”

Miles also pointed out the little room next door with just enough space for a desk and a wardrobe. Her wobbly tears turned into a full on blubber. They panicked, trying to comfort her and all she could say was “why is it all so perfect?” over and over.

“You’re still missing some things though,” Ollie said tentatively once she was only hiccuping once every two minutes. He picked up a large wicker basket that had been sitting in the corner. “We’ve put off doing our laundry for the last couple of weeks. Isaac couldn’t stand it but I insisted.”

Miles gave him an amused look. “Insisted?”

“Ok fine, I asked as nicely as I could and explained that it was for you,” Ollie corrected himself, unflapped by Miles’ interruption. “Our sheets, pillows, clothes...well, they’re getting a bit...” He turned to Miles, searching for the right word.

“Aromatic. Pungent. Downright stinky,” Miles supplied magnanimously.

Ollie blinked. “I don’t know if that’s the best way to...well I guess they are. But that means they’re perfect for you. Don’t think I haven’t noticed my

missing T-shirts, by the way.” He winked at her and Juno squeaked and chewed on her fingernails. They made such comfy loungewear for when she had been back at the Village.

He placed the basket in her hands. “You should go steal some more stuff, little thief. Bring back whatever you need to make his nest yours.”

It was an omega’s version of a candy store.

“I can...take anything?” Juno asked, her eyes alight and excitement bubbling in her chest.

“Even Ev and Isaac’s rooms aren’t off limits if you want anything of theirs.”

The reminder of the other pack members cooled her enthusiasm slightly. “They don’t mind not being part of my heat, do they?” Juno asked, not daring to meet Miles and Ollie’s eyes.

“I think Isaac would be mortified if you asked. He knows you guys aren’t like that,” Ollie laughed. Miles said nothing, but there was a flash of something calculating in his expression before it disappeared.

“As for Everett?” Ollie and Miles glanced at each other briefly over her shoulder. “Ev knows your relationship isn’t really in that place yet. That’s what he told us. Did he misread things?”

“No I...I agree. I didn’t want him to feel slighted.”

“We’re here for *you* during your heat. If anyone feels entitled to be with you during such a vulnerable time then they don’t deserve to be there,” Ollie insisted with uncharacteristic fierceness.

Miles stroked her cheek with his thumb. “And Isaac just wants you cared for. They’ll both help out in other ways.”

“Food, any life admin things on our behalf while we’re occupied,” Ollie explained. “But mostly keep their distance,” he went on to assure her quickly.

Miles spun her around and gave her a playful swat on the bum. “So go snoop and steal to your heart’s content, beautiful.”

With an undeniable skip in her step, Juno left her beautiful unfinished nest behind. She arrived at Ollie’s room first. Organised chaos was the best way to describe it. He insisted he knew exactly where everything was but also took a good twenty minutes to find matching socks. His unmade bed was a siren song for her. Some omegas liked clothes for their nest but that wasn’t really Juno’s style. Clothes were for stealing and wearing, not fucking on top of.

His slightly lumpy pillows were immediately stuffed in the basket, along

with his quilt. Juno pursed her lips at the already full basket, realising she would need to take several trips. Ollie's softest, most threadbare T-shirt found its way into a crevice and she pottered back to the nest to dump her windfall.

Miles was next. She was pleasantly surprised to find his subtle beta scent lingered on his bedding despite spending most nights in Isaac's room. "I napped and lay in bed like a sloth watching TV for you," Miles explained later with the most sombre, altruistic expression on his face. She claimed a pillow and stripped his sheets for good measure. Juno thumbed through his wardrobe until she found the oversized jumper he wore on their first date.

Maybe she'd wear it for him someday with no pants on.

Even though she had permission, crossing the threshold into Everett's room felt strange. His scent filled the neat and orderly space, bitingly fresh and wonderfully wild. Juno gasped at the sight of his curved U-shaped pillow — she had to have it, it was in the basket, it was hers forever. She found a muscle tee he must have used as a gym shirt because the amount of his scent on it was absolutely potent. Into the basket it went, because she was a gross omega who liked sweaty clothes.

Isaac's room made her tipsy. His rum mingled with Miles' fainter sangria evoking dark corners, flashing lights and helpless giggles. Her thieving fingers itched. Would it be weird to take Isaac's things for her heat?

"Oh! I'm sorry, I can come back."

Juno turned, eyes round like a deer in headlights as Isaac appeared at the door. He was doing a strange shuffling motion like he didn't know if he was coming or going.

She babbled apologetically. "No, I'm sorry. I mean it's your room and everything, I'm just—"

"It's completely fine. Miles told me what you were doing tonight. It's my fault." He was alternating between talking to the space directly above her head and the wall closest to him. "He asked me to get...well it doesn't matter, but it just completely slipped my mind. Take whatever you want."

"It's ok, I don't need—"

"Juno." His low warning growl sent shivers through her. Pleasurable ones, like getting a back scratch or having your head rubbed.

She grabbed a cotton T-shirt that had been slung over the armchair.

"I wore that to bed with Miles this week. Good choice. It smells like him." Isaac cleared his throat, shifting his weight to his other foot.

Juno couldn't help herself. She brought the shirt up to her nose and inhaled. *Drunken licking kisses, then the whipping sound of a leather belt roughly undone and pulled out from its loops, clattering to the floor.* She couldn't stop herself imagining Isaac pressing Miles against the wall, hands held captive above his head. The heady mix of the two of them lit up every dopamine synapse in her brain.

"Thanks." She squashed it in her basket, hoping her voice didn't sound too strained.

As he was leaving, Isaac held up the object he'd come in to retrieve. The disc case for an extremely gory fighting game. His ears turned a deep burgundy and Juno realised with concealed delight that this was how he showed embarrassment. "He never wants to play with me. Says he has no interest in watching his character have his spine removed. But he asked tonight for some reason," Isaac explained sheepishly.

"I'll play with you sometime," Juno found herself saying. "My parents never let me play video games but sometimes my brother Ben would let me when they were out or had gone to bed."

If he was surprised, he didn't show it. He simply nodded before a steely glint appeared in his eyes. "Prepare to have your ass kicked then."

Juno let out an indignant gasp. "*You* prepare to have your ass kicked!" she yelled after him as he disappeared out the door, his booming laughter echoing in the hall.

She spent a good twenty minutes arranging everything *just so* in her nest. Most of the pilfered clothes were folded neatly in her overnight bag to take home. Although for some reason she needed Isaac's shirt slid into a pillow between the case and cushion.

Juno was basking in the soft cocoon of her newly built nest when she saw a shadow against the canopy fabric.

"Can I come into your nest, omega?" Ollie's polite voice filtered through.

Her instincts crowed, eager for this beautiful alpha to complete her nest. She opened the curtain and pulled him in, her arms circling his neck as she greeted him with a fierce kiss.

"Was this the something special you were waiting for?" Juno murmured

against his lips. He nodded, kissing her harder, their breaths mingling.

“I have something for you.” Ollie’s voice dropped as his arms wound around her waist to pull her closer.

“Something more than this nest?” Juno asked, gesturing at her lavish surroundings.

“No, I mean, yes.” He looked flustered and slightly confused. “Yes, I have something for you. It starts with a k.” There was an awkward silence as he considered something. “But it sounds like it starts with an n.”

Juno stared at him blankly. A beat passed as his meaning registered. “Are you trying to say you have a knot for me?” she asked incredulously.

Ollie looked miserable. “I thought I could do dirty talk but I don’t think I can,” he said mournfully. “Can’t believe I’ve messed this up already.” He released her and tried to stick his head under the pile of bedding like an ashamed ostrich. Juno tried valiantly to stop him while holding back a giggle fit.

“I don’t need dirty talk, Ollie.” Juno was trying to make eye contact with him behind a pillow he’d held up as a final line of defence. “Just you.” She moved it aside so she could kiss him. It was a very serious, heart-thumping kind of kiss, accompanied by a soothing hand cupped under his freckled cheek. *I like you just the way you are*, she said without words. He deepened it, closing the space between their bodies as his tongue sought hers. Juno felt him hardening against her and an involuntary whine escaped. With a desperate groan, he tore off his glasses as his kisses grew more filthy, his hands starting to stroke her brazenly as Juno lost her mind entirely.

She wanted him and she couldn’t believe that she could just *have* him. If she wanted to feel the coarse texture of his hair under her fingers, she could. If she wanted to entwine her tongue with his, she could. And he rewarded her with the most eager noises she couldn’t get enough of.

They fell into the nest in a messy heap, her world narrowing entirely down to the hot press of his weight on top of her and the promise of one mischievous wandering hand sliding up her thigh. As he moved upward, the hem of her dress followed, up and over her head before his mouth found hers again. She mirrored his movements with his shirt before her fingers wandered down his chest, admiring the firm muscles beneath. He seemed slightly embarrassed when she reached the slight softness around his belly button that contrasted with his wiry frame. So she bent down to kiss him there several times. *I like you just the way you are. I like you just the way you are.*

Her bra was off now and this time it was her turn to feel self conscious. Miles didn't seem to mind her small breasts but how did Ollie feel? One glance at his face melted all apprehension. She caught a slightly feral tinge to his expression, before he unleashed himself.

"There's really not much there," she gasped after a particularly vulgar lick of his tongue along the curve of her breast. There was a beat of stillness as he stared at her, before he slowly, intentionally lowered his head back down and sucked the tip of her nipple into his mouth without breaking eye contact. It was too much — his black eyes, his richly roasted scent rising — the sensation shot down her belly straight to her aching centre and a fresh burst of slick soaked her panties.

"I think they're perfect." His voice was low and husky and *fuck*, that alone managed to turn her on another notch.

Ollie kissed his way to where her panties sat low on her hips, his hands caressing her thigh in gentle circles. The span of his hand felt huge as he palmed her inner thigh, pushing her legs open wider. He took one look at the almost transparent, slick drenched cotton and swore, his entire body tensing.

"Oh, fuck." He sounded like he was in pain. "Let me, let me just—"

Juno's breath caught in her throat as Ollie dove in, his hot mouth sucking the slick straight from her panties. She could feel him laving the edge of the fabric with his tongue, sliding beneath to taste her. The gusset was bunched up now, a torturous friction against her clit as he licked along her now exposed pussy lips. It wasn't enough yet it was everything, her hips rising up to press herself harder against him without realising. She was so fucking wet, a carnal mix of her slick and his saliva. She could feel it on her thighs, pooling between her ass cheeks.

Ollie enclosed her clit in the heat of his mouth and his tongue circled it once, twice, three times and she was done. "Keep going," she begged him, fisting the sheets as the trembling started to take over. "Please. Please please please."

Those maddening circles continued, no matter how much her body flailed and arched, never faltering, giving, giving, giving until she couldn't take anymore. He was her lifeline as she lost herself to the pleasure.

JUNO

Things were hazy as she came down from her high. Was he...pulling her ruined underwear down her legs with his teeth?

“I thought this would be sexier,” he admitted ruefully. Juno noticed his hair was even more tousled and unkempt than usual. She had vague memories of gripping it to get better leverage to fuck his face.

“What’s that?” she managed to croak out. Oblivious to how turned on she still was, Ollie pulled the drenched scrap down and off her legs. “I thought doing it with my teeth would be hot, but it took a long time and after a while I wasn’t near any fun bits anymore.” He gave her knee a cursory pat. “Not that I don’t like this,” he added hastily.

Did he just try to reassure her that he liked her *knee*?

There was only one body part Juno wanted right now and it sure as shit wasn’t on her.

She advanced on Ollie slowly like a lioness stalking her prey, her ferocious gaze unwavering. He released a startled yelp, falling back onto the mattress as she pounced, pulling down the waistband of his boxers to release her prize. She didn’t even take a good look at it before she swallowed it down, savouring the weight of him on her tongue. The way the head pressed deep in her throat and the taste of him; salty and deliciously male mixed with his nutty coffee scent. *Fuck, so good.* Her tongue began to trace the veins along his shaft while still keeping his cock lodged firmly in her mouth, her lips pressed against his bulging knot. She lifted her head up, admiring the way his cock glistened with her spit before sinking back down again.

Juno was dimly aware of the thrashing, swearing alpha beneath her but she was laser focused and enjoying herself far too much to take notice of

what he was saying. Something about it being too good. She didn't really care that he was warning her he was going to come soon, she wanted it. Wanted to taste it, consume it, *own* it.

“Shit, I'm coming already. Fuck. Fuck! Juno, I—”

Her hand came up, wrapping around him. She pumped his cum onto her tongue so she could taste him, moaning as she felt the excess run out the corner of her mouth. Juno traced the stray trickle with her finger before popping it in her mouth and sucking it clean. He watched her the entire time, breathing hard.

She made a few more lazy loose movements up and down his length before stilling. “You're still hard,” she noted appreciatively.

He was very still except for his chest, which rose and fell, the sheen of sweat across it catching the dim light. “Did you think I was done with you?”

Ollie pulled her in for a kiss, unbothered by his flavour on her tongue as they enjoyed the sinful glide of their naked bodies together. The tip of his cock rolled against her slippery entrance. Once, twice. She bit her lip and nodded at his final questioning glance and then he was sliding inside her. Slow and calculated, letting her feel every hard inch of him as he filled her.

“God I—” He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to hers. “I love fucking you. You feel...You're so...I'm—”

“Shh.” Juno kissed his sweet stumbling words away. He began to move and she was soon utterly at the mercy of his long, deliberate thrusts.

Ollie covered her hand in his, guiding them both down. “Show me how you like to be touched,” he urged her, pressing her fingers against her clit. With a small whimper, Juno began to rub her clit, feeling how swollen it was. A few more touches and then he took over, mimicking her movements and matching the pressure while he continued to fuck her. “You let me know when I hit the right spot.” He drove into her relentlessly. Harder. Deeper. The wet sound of their fucking filled the nest. A slight tilt and the angle changed and Juno cried out. “Fuck. *There*. It's so good, it's so fucking good. Holy shit,” she sobbed.

“Wanna learn everything about your body,” he said roughly. She couldn't handle it. His clever hands, his eager words punctuated by masculine grunts of effort into her ear, his absolute magnificent cock fucking her goddamn brains out. “I'll happily study it every morning, every night, whenever you want.” Fuck, she wanted that too. She was literally being fucked by him and was already thinking about when he could fuck her again. “Until I know

every way to make. You. Co—”

She couldn't stop herself from coming. The barrage of sensations — his scent, his touch, his words — culminated in a surging wave of ecstasy emanating from her core out through her entire body. His driving thrusts were growing harder and more frenzied as his knot pressed urgently against her opening. With her slick easing the way, it would be so easy to take him.

“Can I knot you?” The desperation in his voice was aching. “I've never... I haven't—”

“I'll die if you don't, Ollie,” Juno begged. “Knot me. Now. Now.”

With a guttural moan, his knot pushed in past her pussy lips, locking in that throbbing empty spot inside her. It set off another orgasm on the tail end of the last one, her inner walls pulsing around him, demanding his release.

“Oh Jesus fuck. Your pussy it's, it's...” His words devolved into a mix of curses and a low, animalistic growl. She could feel him coming inside her and she relished it, knowing his expanding knot was keeping his seed trapped. It would all come gushing back out of her afterward in a hot rush. Juno shuddered beneath him, unable to do anything but be filled by him over and over. It was everything. *It was everything.* Her inner omega was utterly sated.

Ollie carefully turned them so he could hold her while they were still locked together. Juno felt a low rumble against her chest and a soft puff of air against her ear.

“You're purring,” she said wondrously, tracing the little constellation-like freckles dotting his arm.

The beautiful, mellow sound stuttered slightly. “Oh, I didn't even realise I was doing it.”

Juno squeezed his arm around her waist even tighter. “Keep going,” she whispered, feeling instantly content when he started back up again.

She had no idea sex with an alpha could be like this. Cautious, desperate, endearingly awkward, and filled with adoration. Juno didn't have the most experience but she just had a feeling this was special. This was theirs.

Lulled by the soothing resonance of his purr, she knew she didn't just want him for her heat. She needed him.

“I’m moving out of the Omega Village.”

Unfortunately for Juno, Hazel chose that moment to stuff a huge piece of bok choy in her mouth. Her eyes widened in surprise, teared up suddenly with happiness and then crinkled with frustration as chewing was taking way too long.

“You’re packing up.” She could see Hazel’s pride through the rising steam of their hotpot.

“I am.”

It was becoming more and more apparent that the Rivera-Gunnarsson pack house was becoming home. No matter how many items of clothing she stole from her way-too-understanding suitors, it never made her room at the Village smell or feel right anymore. Shuttling herself between the two was becoming a nuisance. Her stays grew longer each time as her reluctance to leave magnified. She could feel herself outgrowing the walls of her little apartment, chafing and digging into her like an ill-fitting garment.

On the third straight night she had stayed that week, she lay curled up with Miles in her nest. He held her tight and murmured almost imperceptibly against her hair.

“I think you should move in.”

She argued and he kept his cool, deftly lobbing her increasingly irrational arguments back to her because he knew she was just scared.

“Well, you shouldn’t be going over Isaac’s head like this. He’s the prime alpha!” Juno finally blustered.

“Who do you think told me to ask you?”

Then he kissed her and there was no more quarrelling that night.

It was hard, leaving the home she had cocooned herself in for the last three years after her ordeal. But it made sense. Her heat was imminent and though there was part of her still reluctant to say she was pack, it felt like a slow, inevitable conclusion.

“Shit, well...” Hazel clicked her tongue as she added a few seafood balls to the spicy half of their hotpot. “I guess this is the best time to tell you that I’m moving out too.”

Juno’s chest tightened with panic. Had she been such a shitty best friend she didn’t even notice that Hazel had found a pack? “What? Did you, have you—”

“Oh, no no. I haven’t, I’m not, shit Juno relax, you’re stressing me out with those pheromones.” She batted the air with a waving motion as she let

out a guilty laugh. “I guess I should’ve explained better. I bought an apartment. I gotta be honest with you, Junie, it’s fucking nice. Very safe, so don’t worry about that. Has a cute security boy manning the lobby desk and everything. I mean, I don’t want to look at the negative balance on my account now thanks to my mortgage but it’s all mine.”

Juno’s chopsticks clattered onto the table. “When did you buy an apartment? What the hell!”

“Oh um, six months ago? All that OmegaFans money had to go somewhere right.” Hazel’s casual shrug seemed so flippant compared to the size of the bombshell she had dropped.

“Six months!”

“It’s being rented out right now — just month to month. I’ll give them notice to vacate so I can move in.”

“Why would you rent out an apartment you just bought? Also, did you just say you will give them notice to vacate?” Juno’s eyes narrowed as realisation sunk in. “Were you staying at the Village...for me?” How much of a fuck-up had she been that Hazel felt the need to babysit her?

Hazel surprised her. She didn’t look ashamed or caught out. Instead there was pain in those soulful brown eyes, layers upon layers of it. Her voice was uncharacteristically reserved when she spoke next.

“Juno, you’ve been my friend from the very beginning. You know why I joined the trials and you never judged me or hated me for it. This?” She gestured between the two of them with her finger. “Has kept me sane this whole time. So no, I haven’t been staying here for you. I’ve been staying here for *me*.”

Juno made her way to Hazel’s side of the table and pulled her into a tight hug, trying not to snot and cry all over her shoulder. “You know you have nothing to feel guilty about, right? With your past?”

“Maybe I’ll believe you one day,” she replied, ruefully. “By the way, we can still have hotpot when you’re living up the pack life and shit right?”

“You shut your mouth, Hazel Wu. You’ll be having hotpot dates with me until we die.”

A beat of silence passed before Hazel spoke, her voice muffled in Juno’s hair. “And pho as well, right? And ramen?”

She let out a little snort of laughter. “Yes Hazel. Consider me booked for dates to eat yummy things in soup for eternity.”

“Perfect.”

JUNO

Juno moved in that week. But not before having a supremely awkward conversation with Isaac (they seemed to be getting into a habit of having those) that was essentially a version of ‘defining the relationship’. Yes, she was their omega. No, she didn’t want to bond. Yes, that was ok with them, it was still early days after all. No, it wasn’t unreasonable to check in on the matter again in the future.

They walked a precarious tightrope of no longer courting, but nowhere near ready for a lifetime commitment of a bond. If it were a beta relationship, it was like Juno was their girlfriend. Thinking of Miles and Ollie as her boyfriends gave her teenage self the giggles. But giving Isaac the title of ‘boyfriend’ sounded insane. Like putting a tutu on a lion.

He tentatively broached the subject of their pack name — Isaac had always intended to take the name of his omega, but carrying the family name of the people who had sold Juno did not sit right with him. “Makes me want to levy all my considerable resources into crushing them into dust,” he’d said, flatly. Touched by the gesture and a little aroused (*platonically obviously*) by his casual murder-y attitude, Juno agreed and their pack name was also tabled as a future discussion topic.

When the silence stretched a bit too long after they finished going through everything, Juno for some reason decided to end the conversation with a little curtsy, before letting out a tiny scream of mortification and promptly running away. Isaac thankfully never brought it up and did not seem to have told anyone else about it.

And that’s how she joined Pack Rivera-Gunnarsson.

When she pictured domestic life in the pack house, she did not foresee going toe to toe with Everett while he looked like cartoon smoke should be dissipating from his ears.

Over *cookies*.

“I don’t get what the problem is!” Juno stuck a finger into the batter and scooped up a little dollop and popped it in her mouth. “Tastes pretty good to me.”

The cartoon smoke was now accompanied by lightning bolts around his head. “Don’t eat raw egg!” Everett shouted like she was on the verge of ingesting cyanide. Juno gave him an appraising look before purposefully licking another fingertip of batter. She pretended to faint dead away. Everett caught her, swearing profusely, before she even had time to brace herself on the counter on the way down.

“I wasn’t really dying, you know.”

Juno didn’t think Everett’s jaw could get any stonier as he set her back down. “I know.”

“And I think the cookies will be fine with the extra butter and caster sugar. And who doesn’t love double the amount of chocolate chips? I’m sure the recipe in your amazing book is excellent too, but I was just having a bit of fun in the kitchen. That’s ok, right?”

Everett glanced at his worn binder stuffed with recipes he’d collected over the years. When Juno got a sudden hankering for choc chip cookies (a sure sign her heat was around the corner), he whipped it out, stating he had the perfect recipe. He went slightly green when she offered to help and then the aforementioned smoke appeared when she started making changes.

He sighed, shoulders slumped in defeat. “Yes, it’s ok. Now let’s get these on a tray and in the oven.”

Juno could tell he was fighting the urge to tell her off as she leaned on the countertop, poking at the still lava-like cookies on their trays.

“You have to let them sit on the tray to set,” he bit out, unable to take her prodding any longer.

“Don’t you think this exploded bit of chocolate chip looks so gooey and delicious?” Juno couldn’t stand it any longer, and broke off the corner ignoring Everett’s indignant objection. She juggled it between her hands and then against her better judgement, popped it in her mouth. The cookie itself

was scorching but the melted chocolate chips bursting was armageddon.

Everett watched her the entire time smugly. “Too hot?”

“Perfect, actually. Might have another.” Juno stuck her tongue out her mouth to let it cool faster and pointed her chin at the fridge. “On an unrelated note, does that dispense ice?” she asked, lisping slightly.

He fetched her some, sticking it in her mouth with the most disapproving expression imaginable. His displeasure increased exponentially later on when he tried one of the modified cookies and enjoyed it immensely.

Hot. She was intensely hot. Pounding in her ears, a thick and viscous drumbeat as her pulse raced. Feeling swollen within her own body, skin pulled too tight. There was wetness between her thighs but it offered no relief. The ache only exacerbated as her cunt clenched around nothing. At least she was safe — surrounded with familiar, comforting scents and soft, plush textures — but it wasn’t enough. She thrust out her hand, searching and seeking for what she needed.

Skin. A chest slowly rising and falling. The edge of a jaw, soft lips, a broad nose. Fingers tangling in long, curly strands. Juno pressed her nose into his neck, her breasts against his arm, her leg thrown over his. The smell of freshly brewed coffee and buttery rich macadamias.

Alpha.

A whimper slipped from her lips and she felt him stir. His hand stroked down her back and cupped her ass before giving it a firm squeeze. She shuddered as she felt fresh slick dripping down her inner thigh.

“What time is it?” His sleep-roughened voice only heated her blood more. “Oh shit. You’re, you’re in—”

He was definitely awake now, pupils widening as he inhaled. Heat pheromones pumped through her scent, stirring his rutting instincts. His hand curled around her cheek and she groaned, leaning into his touch. “I’ll go get Miles. We’ll take care of you, Juno.”

Go? This alpha wasn’t leaving. Juno crushed her lips to his. She had to get him to stay, had to show him how much she needed him. She circled his wrist and guided his hand down, along the hammering pulse point in her neck, past the pointed dark nipples of the breasts, down the smooth skin of

her stomach until his fingers brushed her soaking slit. There. See? There was no way he could leave. Juno was pleased to hear him cursing (that meant he understood, right?), and when she felt two fingers slide into her tight channel she cried out, rolling her hips against his hand.

“So wet. So fucking wet. Jesus Christ.”

“Alpha.” Juno stared at him with glassy eyes. “Need you.”

That’s all it took to unleash him. Three desperate little words from an omega in heat to trigger her alpha’s rut. Her leg was hiked up over his hip, his fingers left her pussy to quickly rub her slick over his engorged tip before he buried his entire length in her. He was a shot of espresso thrown back, every vein in her body a live-wire. He bore down on her with a snarl, rolling her onto her back as his hands gripped her ass, spreading her as he fucked her on his cock. Each rough pull of his hands drove his length deep into her slick-soaked pussy, reaching parts inside her that made her scream uncontrollably.

“Knot,” she whimpered between cries elicited by every filthy thrust.

“Not yet. Not until you’re just about to come.” His eyes were wild, a primal force burning behind them.

The need to please this alpha fucking her was overwhelming. She could feel her orgasm rising and rising. She teetered on the brink of something wonderful, painful and frightening all at once and when his knot finally slid into her stretched heated cunt, she fell. Each pulse of her pussy squeezed his knot, sending a fresh burst of cum deep inside her, heightening her pleasure over and over in an endless loop. She didn’t know how long she lay there, shaking and holding him as he soothed the fire that raged within her.

“Ollie.” She didn’t recognise the hoarse voice repeating his name over and over.

“I’ve got you, sweet girl. I’ve got you.”

It had never been like this, the brief moments of clarity she experienced during her heat. It had always been regretful, humiliating and deeply painful while she waited for oblivion to take her again. To feel safe and cherished was so devastating that Juno could not stop herself from breaking down and sobbing, her heavy emotions bursting the dam of her control.

Ollie didn’t baulk or panic, so attuned to her already that he understood what she needed without words. He just kissed her and kissed her and kissed her until her tears finally dried.

“Gorgeous. Try and have a spoonful of this.”

A nostalgic, homey smell wafted under her nose. Soy sauce. Rice. Broth. Juno’s eyes popped open, greeted by Miles holding a bowl of congee. There were also large slices of chicken poking out of the gelatinous porridge and it had even been garnished with spring onion.

“Everett made it. He got the recipe from Isaac’s Ba, who swears by it for their Nanay’s heat. Ev hoped it would be something you’d be eager enough to leave your nest for. Wasn’t pleased to hear his sandwiches didn’t cut it. I told him it was probably because you were at the peak of your heat and food wasn’t what you wanted in your mouth.” Ignoring Juno’s flaming cheeks, Miles tipped his head over at his own empty bowl. “It’s pretty good. It’s exactly the sort of thing we all need after the last couple days we’ve had.”

She tentatively inched her way out of her nest where Ollie was currently getting a well deserved nap in. Juno couldn’t resist brushing the alpha’s hair back off his tired face, her heart skipping when his lips curved up slightly in an involuntary smile. She wrapped herself in a blanket and let Miles guide the heaped spoon into her mouth.

Her face lit up. “It’s great!” Great depth of flavour, seasoned perfectly. She was impressed. “It’s probably ’cause Everett followed the recipe exactly.” Miles laughed in agreement, offering her the bowl and spoon which she took eagerly.

She ate slowly, not wanting to upset her empty stomach, while Miles offered her a variety of drinks. A thick pink smoothie, a murky looking green juice, a million varieties of tea. She turned down all of them in favour of water, much to his consternation. She was probably past the peak of her heat now, judging by this longer period of lucidity, but she wasn’t out of the woods yet. Maybe another day, day and a half to go.

“Now there was something I wanted to run by you, beautiful.” He took her now empty bowl out of her hands so he could hold them, his other hand running up and down her arm comfortingly. “We obviously spoke before your heat about what you were comfortable with and I know you didn’t want any anal. Which we completely understand and respect.”

Juno didn’t know how he did it, there wasn’t a trace of embarrassment or hesitation in his voice. Ahh, to be able to bring up anal in conversation with a straight face. Meanwhile, she was sitting there either having an aneurysm or hoping she would have one. Miles continued on, unaware of her slow internal descent into death.

“But when you’ve been deep in it, you’ve been wanting it. Begging for it. Hurts to see you upset when we deny you but we would never do anything without your consent, I hope you know that.”

She could only manage a stiff nod, taking in all this new, humiliating information.

“I do have a workaround if you’re open to it.” Miles reached into a little silk bag and pulled out a purple silicone buttplug. “Don’t worry, it’s brand new and washed and everything,” he added quickly, as if that was the main thing Juno was flagellating herself over. She tried not to think too hard about who would have run that particular errand for them. “Yes? You don’t have to, of course, it’s just a—”

“Yes,” she whispered, cutting him off. “Yes.” It was suddenly imperative to smooth every visible crease down her blanket. “Just so my mortification is complete, has there, uh, been anything else that I’ve been begging for?”

Miles unravelled the blanket and pulled her into his lap, their naked bodies fitting together. Their mouths met in a sultry kiss and she could feel her temperature rising again. There was a hint of rum on his tongue, and the smell of worn, velvety soft leather clung to him — *Isaac*. Clearly the prime alpha had been looking out for his beta during her heat. Her scent perfumed, responding to the dominant pheromones clinging to him. Sweet and boozy, a perfect sensual cocktail. His lips kissed down her jaw, one hand tilting her chin up so he could lick and nip the hollow of her neck.

“You’ve asked for bites.”

She froze at the implication. *No, not bonds. Not again.* Then guilt, because neither Miles or Ollie deserved her fear. Miles linked his fingers with hers and gave her a reassuring squeeze. “We’ve been giving you a lot of hickeys, those seem to help.”

Her hands flew to the side of her neck that Miles wasn’t kissing, gingerly feeling the tender but unbroken skin. *You’re safe. You’re safe with them.* His cock was hardening against her inner thigh and her heat fuelled brain began to take over. Just a slight manoeuvre and she could have him inside her. She could feel herself getting wet at the thought.

“And don’t be embarrassed. Never be embarrassed.” Both their hips were now moving slightly, creating a torturous teasing friction. A candle flame when she wanted a bonfire. “You’re perfect like this.” He lightly pinched her pink cheeks. “You’re perfect for us.” Miles reached between them and angled his cock downwards, pushing only the tip into her heat for the briefest

moment before he ignited her with his next words. “My dick has never been harder in my *life*.”

“Nest,” she managed to choke out. “Fuck me in my nest, *now*.”

He didn’t tease her thankfully, understanding the crest of a new heat spell was not the time for it. She could feel his chest against her burning back, her leg hooked over his arm holding her open as he fucked her with short, pounding strokes. Miles had a knotted sleeve fitted over the base of his cock — a surprise he had sprung on her when he eventually discovered Ollie and Juno in her nest that first morning when neither came down to breakfast. It didn’t quench the burning need like Ollie’s alpha knot did, but it was enough so Ollie could recuperate and recharge before she needed him again. Miles’ designation did come up briefly during her heat discussion. It went something along the lines of:

“Are you sure that as a beta I can...”

“Give me lots of orgasms during my heat? Yeah, I’m pretty sure.”

Then they conducted more research confirming her hypothesis.

The silicone knot pressed against her opening now with each hedonistic drag of his cock inside her, as she pulled his face down to hers for a biting kiss.

Ollie would get quite a show once he woke up. It was fine, not like it hadn’t already occurred at least five times before during this heat, or that he hadn’t reciprocated the favour himself to Miles.

His fingers were lightly exploring, swirling around her clit, tracing the lips of her pussy as they stretched around him. He dipped down further, pressing against her back entrance with slick-covered fingers. Desperate for more, she flattened her front to the mattress as he braced his hands on her waist and drove into her even harder. Fuelled only by her instincts, she popped her ass higher into the air and was rewarded with a groan, his hands sliding down and grasping her cheeks. His thumb circled her ass, pushing in ever so slightly as she buried her face into the nest with a ragged whimper.

“I’m going to stretch you out and fill your ass. You’re going to feel so fucking good,” he said encouragingly as his finger eased deeper. “How does that sound, beautiful?”

Juno looked back at him, her eyes hooded with desire. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Then I’ll feed you my cock and Ollie can knot this needy pussy of yours at the same time,” Miles panted, staring over her head.

Ollie definitely wasn't asleep anymore, leaning languidly against the wall of the nest with his hard cock in his fist. His fingers curled around the engorged knot at the base, giving it a squeeze that made his whole body tense before releasing it with a whoosh of his breath. The two of them had been taking it in turns to sate her so far but right now?

Juno wanted them both.

"I think she likes that idea a lot." Miles groaned as her pussy clenched around him, a shiver of need running through her.

Juno reached her arm out and Ollie immediately drew closer, letting her pull his head down for a slow, savouring kiss. She felt bereft momentarily when Miles pulled out but Ollie swallowed her gasp as she felt the plug push into her slippery cunt. He was spinning it slowly, coating it in her slick before he withdrew. Juno almost came when she heard Miles spit and then felt his saliva on her sphincter a moment later. It had *no right* being that hot. He began to work the plug gently past her ring of muscle to stretch her slowly, eased by their combined wetness.

"You're doing so good," Ollie purred, stroking her sweat-lined brow. He looked up at Miles. "Isn't she?"

Miles pushed the final widest part of the plug in and she shuddered, letting out a low moan as she felt it pop into place. Their hands were all over her, soothing and worshipping. "Such a good girl," Miles whispered, kissing the dip of her spine.

"More," she begged as she fisted the sheets. "*More.*"

She was dimly aware of them trading places, their caressing touches never leaving her as she soaked in their murmured praise. Her chin was gently lifted and she stared into Miles' hazel eyes, blazing with desire. He coaxed her lips open with the head of his cock and she swirled her tongue around the tip, tasting her own peachy slick as she watched his strained reaction. Eager to see him fall apart, she took him in her mouth, ready to slowly swallow him down. Ollie suddenly drove into her hard from behind. Her body lurched forward and Miles slid deep down her throat. *Full*. She was so blissfully full. From the weight of the alpha's knot slapping against her with each thrust, the added tightness from the plug in her ass to the heft of the beta's hard length on her tongue; she was helpless between them.

"There we go." Miles was stroking her cheek as she gagged slightly on his cock, her nose hitting the coarse hair at the base. "Look at you taking us both."

That's all it took for her to come. She was in free-fall, utterly weightless as they continued fucking her through her orgasm from both ends. Her inner walls tightened, desperate for a knot and Ollie gave her nipples a gentle pluck, assuring her she would get one soon.

"Where do you want my cum?" Juno could tell Miles was close from his jerky movements and feverish stare. She pulled him from her mouth, and he took over, squeezing the tip firmly to try and last.

"On my tits." She leaned back and Ollie helpfully wrapped a strong arm around her waist, bracing her. Miles' eyes darted down to where her breasts bounced from Ollie's steady rhythm. "Want to be covered in your scent."

"*Fuck!*" Warm jets of cum hit her neck and chest and an exhilarated thrill ran through her. She let out a satisfied little hum and licked the over-sensitised tip clean, savouring the taste of him. He sank down onto his heels, breathing hard as he stared at his handiwork dripping obscenely off her pebbled nipples. His cock gave a little twitch. Miles looked down at it and then back at her. "Witchy little omega. How my cock is still working after all that I'll never know."

Ollie let out a low laugh. "She *is* a witchy little omega. Lost count of how many times I've knotted her but I still can't get enough." He shoved forward and she mewled as her opening began to distend around his knot. There was enormous pressure as he filled her, thumbing the base of the plug at the same time pressing it deeper into her ass. They both groaned as his knot locked and he exploded inside her, setting off another wave of pleasure radiating out from her core all the way to the tips of her fingers. Juno collapsed on the nest, uncaring of Miles' cum smearing on her skin and sheets, her entire body tingling.

Their care and adoration never let up as she surrendered to their gentle ministrations, bringing her back down to earth.

ISAAC

“Finish the whole bottle. You need to keep your fluids up,” Isaac ordered Miles sternly. His tone was at odds with the way his fingers carefully threaded through the beta’s hair. It was damp with perspiration and Juno’s thick heat sweetened scent coated him. Isaac did his best to breathe shallowly, fighting the urge to shove him down on the nearest surface and lick the luscious sugar-laced cream off his skin. *Just pheromones*, he told himself. *Don’t let it go to your head.*

Too exhausted to argue, Miles tipped his head back and drank deeply before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Isaac noted the dark circles that had formed under his eyes with concern. Miles and Ollie were doing an admirable job of tending to Juno but he hoped Everett would be able to help with the next heat to take some of the pressure off his bonded.

“She’s near the end of it now, love,” Miles offered assuringly, sensing Isaac’s worry. “Sleeping for much longer stints than before.” He gave Isaac a sidelong glance. “You know there’s *fun* aspects of all this that make the tiredness worth it, right?”

It wasn’t that he *didn’t* want to think about the fun aspects, he just felt he *shouldn’t* be imagining all the ways Miles had been wringing pleasure from Juno. Or what *activities* might have led to Juno’s juicy scent clinging so strongly to his face, chest and Isaac was certain if he shoved Miles’ boxers down, all over his—

Isaac stuffed his hand in his pocket to hide the way his fingers clenched up. “I need to go catch my flight. Everett will be around if you need anything.” He gave his shirt sleeve an unnecessary adjustment. “And how is Ollie? I’ve barely seen him since this started.”

Miles waved a dismissive hand. “He’s fine. He’s in his own version of la-la land, trust me.” Isaac supposed that must have been true with what he knew about alpha ruts. Luckily he didn’t have to worry about that.

Holding his breath, he pressed a chaste kiss to Miles’ forehead. “I love you. I’ll be back later tonight.”

“Short trip,” Miles commented, with a raised brow.

Isaac pushed a loaded plate of noodles towards Miles before he turned to leave. “Just a meeting that needed to be in person.”

It hadn’t taken long to find him. Isaac’s go-to private investigator was expensive for a reason. The additional time had been spent poring over the files, assessing whether there was any potential threat in making contact. In a rare decision, he did not bring it up for discussion with the others, taking it upon himself as the prime alpha to make a logical, informed decision unswayed by emotion.

Isaac stepped into the restaurant, purposefully chosen for its intimate seating and discreet staff. He had the meeting timed for the lull between lunch and dinner to minimise bystanders. His eyes immediately found his dining companion.

Julian Tsai.

Twenty-five, with a Bachelor of Information Technology and residing in a sharehouse. Kept a mundane routine of gym, work and a social life with a group that mostly consisted of other graduates from his course. Estranged from his family and had no romantic relationships that warranted a social media mention. He did have accounts on dating apps notorious for hook-ups, though they did not seem to get used during the time Isaac was having him tailed.

Oh, and he was once the employee of prime alpha Andrew, convicted-of-manslaughter Eric, and the deceased Vincent Zhao.

Juno’s former pack.

He had also been with his current company since he graduated and Isaac had hoped the lure of greener pastures would give him an in. It worked.

“Julian?” Isaac asked like he had not just refreshed himself on the beta’s entire life story on the plane. He came to a stop next to the table where Julian

sat waiting nervously.

“Isaac, hi.” Julian looked relieved as he stood up to shake his hand. There was a whiff of pine, calming and fresh, the crunch of needles underfoot on a crisp morning.

They both sat as Julian thanked him profusely for seeking him out. Isaac saw no reason for the deception to continue any longer.

“This meeting is unfortunately not to discuss a job offer. I do not represent your competitor. I apologise for the subterfuge.” Isaac sipped his water and Julian mirrored him dutifully, clearly confused. “I’m here about Juno Liu.”

Julian’s entire demeanour changed. His hackles immediately rose, back snapping straight and hands curling into fists.

“I don’t know where she is,” he bit out savagely as he threw his napkin onto the table. “Who sent you? You know what, it doesn’t matter. I told my family, I told Pack Zhao years ago over and over that the last time I saw her was when they kicked me out. And that there was no way I was helping them find her. They had already destroyed any leverage they had on me.” Isaac didn’t like the cynical laugh that left his mouth. “If you organised this meeting to try again then you’ve wasted your time. I can honestly tell you that I have no idea.” Julian’s chair screeched harshly as he stood up. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Stop.”

Isaac spoke so urgently a fraction of his alpha dominance slipped in. Julian’s steps stuttered, his shoulders slumping as the command coursed through him.

“Fu-uck, you’re strong.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Still not saying shit, though.”

Isaac gestured at Julian’s seat. “Sit down, please,” he asked in a much more measured tone.

Julian tried to hold his stare but failed miserably. “No, I really don’t want to,” he muttered sullenly at the floor.

Isaac dipped his head in acknowledgement before pulling a piece of paper out of his bag. He laid it down carefully on the table before sitting back so Julian could see. It was one of Juno’s drawings he had discreetly pilfered from her sketchbook — a photorealistic fox with a skull for a face. Julian went pale, conflicting emotions flickering across his face.

“This is hers, isn’t it? Where did you get this?”

“Just one thing before I say anything further.” Isaac folded his hands carefully in his lap, watching the trembling beta closely. “You pay a fortnightly stipend into your parents joint account but you seem to be quite careful in covering your tracks. Why?”

“How did you—” Julian shook his head, “Never mind, guess you alphas are just used to taking what you want and fuck the rest of us, right?”

Isaac let the insult slide. “I apologise for the violation but I promise you it’s important.”

“I don’t have a relationship with my parents after...everything. They blamed me for what happened, as they should.” Julian spoke so quietly, barely above a whisper, as his body folded in on itself protectively. “I know they barely keep afloat. Dad ended up finding work at a warehouse and Mum had to get a job as a cleaner. My grandparents are getting old and were already having health issues when I cut ties. I know my parents were expecting me to get a good job and help them out. I blocked them so they couldn’t hound me for more. But leaving them with nothing, especially when I was responsible...I couldn’t do it.” He was picking at the skin of his fingers anxiously and Isaac fought the urge to take his hand to get him to stop. “Maybe that makes me an idiot but—”

“It doesn’t.” Isaac had seen his Nanay go through something similar with her own family. Years of guilt-tripping and requests for money from extended family in the Philippines from the very moment they found out she had bonded three successful alphas. “Filial piety is quite the mindfuck.”

Julian looked surprised by his empathy, and perhaps even by his casual foul language. “Yeah, it really is.”

“Thank you for answering, Julian.” Isaac spun Juno’s drawing around to face him, pushing it towards him a touch. “She asked me to find you,” he said quietly.

Julian’s distress dissipated as quickly as it had flared, a hopeful kind of anguish twisting on his face “Is she ok? Please just tell me that, that’s all I need to know. Is she ok and is she happy? Ok, two things.”

Isaac was getting a strange feeling in his chest. A warm ache burrowing down, unsettling his stomach and burning behind his ribs.

“Yes, she’s doing well.”

Julian hovered between standing and sitting, like his body had malfunctioned while his brain was catching up. “You’re her alpha I assume?”

Isaac considered how much information to offer. “My pack is courting her.”

“That’s good.” Julian sank down in his chair, his eyes distant and wistful. “That’s really good. She deserves that.” He ran his fingertips almost reverently over the drawing, tracing the pencil strokes. His next words were almost inaudible, just to himself. “She’s gotten better.”

“You never tried to find her these past few years?” Isaac watched him, staring at those sentimental dark eyes and the slightly lifted corner of his full lips.

Julian’s forehead creased. “Of course not. There’s no way I would risk them coming after her through me. I’d heard through people who knew my family that Pack Zhao felt the bond break. I knew she was free. How could I jeopardise that?”

It was clear Julian wore his heart on his sleeve and exactly to whom it belonged. Just as Juno had loved him all this time, he had loved her too. Loved her still. The burden of Isaac’s next move weighed heavily on him. He wanted to reconnect them, to see Juno happy. And for some reason he also needed to see Julian’s debilitating remorse lifted too.

Unaware of the knowledge Isaac carried, Julian went back to outlining Juno’s drawing. “I can’t believe you’re here because of her. I didn’t think she would even think of me again after what I did.”

“And what did you do?”

“Failed her,” Julian whispered, exposing what he believed was his greatest crime, before hanging his head.

The whole purpose of this meeting was to make a clear and reasoned judgement on behalf of his pack. Was Julian a threat to their safety if he reconnected with Juno? He stared at the beta across from him, sitting there leaden with misplaced guilt he ached to heal. Hair hanging over his forehead begging to be grabbed and lips made for cock-sucking.

Isaac was in trouble.

JUNO

Juno was playing chicken with Ari.

She had written a very professionally worded email stating she was experiencing a medical event and would be missing that week's classes. Then he had the audacity to be thoughtful enough to text Ollie to check in on top of his perfunctory reply to her email. Ollie proceeded to blow all tact out of the water with his reply before Isaac or Everett got around to it. *All good, Juno's in heat.* An understandably rushed response considering she was probably busy trying to sit on his dick.

She knew that *he knew* exactly why she had been away. And he must know that she knew that he knew.

Juno's head hurt.

And they still had not made eye contact once in the last hour.

He dismissed the lecture and Juno stared down at her page. It was completely blank except for the headline she had underlined about fifty times. Productive. At least Ari made his slides available online. He seemed a little more frazzled today, like he had just rolled out of bed and straight into class. Extra scruffy, extra overgrown, extra rumped. Why was that hot? Juno shook her head. Maybe some vestige of her heat hormones was still rattling around inside her. That had to be it.

Juno made her way out of the building and was hit by a frigid gust of wind as she opened the door.

"Shit, my jacket."

It was still hanging uselessly off the back of her chair. She rushed back down the corridor and loped up two flights of stairs like a madwoman, hoping the door wouldn't be locked. Huffing as she turned the corner, she let

out a little excited squeak when she saw that it was still open.

“Yesss, I freaking made—*oof!*”

Juno caught the briefest glimpse of tan skin and eyes widened in shock before she slammed into a solid chest. Something had to give and it certainly wasn't the tall skyscraper of an alpha, so Juno found herself off balance and heading inexorably towards the ground.

But instead of landing on hard linoleum, a strong arm wound its way around her waist. The air was punched from her lungs as she snapped back up, pressed safely against a shirt that smelled of tea and warm honey. Juno's omega hindbrain urged her to bury her nose in it but her frontal lobe screamed at her that this would be a very, very dumb idea. So there she remained, frozen in the arms of her lecturer.

“Juno, are you ok?” Ari asked her urgently. Instead of releasing her, his belongings clattered to the floor beside him and his other arm enclosed her as well. She couldn't think like this, not when she could feel his touch on her hips, the small of her back, against her stomach and breasts. It was too easy to imagine those arms gripping her tighter as he crushed their bodies together against the wall. Tasting him, consuming him. Panties pulled to one side and two long fingers sliding home while he swallowed her cries of pleasure.

Arousal flooded between her legs, her thick vanilla cream and peach perfume filling the small space between them. It blended with Ari's own sharply mounting scent and she looked up at his blown pupils, harsh breaths and knew with 100% certainty that he had envisioned the exact same thing she had.

Rational thinking finally caught up with them both and they leapt away from each other, stammering apologies. Pretending that it felt right to be apart, and their bodies did not remember how it felt to hold each other.

“I-I forgot my...”

Ari leaned down, gracefully scooping her jacket up from the pile on the floor.

“I saw that you'd left it,” he said hesitantly, holding it open for her. Juno slid her arms through, not daring to look at him. She could feel the care he was showing in the way he smoothed the collar down behind her neck and adjusted her shoulders slightly.

She pulled the sides of the jacket tightly around herself. “Thanks,” she said, dumbly.

Then she ran.

It was idiotic because they were headed to the same place. She just needed a bit of distance to gather herself before their tute together, she told herself.

But as she pushed the heavy door of the building open, she couldn't help lifting her collar to her nose. *A lazy afternoon nap in her nest, woken with kisses along her neck and an aromatic mug of honey sweetened tea. Then the rough slide of a beard along her inner thighs, fingers intertwined with hers.*

With a muttered curse, she snapped her head back and released the fabric, trying to breathe thinly to calm her racing heart.

Juno picked a seat closest to the open door, lamenting that the small class meant there was no back row she could try and set up some sort of book fort around. She didn't even notice she had sat down next to Bodhi, the alpha who had hit on her the first week and then assiduously avoided from then on. He straightened up from his slouched position.

“So it finally happened, huh?” He let out a crude laugh. “Nice.”

Juno opened her notebook, flicking the pages much more aggressively than she needed to. “What are you talking about?” she said shortly, not looking at him.

He leaned in way too close and took a long, exaggerated sniff. Then he looked pointedly at where Ari was fiddling with his laptop cable, unaware. To Juno's great horror, he threw a shaka and stuck his tongue out the side of his mouth at the same time. Bodhi's antics unfortunately did not go unnoticed by Priya and Juno groaned internally, wondering how that was going to bite her in the ass later.

Juno pasted on a saccharine smile as she crumpled a blank page in her fist. “If you could never speak to me again, Bodhi, that would be great,” she said sweetly before throwing the paper ball at his head. She was immensely satisfied when he tried and failed to dodge it. Although she should be thanking him in a way. She had never been more unaroused in her life and it would be the trick to getting through this class.

It was a relief when it ended. Juno fled out the door without looking back. The semester would be over soon and Ari and his class would just be a distant memory (apart from a hopefully excellent grade, of course). Though

her stomach did a sour little flip at the thought.

“Hey!”

That sounded like Priya. Guess the ass-biting was about to happen now. Juno swung her head around and saw the beta flouncing towards her. Juno knew it was ill-mannered but she responded with a waspish “What?” anyway. The girl had spent the entire class staring maniacally at Juno like she wanted to peel her skin off and wear it, so she didn’t deserve politeness.

Priya was seething, biting off each word with furiously clenched teeth. “I may be a beta but I’m not an idiot.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Juno interjected, casually inspecting her nails. Not the cleverest move as it riled Priya up even more but Juno could not find it in herself to care.

“I can smell him on you, you dumb omega bitch. You’re all the same entitled whores. Don’t you have a pack already?”

“I’m sorry, *I’m* the entitled one?” Juno asked her incredulously. “You know he’s our teacher, right?” God, she just wanted to be home annoying Everett in the kitchen, not being yelled at by a delusional beta coated in a migraine-inducing floral perfume.

Priya forged on, undeterred. “Ari is *exactly* the kind of man I should be with. Did you know he dated a beta for years? He left his pack in London when they found their omega. How does it feel to know that he wouldn’t want you anyway?” Her expression twisted into something cruel and ugly. “He doesn’t need a pack and he definitely doesn’t need an *omega*.” She spat her last word out like it was poison.

The sound of footsteps echoed through the corridor. Instead of backing off, Priya rushed forward crowding in Juno’s personal space.

“You’ll never understand him like I would,” Priya hissed at her.

Juno had had enough. Priya was too close and she wanted absolutely nothing to do with the insane, ranting woman. She held a firm hand in front of her to try and put some distance between them and stepped forward.

“You need to back off,” Juno demanded.

“Don’t touch me!” she shrieked, flinching back as if Juno had struck her.

“What’s going on here?” The alpha roar was unmistakable.

Ari charged towards them, his steps stuttering as he surveyed the scene in front of him. Juno stared down at her outstretched hand, held out to stop Priya’s advance, and the beta who was shrinking back with her arms curled protectively around herself. She opened her mouth to explain but Priya was

faster.

“She just attacked me out of nowhere, Ari.” Priya was doing a frighteningly convincing job of cowering. “S-she said that I should...that I should—”

“Should what, Priya?”

“Know my place as a beta,” Priya whispered, squeezing her eyes shut as a lone tear slid down her cheek.

If Juno wasn't so frozen in horror she would have clapped at Priya's impressive performance. Surely Ari wasn't going to buy this? One glance at the alpha and her heart sank. It was like something clicked within him, a trigger Priya had found and pulled.

Aimed straight for her.

“I thought you were different, Juno.” The unfairness of it all made her feel sick and she couldn't rationalise the alpha in front of her with the one who so attentively helped her with her jacket.

“No, she's lying, that's not—”

“Just because you're an omega does not give you licence to antagonise others based on their designation. Consider this your first and only warning.”

He wasn't going to even try to hear her side? Fine. He didn't deserve it.

“I'm sorry, Priya. I was wrong,” she said grimly as her compassion drained from her. Priya swallowed as her mask slipped slightly. “I hope you get everything you wanted.”

She left so she didn't have to hear Priya sinking her talons further into him.

Isaac was the first packmate she came across as she trudged into the house that evening. Sensing her turmoil immediately, he was in front of her in seconds. He gently lifted her bowed head, his thumb grazing her chin.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes...no.” Juno tore her face away from his far too discerning gaze. “I don't want to talk about it,” she muttered, petulantly.

From the way his brow raised, she knew he was only letting it go for now. He didn't even make a comment about clutter when she let her bag fall off her shoulder and land on the floor with a loud thump. Instead, he ran his

hands over her arms and Juno felt the tension slide from her body as his leather and rum scent washed over her.

“I have some news that I think will help.”

“Ollie used Everett’s fancy cast-iron skillet and then cleaned it wrong?”

“No, darling. Although I do like that apparently that’s all it would take to cheer you up.” He gave a rueful little chuckle before his expression grew serious. “I found Julian.”

Isaac caught her as her knees collapsed.

JULIAN

Lightheadedness. Difficulty breathing. Stabbing sensations in his chest.

Julian wasn't entirely convinced he wasn't experiencing some sort of cardiac event. He reached over to wind the car window down slightly to let in the cool night breeze and was mortified to feel the sweat pooling in his armpit.

He was en-route to Juno's pack house, having caught a flight in (at their expense) and been met at the airport by a *chauffeur* holding his name on a sign. Despite his name written very clearly in block letters, he still felt like a fraud when he made his way over and said "that's me?" It was abundantly clear that Juno's pack was *send-a-driver* rich, and did not have to squabble over who had to do the airport run like plebs.

His theory was only further confirmed when the car turned into the driveway. The pack house was situated in an idyllic tree-lined suburb amongst other similarly imposing residences. Julian was fairly certain at least six of his family's dilapidated two bedroom apartment could fit inside it. He felt thirteen again, going to a classmate's house after school and becoming painfully aware that living with five people — mum, dad, Ye Ye and Nai Nai — crammed in a tiny space above the restaurant they were barely keeping afloat was not how most people lived. Sweaty palms smoothed along his jeans, reassuring himself it was not the rough weave from his long outgrown school uniform.

Julian thanked the driver and made his way to the back of the car. He was in the middle of the awkward *no, please I insist* song-and-dance over getting his suitcase out when the sound of the large door opening turned his head.

Isaac appeared, but his attention was instantly diverted away from the

intensely serious prime alpha. A small face stuck her head out from beneath where Isaac had his arm braced against the door.

Juno.

His heart stuttered and there seemed to be no oxygen left in his lungs. His brain barely registered the physical changes in her since he saw her last. Flying blonde hair as she raced towards him. Tattoos he hoped didn't hurt too much. But were those house slippers she had on? She better not have worn them outside for his sake. Before he could idiotically ask her this and have it be the very first thing he said to her in almost four years, she slammed bodily into him, sending them both to their knees.

He was touching her.

He'd never known how soft her skin would feel under his fingertips. Or the solace her embrace brought to his tattered nerves. How pressing his nose into the curve of her neck and inhaling her scent — all summer and sweetness — would open a Pandora's Box of emotion within him. Devotion. Bliss. *Lust*. For a brief moment, his only tether to the world was her.

“You smell like Christmas.”

Juno was nuzzling his chest and neck like an affectionate little kitten. Julian stayed very still, not wanting it to ever end.

“Like...turkey?”

She gave his arm a cross little pinch and laughed. “No, like a Christmas tree. A fresh one, that fills the room with its scent and makes you instantly happy the moment you walk in.”

“I...wouldn't know.” Christmas trees were not a priority in the Tsai household. Not fake ones and certainly not a real one. In fact, Christmas presents weren't really a priority either. Julian thought back to when he was ten and his Mama handed him an unwrapped packet of ballpoint pens on Christmas morning and said, “Merry Christmas. Don't forget you need to clean the tables downstairs before lunchtime.”

Great, he was finally reunited with Juno and his brain decided to completely bum him out.

Instead of being taken aback by his sombre response, Juno brushed his hair back lightly from his forehead. “Me neither, really. Not until I got to the Omega Village.”

It was a small thing, but imagining her experiencing a real Christmas tree after everything she'd been through lit a warm sensation in his chest. The first glimpse of a lighthouse on a stormy sea. He ran the backs of his fingers

across her cheek, amazed that he could finally do so. “You’ve been good?”

“Yes. I can’t wait to catch you up on everything. What about you?” The corner of her lips quirked upwards. “1 to 10?”

His stomach gave a little flip. She remembered how he used to check in with her after all this time? Her expression plainly said *of course I did, silly.*

“Right now?” he whispered, pulling her as close as humanly possible without crushing her. “Off the freaking charts.”

Juno led him inside, exchanging a quick word with Isaac at the door. “Is it alright if we leave meeting everyone else till tomorrow?”

“I already chased them away when they started gawking like you were zoo animals,” he said with a disapproving sniff.

As they made their way through the house, they spoke to each other for some reason in low, hushed tones like errant children in the back of the classroom. *Is it just me or is the floor warm? Yeah, they have underfloor heating.* Julian then asked if she’d ever felt the urge to put her face on it and she let off peal after peal of silvery laughter.

“Yes. So I did.”

“And?”

“Solid 1 and a half points. 5 points for warmth, then minus 3.5 as you start to wonder what you’re doing with your life.”

He baulked when he saw her nest. Not because he didn’t want to go inside but because he definitely, unequivocally did not belong there. But she tugged at his hand with her fingers and at his heart with her pouty little lip. “You’ll hurt my feelings if you don’t,” she said, and there was no universe in which that was allowed so in he went.

They talked long into the night, their time apart compressing into minutes and hours of conversation. He’d brought her a gift — a bag of all her favourite lollies he had painstakingly organised by colour, knowing just how satisfying she would find it (the answer was *very*, judging by her delighted gasp). She shyly produced a little drawing of him as a penguin in return. “It’s not much,” she said. The realisation that he finally had a new artwork of hers to add to his treasured collection made his eyes sting.

When she described the aftermath of their painful separation, Julian broke.

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry I couldn’t get you out of there,” he choked out, unable to look at her.

“Don’t be sorry.” Juno clasped his head, refusing to let him sink away.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, you hear me? Pack Zhao did this, not you or me.”

He let her hold him until they both fell asleep, wishing the guilt could drift away just as easily.

Julian’s arm going numb from a lightly snoring Juno resting atop it. A sacrifice he was willing to make. The entire nest smelled of peaches, sweeter than he had ever experienced in the years he had known her. He couldn’t help watching her sleep, fighting the urge to trace her serene expression with his fingertip. Just when he began to tip over to the ‘staring for too long’ side of the scale, she yawned and stretched like a cat, blinking up at him with her long lashes.

Their relationship felt new again somehow in the morning light, shyness prevailing despite the night of soul-bearing.

Juno pulled the blanket up until only her eyes were visible.

“Hi.” Her muffled voice greeted him bashfully.

He pulled his side up too. Two caterpillars not yet butterflies.

“Hi.”

They’d shuffled downstairs together where the pack had been busy throwing together breakfast. Everyone looked coincidentally busy yet Julian was sure they had been waiting for them to come down. Juno skipped over to kiss a bespectacled unruly-haired alpha. He grabbed her ass enthusiastically and Julian found himself whipping his head toward the ceiling, certain he should not have seen that. Isaac thankfully doled out introductions so he had something to do with his hands.

If he had met Isaac elsewhere in another life, Julian would’ve harboured a secret crush he’d never dare act on. Purely because of just how out of his league the magnetic prime alpha was. But right now, he was just grateful he had been allowed into his home. Into his pack omega’s *nest*.

Yeah, he was still processing that.

“Julian, I’d like you to meet Miles.”

There was a familiarity to Isaac’s touch on the other beta’s shoulders that made Julian’s belly twist. It was clear Miles was his and the last thing he wanted was to get in the way of that. He shook Miles’ offered hand, focusing

on not making it feel like a limp dead fish.

Isaac introduced Ollie next, who greeted him with an unholy amount of enthusiasm considering it was morning, before going back to staring at Juno like she hung the moon. Everett rounded out the pack, ginormous and utterly intimidating with his brief nod.

“Can we finish making breakfast now?” Juno pouted and the tenuous energy in the room broke immediately as every pack member subconsciously leapt to their omega’s whim. Ollie asked how Julian liked his coffee as he settled into one of the stools. Juno was rifling through the fridge as Everett watched her. His eyes darted between the mixing bowl on the counter and the scavenging omega. Julian had only just met the alpha but swore he looked nauseous.

“The chef at the cafe I used to work at said the secret ingredient to fluffy pancakes is ricotta. Then I *remembered* that we just had cannelloni the other night.” Juno emerged holding the tub triumphantly in front of the hulking blonde alpha. “We should add a couple of spoonfuls!”

Everett looked like he was crunching glass under his molars. Julian tensed, the muscles in his back growing tight as his eyes darted between the two. It was a painfully familiar scene — an alpha staring down at Juno until she capitulated.

His arm shot out and Julian found himself rising slightly out of his chair. As if a skinny little shrimp like him could face down the great white shark of an alpha. But all Everett was doing was taking the tub from Juno before handing her a spoon.

“Two spoons was it?”

“Yeah, big ones!” The size of her ricotta dollop made a thick splashing sound as it hit the pancake mix. As Juno gleefully added another, Everett hunched over a well-worn notebook with a pen. Julian peered over to read what he was writing under the pancake page. *Two Juno-sized spoons of smooth ricotta, equivalent to 5 regular tablespoons.* Juno held out the spoon for Everett to taste and he shook his head, earning himself a stripe of batter on his nose. Her delighted cackle dissolved into shrieks when he wound his inked arms around her waist, trapping her as he wiped his nose clean with her cheek.

“I would never let anyone that would hurt her within the same building let alone the same room.”

Julian started violently, unprepared for Isaac’s low velvety-rich voice

beside his ear. He spluttered strangled-sounding nonsense in reply, feeling far too exposed. But all Isaac did was offer him a bemused tilt of his lips (it would have been too much to call it a smile) before turning back to his bonded beta.

Juno was now mashing up some brown bananas she'd found — “we can't waste these and let's face it none of us are going to make banana bread today” — as Everett counted to ten under his breath. She had the grace to say nothing when he made a test pancake, his face black as he ate it in large furious bites.

“Why is this so fucking good?”

Ollie set a mug in front of him and promised that despite his failed attempt at coffee art, it would still taste very good. Julian swore he could see a cock and balls in the froth somehow, like it was an unintentional Rorschach test.

“Did you give him a dick on his latte?”

Ok maybe it wasn't just him. Miles sounded both outraged and amused. Before Julian could get a word in, Ollie stuck a clean teaspoon handle in the froth. After a few strategic swirls, he declared the penis was now an elephant. Miles swapped their mugs once Ollie's back was turned. “Quick, give me the dick. I haven't touched mine yet.”

So Julian let Miles take his elephant dick coffee like this was a perfectly normal occurrence.

“Have fun in the nest last night, Julian?” Miles nudged him with his elbow and winked. Julian's face flamed with embarrassment, matching Juno's.

“Miles!” She held her spatula over her face, hiding unsuccessfully behind the slotted utensil. “We just talked, ok?”

“Yeah, I-I missed her so much.” To his horror, his voice wavered a little. He gave Juno a quick glance only to find she was misty-eyed.

Miles looked between them and groaned. “Ok, now you're making me the dirty-minded asshole.”

Ollie pointed the banana he was eating at him. “You're not an asshole, don't say that.” He smacked Everett's arm, looking for backup. “Right?” Everett gave a noncommittal shrug and slanted his hand in a so-so motion.

“But you are the other thing,” Isaac murmured, his eyes never leaving his phone as he scrolled through emails.

The domestic bliss of his first breakfast with the Rivera-Gunnarsson pack

was difficult in ways he did not expect. Lonely for a lot of his life for a multitude of reasons — his scarce upbringing, being an immigrant child straddling two worlds and the fluidity of his sexuality — witnessing the clear and easy affection between all the pack members drove a dull ache beneath his sternum.

It was everything Juno deserved and more.

But where did that leave him?

“I want to court you,” Julian declared with uncharacteristic bravery. Every head turned toward him and he prickled with self-consciousness. “I mean, if you want,” he added hurriedly. Shit, was he even allowed to just say something like that? He turned to Isaac, “And if you’re ok with that, I don’t want to step on any toes and—”

“Julian.”

Isaac’s stern but gentle interruption saved him from babbling further. “You and Juno had history before any of us came into the picture. We already agreed as a pack that it wasn’t our place to deny you two the chance to reconnect if that’s what she wants.”

“Yes,” Juno cut in suddenly. There was the faint smell of pancakes burning but neither of them cared. “Yes, I-I want that.”

His giddiness was blinding. Julian felt like he was 10 years old, sliding Juno a piece of paper where he had scrawled *Do you like me: YES OR NO* and received it back with the yes box ticked.

“I don’t allow members into my pack easily, Julian,” Isaac warned, cutting into his childish daydream. “Consider this a trial.”

“Just make her happy,” Everett muttered. A bloom of peach perfume filled the kitchen, the apples of Juno’s cheeks flushing crimson as Miles and Ollie shifted in their seats.

A potential place in a pack? Julian had never even believed such a thing could even be possible for him.

But first, he was going to finally, *finally* court the love of his life.

JULIAN

Julian only had 48 hours before he had to fly back home again. There were many things that he could have dwelt on. What he was going to tell his boss on Monday. How his friends were going to react. What the hell he was going to do for money. Not to mention the absolute nightmare logistics of moving his entire life from one state to another just for a *chance* to be with Juno.

But instead he was trying to decide between a peony-focused floral arrangement or a wild spray of indigenous blooms.

The unerringly patient florist added eucalyptus to the native flowers and that clinched it for him. “That one, please,” he said. Julian wavered slightly manoeuvring it out the door but it would be worth it.

All his carefully laid plans disintegrated before his eyes when Juno spotted him entering the house. Such rotten luck that she wasn’t in any of the other fifty rooms and managed to catch him making a beeline for the guest bedroom.

“Don’t look!” Julian yelled over his shoulder as he shuffled his way past her, wondering why he chose such a huge bouquet that was impossible to hide.

“What?” Juno looked anyway because she was confused and he was being ridiculous.

About twenty minutes later, he was at the front door again. He smoothed his hair down, adjusted his grip on the flowers, and rang the doorbell.

The door swung open and Juno stared at him.

“Hi.” Julian presented the bouquet to her with a flourish. “For you.”

Instead of taking it from him, she stuck her head out the door and looked around as if she suspected she was being pranked. “Did you just...come

home, get changed and then knock on the door holding the same flowers I just saw you come in with?”

Julian drooped, feeling wounded. “I’m picking you up for our date.”

Juno’s eyes widened. “Oh. Oh! My bad, let me start again.”

Then she shut the door in his face.

It opened again immediately and Juno had a huge smile this time. “Julian! You’re here. Wow, these are *beautiful*.” She reached out and took the flowers from him and held it tightly as she admired them. “This is definitely my first time seeing them,” she added, her lips pursed as she held back a laugh.

Juno invited him into the house, pointing out rooms with the enthusiasm of a museum tour guide.

“And this is the kitchen, right over here!” She laid the flowers on the counter and fished out a vase so she could put them in water.

Julian rest his elbows on the bench and watched her work. “What a great kitchen. Never have I been in a kitchen this nice. I bet you make the best pancakes here.”

Juno’s delighted grin was infectious. “I do!”

Isaac walked in and both their heads swung towards him. He came to an abrupt stop, eyeing them like he was expecting them to do something outrageous like toss confetti all over him.

It wasn’t far off. Juno wandered over and gave Isaac’s shoulder a familiar pat. “Julian, I’d like you to meet Isaac, my prime.” She turned to Isaac and spoke with the cadence of a preschool teacher. “*Isaac*, I’d like you to meet Julian. My date.”

Isaac looked disturbed. “What on earth,” he said, shaking off Juno’s hand suspiciously.

Julian made it worse. “Hello Isaac. It’s nice to meet you. You have a lovely home.”

The pause that followed was excruciating. Finally Isaac spoke. “Thank you. It currently houses a kooky omega and a beta who encourages her.”

“Wow, that sounds annoying,” Julian said blandly.

Isaac’s lips pressed together in a tight line. “It’s...alright.”

They were all saved by the notification ping from Julian’s phone. “Car’s here!” Julian announced, holding a hand out for Juno to take. She giggled as she let him lead her back to the front door.

“Bye Isaac!” She waved before making her way down the steps.

“I’ll have her home before midnight, sir,” Julian added, tipping an

invisible hat.

Isaac leaned against the doorframe, watching Julian open Juno's car door for her. "When did I become the dad in this scenario?" he asked crossly.

The omega car service dropped them off right outside the restaurant. Julian was taking no chances after being entrusted with Juno's safety tonight. The Golden Palace had fairly average reviews. But Julian knew from the laminated menus, abrupt door greeting and handwritten 'CASH ONLY' sign that they were going to eat well tonight. The child seated at a single table doing homework between manning the till gave Julian unwelcome flashbacks though.

They ate quickly as Julian assured her the main event was coming up after this.

"I don't know, Julian." Juno lifted her bowl of Zha Jiang Mian and used her chopsticks to push the last few noodles into her mouth. She did a happy little wiggle in her seat as she set her utensils down. "I kinda feel like *this* is the main event."

If Julian wasn't already completely in love with her already, that would have well and truly tipped him over the edge.

His heart was thumping when he led her a short walk down the street, stopping abruptly in front of their destination. Juno glanced up, then spun towards him, hands clasped under her chin.

"A retro gaming bar?"

Julian scratched his hair bashfully. "Is it ok?"

A mischievous smirk crossed her face. "I hope you like losing," Juno taunted, disappearing through the door before he could blink.

It was the first time the bullshit of their circumstances faded away and they could just *be*. They floated between arcade systems; shooting zombies, blowing up alien spaceships and beating each other up to a bloody pulp. Julian made the mistake of letting her win one game and she was *not* having it.

"Fight me like you mean it!" she yelled with the seriousness of a war cry as she mashed the punch button.

The only thing more surprising than seeing this side of her come out was

how arousing he found it.

Tucked in the far corner was a black and white photo booth and Juno immediately pulled him in. She drew the curtain shut and there was no escaping that sweet, summer scent. He had loved it back then all those years ago but it was exhilarating now. Bare feet running through a peach orchard and sugar kissed off sweat-soaked skin. *Wild. Free.*

“Follow my lead.” She grinned, pressing the button to start.

Always, Julian thought to himself.

The countdown flashed on the screen and panic immediately took over.

“A nice smiling one!” Juno called out.

Julian only just managed to bare his teeth in a half-smile, half-grimace.

“Be a fish!”

Julian used his hands to give himself fins only to realise that Juno had gone the much easier route of making a fish lips face.

“Mugshot for indecent exposure!”

He filled the entire frame with his lifted shirt and bared nipple. Juno lost it, bent over in a hacking laugh in the corner. She said nothing for the last photo. Instead, she pressed a kiss to his cheek, nuzzling him with her nose before she pulled away. The photos the machine spat out revealed his completely pole-axed expression. She handed him a copy and he stared at it the whole car ride home.

“Thank you, Julian, this has been perfect.”

They both knew how perfect dates were meant to end. The stage was set — the front door step, the soft glow of moonlight and two entwined souls.

Julian’s gaze travelled across her upturned face, down to her lips. *A split lip, blood oozing from jagged teeth marks and bruises shaped like fingertips.*

He recoiled at the vivid, malevolent memory.

You cannot be the reason they find her.

Julian exhaled loudly and made a big show of checking his watch. “Oh, it’s almost midnight. I better get you in — don’t want Isaac to have my head,” he babbled nervously. He turned away before her confusion and disappointment ruined him.

Yeah. He was a coward.

ISAAC

Julian proceeded to court Juno like a 1980s film protagonist. After their first date, he made a big gesture of declaring he was quitting his job and moving for her. He flew home to get his affairs in order, but not before leaving her with a bundle of love letters — one for every day they would be apart. He sent voice notes with a frightening regularity that gave her a goopy sort of smile. Although Isaac overheard one once and all Julian was doing was narrating the apparent drama between two pigeons that lived near his apartment window with the seriousness of a David Attenborough documentary.

Madness.

When he eventually returned, he told no one about his flight and booked himself some preposterously dodgy accommodation because he “didn’t want to be a bother”. Isaac had to stuff him and his meagre belongings in one of the guest bedrooms before informing him he’d lined up an interview for him at one of his subsidiary companies. His contact there later informed him of how well Julian had interviewed and thanked Isaac for helping them fill the key role. He told Miles this proudly that night, which amused his bonded greatly. He gave Isaac a two-handed belly tickle and told him what a “squishy marshmallow alpha” he was before sauntering off, leaving Isaac rooted to the spot for a good five minutes.

He wasn’t being, to use Miles’ horrific word — *squishy*. Isaac had evaluated the situation quite carefully and that was the best solution for all involved. It was abundantly clear to him that Julian had no idea he was a perfect beta to Juno’s fragile omega. He had a way of anticipating her needs without any sort of pressure — the appearance of a pine-scented hoodie on a

blustery day, an offer of a snack when she grew frustrated with cramming for exams.

It was why he was so surprised one evening to see Julian flinch away as Juno leaned in to kiss him. Her hurt, confused face sent a hot lash of indignation through Isaac.

“I-I’m sorry.” Julian took a few faltering steps back. “I can’t.”

Juno’s bottom lip trembled as she turned and walked off, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. Julian hung his head and curled his hand into a fist, poised to strike either the wall or worse, himself.

Yeah, not in my fucking house.

Isaac strode forward into view, ignoring Julian’s choked gasp of his name. With a firm grip on his shoulder and a quick twist of the forearm, Isaac marched him into the nearest room. Which conveniently happened to be his office. He let Julian get his bearings momentarily as he settled himself on the edge of his desk, facing the shaken beta.

“Explain yourself.”

He wouldn’t look at him. Just stared at the ground like a misbehaving child, making the occasional blustery exhalation or clicking *tsk* of his tongue. Examined the back of his hand. The palm of his hand. Put both in his pockets. Took one back out again and chewed on his fingertip.

Isaac simply watched him and waited.

Then a snuffle slipped out from behind his dark curtain of hair. A hiccup and then several more as he tried and failed to keep them from bubbling up.

“What if I lead them back to her somehow?” Julian asked between broken gasps. “What if she gets hurt again because of me?”

Isaac found himself striding forward, his body moving of its own accord while his mind caught up. He wrapped Julian in a tight embrace, pulling him close. Julian stood frozen for a beat, before he threw his arms around Isaac’s waist and clung to the alpha desperately. He tried to focus on reassuring him, instead of how good it felt to hold him like this.

“She’s safe with us, Julian. We will do whatever it takes to protect her,” Isaac assured the younger man. They pulled apart to Isaac’s reluctance but he kept a steadying hand on his shoulder. “You *do* want to be with her, right?”

Julian looked at him like the question was crazy. “I love her.”

“Then you need to be honest with her about where your head’s at. She doesn’t deserve feeling like this,” Isaac admonished gently.

“I’ll fix this. Right now.” Julian nodded forlornly and let out a loud

exhale. “I’ll be deserving of the generosity you’ve shown me, I promise.”

There was an incessant ringing in his ears, his instincts screaming at him. *Pack*. “You’re a good boy,” Isaac said, his voice like gravel.

Julian’s breath hitched and Isaac felt the atoms in the room change. His hand was no longer simply bracing on Julian’s shoulder but gripping slightly. On the precipice of pulling him closer. Julian’s tongue slid along his bottom lip and left it glistening.

Taste him.

Claim him.

“I...I should go find Juno,” Julian whispered thinly, moving away from Isaac’s outstretched arm and breaking the thread of tension between them.

Isaac remained still as Julian stepped backwards — once, twice — before turning and slipping out the door. He took a deep breath, inhaled Julian’s pine mingled with his own alpha scent, and an expletive slipped out involuntarily. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Having achieved some level of composure, he made his own exit from his office.

Only to run into Miles.

“Who were you in there with?”

He must have just missed Julian’s swift departure. There was no anger or hurt in the bond, mainly confusion. Isaac was trying his best to compose an answer when Ollie charged round the corner. Tucked under his arm was a now thankfully dry-eyed Juno.

“Hey, have you seen Julian?” Ollie frowned, eyes darting wildly.

Juno was tugging on his shirt. “Ollie, this really isn’t necessary.”

Isaac compartmentalised the Miles conversation he knew he had to have and turned to the most immediate fire he had to put out. “Why do you want to find Julian?” he asked, forcing his voice to remain even.

“I have *words* I need to say to him.” Ollie punctuated his point with a jerky move towards Isaac, bringing the cross little omega with him. “Serious words.”

“What words?”

Any bluster left in Ollie promptly deflated. “I...I don’t know. Juno hasn’t told me what’s wrong.”

“I was *trying* and you ran off, you...you nincompoop!” Juno scolded him with no real outrage as Ollie sheepishly scratched his head.

Julian decided this was the best time to appear at the other end of the hallway, looking slightly winded. “Juno, there you are. God, I ran around the

whole house and you're where I started."

Miles pricked up slightly. "Where you started? You were with Isaac?"

Isaac felt like he was watching a slow-motion car crash. Julian was surveying the scene and finally sensed the odd energy in the air. "I feel like I should say no. But...yes?" he answered, tentatively.

Miles turned back to Isaac. "What happened in there?"

Juno's gaze pinged around like a pinball, from Miles to Julian before landing on Isaac. "What do you mean, what happened?"

"Nothing happened," Isaac found himself replying far too quickly. A supremely dumb decision all round.

Everett had appeared now, drawn to the commotion, with an expression on his face like he should have brought popcorn. Fucking excellent.

"Then what the hell did I feel in the bond?" Miles threw his hands up incredulously. "I know what you feel like when you're horny, *believe me.*"

"Wait, you're horny?" Juno shook her head like she was trying to clear the mental image. "You and Julian? Is that why you brought him to the house?"

"No, of course not," Isaac reassured her. "I brought him for you."

"So you were just horny for no reason?" Miles asked, his eyes narrowing in disbelief.

"Yes!" For some reason, Julian thought saying this would be less suspicious. Everyone's attention swung to him and it clearly had the opposite intended effect. "Isaac and I both agree that nothing happened," he added in a way that was in no way convincing.

This was going abso-fucking-lutely batshit off the rails.

"Wait, are you guys a thing?" Juno's small voice made Isaac's heart lurch. "Do you...not want to be with me, Julian? I-it's ok if you don't. I'd just rather know sooner rather than later."

Julian looked horrified at the thought. "No! Of course I want you." He stepped forward before pausing, unsure if she would want him to continue.

"He does," Isaac assured her. "He'll explain everything."

Miles clicked his fingers like a lightbulb went off in his head. "So you were trying to help out Julian and Juno?"

"Yes, exactly."

"But you got horny."

"What the hell is happening here?" Juno said, exasperatedly.

A piercing whistle cut through the air and everyone turned to see Everett

pull two fingers out of his mouth.

“Julian wants to be with Juno. But he’s obviously going through some internal shit so Isaac pulled him into the office to yell at him or whatever prime alpha voodoo he had planned. But they *may or may not* have done something in there to make him horny. Which does not invalidate Julian’s feelings for Juno but it does raise questions over whether or not Julian and Isaac want to be...horny together.”

It was the most any of them had ever heard Everett speak.

The pregnant silence was punctuated by rapt applause.

“I followed *none* of that,” Ollie said cheerily between loud claps as Julian made an incomprehensible strangled noise.

Juno gave Ollie a kiss on the cheek and murmured something in his ear, sending him on his way. Everett left with him, his bombshell still smoking in the atmosphere. She took a deep breath and turned back to where the rest of the pack remained frozen.

“Isaac, I think you and Miles should have a chat, don’t you?” She slipped so easily into omega mode, eager to temper the heightened emotions in the pack and bring everyone back together again. “Julian, come with me, please.”

Soon it was just himself and Miles. Eager to not make a spectacle of themselves again, Isaac guided him into the office. He didn’t like the sick feeling in his gut, like he was bringing Miles to the scene of a crime. The air needed to be cleared and fast.

“I spoke to Julian about what’s holding him back from a relationship with Juno. He got emotional and I held him. We shared a moment. Nothing else happened,” Isaac explained, taking Miles’ hands so he could gauge his reaction better. “But I am attracted to him. I have been from the day I met him. Though it hasn’t been at the forefront of my mind, only really coming forth today.”

His heart sank when Miles disentangled their fingers, but began pounding loudly in his ears as Miles closed the distance between them. Thumbs tucked into his waistband and a strong yank brought their bodies flush together. Isaac stifled a groan and couldn’t resist buying his nose into his bondmark to breathe in his familiar sangria scent. There was a hint of Juno he almost always had now as well, generous fat peach wedges floating in red wine. Miles rolled his hips, pressing his thigh against Isaac’s thickening cock.

“Ignore that,” Isaac muttered. “Talk to me, please.”

Miles did neither, instead choosing to slide his hands into Isaac’s back

pockets and nip lightly at his earlobe.

“Miles,” Isaac warned, his voice a much lower register this time.

“So we don’t have a problem in this department. Good to know,” Miles said breathily against his neck.

Isaac growled. “If I ever gave you the impression we did then I have some *re-educating* to do.”

They kissed, slow and lingering. Tasting and savouring. A reset, their connection bursting to life in the bond.

“I love you,” Miles said, quietly.

“I love you, too.” Isaac made sure Miles didn’t just hear it but felt it, knew it so strongly it couldn’t be denied.

“I love you,” Miles re-iterated. “I’m falling for Juno but that doesn’t change that I love you. Just as you exploring your attraction to Julian doesn’t diminish what we have. I just wish you had said something earlier. But knowing you, you probably put it in a little box on your mental shelf to be dealt with later.” Isaac had to reluctantly concur. He should be thankful Miles only ever used his extensively intimate knowledge of Isaac’s inner workings for one of two things — to annoy him or turn him on.

Right on cue, a shameless pout crossed Miles’ face. “You’ll make it up to me, though. Right?”

Isaac wanted very badly to rise to Miles’ insubordinate challenge and fuck him senseless against his desk. But he had something more important to say first.

“I’m sorry, love. I should have told you.”

“I forgive you.” Miles reached between them, flicking open the button of Isaac’s pants, then his own. It was like the blast of a starting pistol, sending desire flaming through his body. “Now that that’s over with, there’s something else I need your help with. See, I’m this super off-limits secretary and my boss has been riding my ass *hard* lately. Don’t you think I deserve a raise?”

Isaac loved him so much in that moment his chest actually hurt. There was a softness in Miles’ beautiful eyes that told him he felt it too.

His hand shot out and stopped Miles’ brazen attempt to undress him. “That is inappropriate,” he reprimanded him. He released him tersely, walked around his desk and settled into his chair. Knees spread, his cock tenting his pants. “Sit down. The only thing that will persuade me to review your salary is your performance,” Isaac snapped, eyes blazing.

Miles stepped into the small space between Isaac and the desk as the tension between them reached a fever pitch. “Well in that case, *sir*,” he said, tongue darting out to wet his bottom lip. “I would rather kneel.”

JUNO

Julian stood at the door to Juno's nest nervously. Eying the threshold like he was expecting it to burst into flames or slice him with lasers the moment his toe crossed it.

"If you want me to leave, I completely understand. I'll go back home and you can continue your life here with your pack like normal." He spoke like he had rehearsed the speech in his head on the way up.

Juno would have to nip this in the bud immediately.

"But who will write me letters? Send me voice notes?" She took his hand and led him into the room, showing him he would not be obliterated instantly if he did so.

"Your pack is all wonderful, I'm sure someone—"

"Who will tell me about the pigeons on his balcony?"

Julian mumbled. "Technically not me, since I don't live in that apartment anymore."

Juno gave him a look. *Stop missing the point on purpose, dummy.*

"Will you tell me what you discussed with Isaac?" She held on firmly to him, despite his clammy palm.

As Julian spoke, she got her truest glimpse into how deep his devotion to her ran. The reason for the threads of fear laced through every action and interaction.

"I stayed away because I wanted to keep you safe. I still do."

She ached to be worthy of it all. To be who he seemed to think she was.

"But whether I'm with you or not..." Julian looked at her like she was the axis upon which his world spun. "Not loving you has never been an option for me."

Juno sucked in a sharp intake of breath. Her omega had wanted him for a long time. Her instincts did not understand what was taking so long to know how this sweet, doting beta kissed and touched and *fucked*.

He sank to his knees in front of her and something clicked into place. The part of her that dwelled in the darkness rose up within her as he lowered himself. The part that found beauty in the macabre. The part that desired a spiked heel into his chest rather than help him back up. She wasn't wearing one, so she did the next best thing.

Juno unfastened the buttons of her shirt and let the fabric fall. Her skirt and bralette followed, a soft whisper as they hit the floor.

“Omega, please.”

She'd never heard herself addressed like that. Breathed as if she was an empress instead of a lesser being to be controlled. Power surged through her, reclaiming her designation as he waited. Reverential, ready to serve.

“Have you ever eaten pussy, Julian?” she asked off-handedly, like she was asking him a mundane question about his day rather than licking up her slickened cunt.

He exhaled raggedly before finding his voice. “No,” he answered, thinly.

Juno hooked her fingers into the waistband of her panties, slid them off and tossed them to the side. She ignored his stuttered profanity and settled herself into her nest, taking the time to make sure she was comfortable.

“Would you like to?” She watched him over her bent knees, closed tight to obscure his view.

“Only if it's yours, omega.”

Oh, he was very good. Juno always knew he was something special. “Good answer,” she approved, her voice a wisp of smoke. “But first, I want the kiss we *should* have had.”

He poured everything into it. Everything he wished he'd done, all the ways he thought he was lacking. Just gave himself over to her wholly, ready to be left with nothing if she did not accept him. Her body may have been bare but his soul was too. She drank his surrender from his lips, drunk off the power it gave her.

He was trembling slightly when they parted. Shattered by the threshold they'd just crossed. Tractable. Pliant. She was going to build him back up again piece by piece.

Juno directed his gaze downward with an imperious press of her finger. She spread her legs slowly, appreciating his wounded groan as she did so.

“Time for your first lesson.”

Julian stroked a shaking hand along her inner thigh as he brought his mouth closer. He looked up at her with anxiety filled eyes. “T-tell me what you like?”

“Of course, angel.” Juno caressed his cheek delicately. Her grip tightened suddenly. “Now. Taste me, Julian,” she whispered.

His eyes fluttered shut at his first exploratory lick, but popped back open immediately after so he could watch her reactions. Uncoordinated and messy at first, Juno guided his technique with gentle instructions. *Less pressure. Even less than that. Bit higher. Longer strokes.* Feeling his hot breath panting as he diligently adjusted his technique each time was like liquid eroticism straight to the vein.

Soon, she was teetering right on the edge. “I’m going to come,” she bit out, her whole body tightening. “Keep going exactly like that, don’t you dare fucking stop.”

He listened so well, not going faster or harder, obeying her perfectly as he continued lapping at her cunt. Juno gasped as she came, her thighs locking against his ears and grasping his hair as she bucked against his tongue.

Julian was licking his lips clean when she finally released him and opened her eyes again. There was the unmistakable glint of pride in his eyes. She was changing him. Remaking him.

Gripping his chin in one hand, she opened her legs again and guided him back to her centre. “Give me another one. See if you can make me come faster this time.” He began eating her out once more without hesitation, his hot tongue wide and flat like she’d taught him. “Yes, angel,” she encouraged him, breathlessly. “Show me everything you’ve learned.”

Juno drenched him with her slick the second time, feeling him swallow with each pulse of her pussy. She cast her eyes over him, still fully dressed, pupils blackened and soaked in her arousal from the chin down. Utterly, utterly delicious. If it were socially acceptable, he would always look like this.

“Do you want to fuck me?” She laid back on her mountain of pillows, wiggling slightly so she sank into them. The two orgasms had only made her ache more to be filled. His cock was straining against his pants. It looked painful. It would be irresponsible to leave him like that.

“I’m so close,” Julian rasped, a slight frown on his face. “I don’t know if I can last.”

“That’s not what I asked you, Julian.” Juno traced a fingertip over the hardened tip of her nipple, a naughty thrill running through her as his eyes inevitably followed before jerking back up to her face. “I said, *do you want to fuck me?*”

“Yes,” he replied immediately, making up for his earlier error. “Please.”

“Then take off your clothes.”

She had always thought him beautiful, her Julian. Seeing more and more bare flesh revealed only confirmed it further. Lean and smooth, a thatch of dark hair and a pretty, pretty cock jutting out of it. His hand reached down to grip his length and she sat up sharply.

“Don’t touch. That belongs to me.”

Julian released his cock hurriedly. “Yes, omega.”

Juno crooked a finger at him and he darted towards her, stumbling over the wrinkled blankets at the base of her nest. He knelt between her spread legs, waiting for her next command. Just the most lovely, eager-to-please boy. She cupped his cheek, rewarding him with an indulgent kiss. He tasted and smelled like her, covered in her slick and bathed in her perfume, so she kissed him and kissed him until his soft, fresh pine came through.

Once she was satisfied, her hand snaked between them and gripped the base of his shaft.

“Watch,” she purred.

His chest rose and fell with the effort of keeping calm as she guided the head of his cock into her juicy entrance. Only the head, no more.

“Fuck me with just the tip,” she teased him, pulling him back out before sliding him ever so slightly back in again.

“God, Juno,” Julian whispered hoarsely. He obeyed, sweat beading his forehead as he fucked her with the most minute thrusts of his hips, staring entranced at where his cockhead disappeared inside her.

It was torturous for them both, but necessary.

Juno brushed the hair out of his eyes and traced the delicate features of his face. “Do you think you deserve more?”

Her words struck him like a blow to the chest. His shoulders caved in and he slipped out of her. “I don’t deserve any of this.”

The next few moments were critical. Juno would not let him fall into a pit of despair ever again, pulling him back as he hovered on the edge.

“You’re mine, Julian,” she rolled her hips against his, feeling his cock nestle back between her legs. “Are you saying I can’t have you?”

He shook his head emphatically, even though he was unable to look at her. “You have me, Juno. You always have.”

“Then you deserve to be mine,” Juno declared. Even though he was a beta, stress pheromones were pouring off him. Sex seemed long forgotten, whether he was hard or not or if she was slick or not didn’t matter. Juno kept stroking, caressing, soothing him. Tucked his nose into her neck to let him breathe her calming scent and kissed his hair. “Say it.”

“I-I’m yours, Juno.”

“No, angel,” she interrupted softly. “You *deserve* to be mine. Say it.”

Julian squeezed his eyes shut and when he opened them, they were brimming with emotion. “I deserve to be yours,” he said, thickly.

With a small smile, Juno slowly stroked him back to hardness, murmuring encouraging words in his ear. When a dribble of precum leaked from his slit and smeared along her thigh, she dragged his tip along her slit towards her entrance. With a guiding press on his lower back with her other hand, he slid home with a vulnerable shaky groan. She fused their lips together, her tongue sliding along his at the same time as she roughly gripped his hair, bombarding his reeling mind with sensations until he was lost to them.

Their bodies found a grinding rhythm as she began to lose herself in him as well. Pushing and sliding, sweaty heat and breathless cries pounded from her lungs. He watched as she swirled her fingers around her clit, no doubt memorising her technique for next time. She graced him with a feverish moan of his name as she came, the sensation molten and honeyed down her spine.

“Fuck, I can feel everything,” he hissed, arms tensing as she dug her nails into his ass so she could squeeze the life out of his delectable cock. Another firm pull, encouraging him to continue thrusting even though she’d finished.

Juno eyed the strained column of his throat and something told her to curl her hand around it and squeeze the sides lightly. Wasn’t her kink — she didn’t like the claustrophobic feeling — but her sweet angel boy might love the reminder of exactly to whom he belonged.

“Holy shit.” Julian pumped into her with a wild, rough rhythm and she tightened her grip. “Holy fucking shit,” he wheezed.

“Give me your cum,” she demanded, hotly. “I’m a greedy little omega, Julian. I want *everything* from you.”

Julian let out a long, low groan as he filled her deep, his hips canting

forward with short, jerky movements. His scent filled the air, stronger than she'd ever experienced it. A freshly splintered branch and the ooze of sharp, biting sap.

Broken, then life forged anew.

Juno cradled his head between her breasts and held him. "I think you're the only one who can bring out this side of me," she confessed as she nuzzled his damp hair. "I need you as much as you need me. Never doubt that."

She smiled as she watched him begin to nod off.

Juno awoke in darkness, the bright glare of her phone informing her it was far from morning. *1:42am*. Julian was curled in a protective little ball next to her, the blanket tucked neatly under his chin. She gave his nose a light stroke and slid carefully from her nest, padding downstairs to the kitchen in search of a drink. And if a snack somehow found its way into her hand as well, it would be an inconvenience *not* to eat it.

She was headfirst, ass-up in the pantry searching for the box of her favourite cereal she swore she had seen hidden behind the canned goods when a deep, sleep-roughened voice interrupted her.

"Juno?"

She shrieked and leapt up, hitting her head on a shelf and dislodging a poorly resealed bag of flour. It fell over, the momentum apparently enough to pop it open and rain a cloud of white all over her. Isaac stared back at her in stunned silence, both of them unable to speak as the fine powder settled prettily over her.

"This must be how bank robbers feel when they open a boobytrapped bag," Isaac commented dryly.

"What the fuck, Isaac!" She could barely see him from the flour all over her lashes. Despite the logical part of her brain telling her that it was all just an unfortunate accident, the devil on her shoulder picked up the half-filled bag from the floor and piffed it straight at him.

By the time Juno had fully realised what she had done, the flour was already airborne. She could only watch in horror as it landed squarely in the middle of his bare chest, before exploding outwards like an elegant firework. Up into his shocked face, all through his rumpled hair, and down his stupidly

low slung pyjama pants.

“If this is about Julian, I can’t say I agree with how you’ve dealt with it but I’ll take it on the chin.” He wiped a hand along his jawline, shaking the flour off his fingers onto the floor. “Literally.”

This fucker. He was like a little fucking parasite in her mind, just reading her internal thoughts and feelings before she even had a chance to have them. Just once she would like him to be a little bit less of a know-it-all but that would make him less Isaac-y, she supposed.

“He’s mine,” she hissed at him. Thinking of him still sleeping in her nest smelling of her was giving her a feral little edge.

“I agree with you entirely.”

She stared at the flour-coated prime alpha before her. The way he led by putting everyone else in his pack first. Even right now standing there waiting for her to speak instead of rushing off to clean up.

He’s ok, I guess.

Alright, he was everything a prime should be for their pack and definitely someone Julian should have in his corner, however he wanted that to look like.

Juno crossed her dusty white arms. “He’s mine. But you can have him too if you care for him the way he deserves. And Miles is ok with it.”

His shoulders sank and a little flurry of powder fluttered downward. “I would never do anything to hurt either one of them,” he pacified her, brows knitting together. “And Miles and I have, er, talked.”

Juno snorted knowing exactly how Miles would have *spoken* to Isaac. “He have a nice long conversation with you then?”

“Well, not the first time,” Isaac admitted, pragmatically. “But the second time, yes.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to, don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to,” she chanted to herself. She peeked out one eye to see if she’d managed to rile Isaac up. Nothing, unless you counted his mouth pressing together in a slightly firmer line than before. Maybe one day she would crack that perfect veneer of his. Although if covering him with flour didn’t do it, she didn’t know what would.

“Julian feels like pack to me, Juno,” Isaac admitted, quietly. “If you feel he belongs with you—”

She nodded vigorously.

“Then he belongs with us too.”

Juno pulled the tea towel hanging off the oven door and wiped her face with it. She walked over and did the same for Isaac so she could really look at him.

“I’m glad you feel that way.” She smiled up at him. “You should tell him tomorrow.”

“I will.” He took the tea towel from her and dabbed a spot she’d missed on her chin. “Now can we go get this godforsaken flour off of us?”

Their ruined pyjamas were dumped in the laundry. Juno (with her eyes firmly shut) kept calling out “don’t look, don’t look, don’t look” while Isaac (also with his eyes shut) kept exasperatedly pointing out that she was the one who had managed to find a giant shirt of Everett’s to wear. He was still fucking naked and could she please, *please* just throw some clothing — *any clothing* — at him.

Despite several bathrooms in the house they could dash off to separately, they settled on squeezing into the powder room together (to minimise locations they had to clean up). Of course that meant they squabbled like children over the basin and single hand towel. Afterward, Isaac vacuumed while Juno ate a bowl of ice cream and threw M&Ms at him for him to catch in his mouth.

“I don’t know how you can go back to sleep after that much ice cream,” Isaac tutted as they made their way back upstairs.

“Like you didn’t eat about seventeen M&Ms on your own,” Juno retorted.

“Hmm, you’re right. I’ll just wake Miles for round three, I guess.”

Juno immediately began to thump her forehead against the wall of the corridor. She felt his hand squeeze her shoulder and the ghost of a chuckle flutter across her neck.

“Good night, Juno,” he murmured, before disappearing around the corner.

EVERETT

Everett had been staring at the vast concrete column in front of him for far too long. What the fuck was he meant to be doing again? It was his first site visit of the day and he'd completely forgotten how to do his job.

“If you want the tradies to think engineers are even more useless than they already do, congratulations. You have done it.”

He spun around and was met by his uncle's exasperated face. Was it a cliché that he followed the footsteps of his dad and uncle into the family business, hoping to one day fill the vacancy his father had left when he died? It was a moot point at the rate he was going at though, unable to even come up with a suitable comeback for his Uncle Henrik's jab.

“Ok, I see what is happening,” he intoned wisely. “Come,” he commanded Everett with a flick of his head.

Apart from one evening where they both got hideously drunk on schnapps and became ‘Rikko and Retty’ to each other (something they would both vehemently deny happened), Everett still automatically deferred to his uncle. Their workload had been shifting in Everett's direction for years, but they both chose to ignore the day when they would no longer be working together.

Uncle Henrik led him to the top of the half-finished three-storey building, far away from where everyone else was working. Everett released his breath in a long exhale, staring into the far horizon where he could see the edge of the coast disappear into the sea.

“How is your omega?”

“Fine,” Everett replied automatically. Shoot, that was the wrong thing to say to someone who knew him so well. He could already feel the irritated glare being levelled his way. “Ok, she drives me up the fucking wall.”

He glanced over to find his uncle peering at him over his glasses, amusement lighting up his grey eyes. “Didn’t look like she was driving you up the wall the other night.”

Juno and now Julian had been introduced to the rest of the Rivera clan courtesy of their chaotic family dinners. Since the now adult children also brought along their extended pack families, people were stuffed to the gills of the old house. But a change of venue would have been sacrilegious, and their Nanay continued holding court over her big beautiful family like the proud omega matriarch she was.

Everett had known how overwhelming it would have been for Juno at first — hell, he found it overwhelming and that was 19 years ago with infinitely less people. But she came alive at the food spread, making all sorts of distracting noises as she sampled dishes from all the cultures their family represented. She unknowingly won all sorts of hearts that night, flitting around asking everyone how they made her favourites because it was so good she had to know.

When she shyly approached him the day before their most recent dinner and asked for his help putting together a dish of her own to bring, Everett got the weirdest swelling sensation in his chest. She was so nervous but she didn’t have to be. Her Chinese steamed whole fish, laden with aromatic ginger and spring onions, went down an absolute treat.

His uncle was probably referring to the way he’d hugged her from behind when he found her vibrating with excitement over the plate being completely picked clean. But how else was he supposed to discreetly gloat that he’d told her so?

“Well, she does.” Everett crossed his arms, not liking how gleeful his uncle looked. “She’s good with Ollie and Miles. And Julian, of course. Beautiful, fragile and a complete hellcat all at once.” Everett hesitated briefly. “She’s nothing like Emma.”

“Well, thank Christ for that.”

“I don’t even know if she likes me that way,” Everett finished petulantly.

Everett was fairly certain Uncle Henrik cleared his throat to cover a laugh. It sounded like a bullfrog croak. “Do *you* like her that way?”

Did he? It was certainly fucking inconvenient that he would get hard every time he scented her arousal through the house. And with Ollie, Miles and now Julian making her horny it was far too fucking often. The alpha in him was enormously smug every time she wore one of his shirts. Seeing to

her comfort and happiness in small ways had him biting back a purr. But the absolute worst thing was the way she had crashed into his perfectly, measured kitchen habits with her pinches and handfuls and *glob glob globs* of liquid for however the fuck long she felt was right. Yes, of course she could cook however the fuck she wanted but it didn't make it any easier to stop himself from smacking that disobedient little ass of hers and fucking her against the fridge she'd left in disarray.

Uncle Henrik whistled and fanned the air between them. "For god sakes, Everett. It's like you're a teenager again and thought we didn't know the exact day you discovered porn."

Everett groaned and turned away from his Uncle, pulling at his hair in frustration.

"Did I make a mistake bringing you up here? Your Nanay would never let me hear the end of it if you decided to fling yourself off this building."

He took a deliberate step backward and gave his uncle a flat stare.

"Ok, you like her. So what's the problem?"

The silence stretched between them. Of course he knew what the problem was. He didn't want to say it out loud, because doing so might make it true.

"What if..." He trailed off, letting out a weary huff before starting again. "What if it's not as good with her because she's not my scent match? What if Emma was my one shot and it didn't work out?"

There. He'd said it.

"Whew, those are some big questions, son." Uncle Henrik reclined against the nearest pillar and looked out into the distance with Everett. "But you know, the grass isn't always greener on the other side."

Everett waited expectantly for him to say more. It soon became apparent that there wasn't anything else. "That's it?" he fumed. "That's your advice?"

"You want more advice?"

"Yes I want more advice than the *nothing* you just gave me!"

Uncle Henrik held his hands up in surrender. "Alright, alright. How about this." His voice grew wistful and nostalgic. "When I met your Nanay—"

"Seriously?"

"Let me finish, let me finish," his uncle assured him magnanimously. "When I met your Nanay, I knew she wasn't my scent match. But she liked me straight away! Maybe the problem is..." He trailed off as his shoulder lifted in a self-deprecating shrug. "You are not as handsome as I am."

Everett let out a bark of laughter. "Get the fuck out of here before I start

telling everyone your mind's gone soft and you need to retire!"

"Retire! Don't threaten me with a good time, son."

Everett couldn't believe his uncle was shuffling away from him, apparently done with their conversation. Just as he was about to look around and see what he could throw at the infuriating man, Uncle Henrik turned around abruptly clicking his fingers.

"Ah! I remembered the rest of the advice I was going to give you." He waggled his index finger at Everett.

Everett folded his arms, still not discounting the idea of tossing something at him. "Well, what is it?"

His uncle's face grew tender as he looked with open affection at his son in all but name. "The grass isn't greener on the other side. It's greener where you water it. Care for her and let her care for you and I have no doubt you two will flourish."

Everett swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Thank you," he croaked.

"Or whatever!" Uncle Henrik threw up his hands as he sauntered off. "I don't know, I'm just an old man who's gotten too much sun in his life." He continued chattering away, swept up in his own tangent about the hole in the ozone layer back in the day and *goodness* wasn't it a huge fuss for a while and now it's all fixed and you barely hear about it anymore.

Everett followed after him, shaking his head.

MILES

Hey Ev. Ollie's working, Julian's got work drinks and Isaac and I are out. Just you and Juno for dinner tonight.

It would've been a completely innocuous text from his packmate if it wasn't accompanied by about sixteen emojis that got more and more lewd as he scrolled. Everett turned the phone face-down on the counter with an annoyed exhale and made his way upstairs to Juno's rooms. She had become a little study mole since finishing up classes for the semester, slogging through assignments and revising for her upcoming exams. It had been hard when he'd left her lunch once and found it still untouched when he went up with dinner that evening. She had been incredibly apologetic, thanking him

profusely for his effort and admitting she had just been too in the zone to eat.

His little grazing board the next day was much more successful.

Everett stopped outside her study nook, trying not to think about the fact that her nest was right behind the adjacent door. Her nest where she slept every night with one or more of his packmates. Pulled close enough for hands to wander in the night, clothes torn off, sweaty bodies writhing, gasping as she was pounded hard into the—

I said don't think about it!

He glanced down and swore, tucking his now hard cock into the waistband of his sweatpants. Once he was sure his T-shirt was long enough to cover his traitorous dick, he knocked on her door.

“Come in!”

Juno was typing on her laptop, a reference text balanced on her lap and her tablet flickering with a tutorial she was watching at the same time. She had her cute reading glasses on, the pink clear frames contrasting with the dark tattoos peeking out the neck of Ollie's jumper. Everett's eyes ran down past her thick rolled up sleeves to the flippy little skirt he could easily stick his head under and see if her slick was as sweet as her—

Fuck's sake, Everett, I said DON'T—

“Hey Everett! What's up?”

“I, uh...”

Use your words, dipshit.

He swiped his hand over his cheek nervously. “It's just us for dinner,” he informed her. “But don't let me interrupt you. I can bring you up a plate when it's done.”

Juno sighed, shutting her laptop and taking off her glasses so she could rub her eyes. “No, I need a break. I'd love to help.” She blinked up at him, hesitantly. “If you don't mind, that is.”

A couple of months ago he might have had a different answer but tonight he was surprised to find he was completely sincere when he replied. “Of course not.”

“Great!” She leapt to her feet. “Let me just get changed quickly.”

“Don't change,” Everett told her automatically. “You look—”

She picked up one of his T-shirts draped over the back of her chair.

“—like your outfit could be improved,” he finished promptly.

With a knowing smirk, Juno frogmarched him back out the door and shut it in his face. He stood there staring at the blank wood, failing monumentally

at not picturing her pulling Ollie's jumper over her head to reveal smooth skin and her soft, perky little boobs. But in his defence that was literally happening. Just not for him to see.

They trudged downstairs together. Everett let her go first so he could pretend he was a gentleman but really he was admiring the view of her in his clothes. Getting high off the faint whiffs of their blended scents trailing behind her. When did her scent become so potent for him? Surely he would have remembered if he reacted this way to her initially. But somehow, somewhere between their exasperating kitchen clashes and caring a bit too much about whether she was comfortable and fed; her indulgent warming scent had infiltrated his entire being down to his cells. The craving was like an ache, breathing the aromas of a freshly baked dessert but never quite being able to sink his teeth into the juicy, multi-layered treat.

Needless to say, his cock remained vertical and tucked in his waistband.

Everett and Juno had managed to find a grudging mutual respect in the kitchen now. They batted compromises at each other like civilised team mates.

“Three cheeses instead of one?”

“Yes, but measured so the total weight matches the recipe.”

“With extra on the side that we can add to taste if needed.”

“Only if the extra cheese is the one from the ingredient list.”

The only thing they both seemed to agree on was that garlic was a suggestion and doubling was always a good bet. But for everything else, this system had the most success in preventing late meals and kitchen skirmishes.

Everett chopped shallots while watching her humming as she grated cheese. His chat with Uncle Henrik earlier echoed in his mind.

Water the grass. Water the grass.

“I have a scent match,” he announced with zero preamble. “I mean...had a scent match.”

You idiot, he said ‘water’. Not set the grass on fire.

Everett snuck a glance over at Juno, fully expecting a riled up omega but she was still calmly grating away. Looking at him like she was waiting for him to continue. Huh. Maybe the parmesan was getting the brunt of her ire.

“She didn't fit in with the rest of the pack. *Hated* that Isaac and Miles were together.” Even saying it now after all this time made him feel ill. Sympathy and understanding dawned on Juno's face. “Obviously it didn't work out and she's bonded to another pack now. But sometimes I wonder...”

This was it. The moment Juno would decide she didn't need to waste time with someone who was still hung up over a failed scent match.

"You know, the omegas at the scent matching department told me they prefer the term 'scent sympathetic'."

Everett stared at her calmly dusting her hands and wrapping the leftover cheese back up.

"They said it was no guarantee of happiness or compatibility," she continued, moving over to his side of the bench. Her scent was driving him crazy. Potent, golden pink peaches heavy with juice. "I mean, if so-called scent matches were the be-all and end-all of alpha and omega relationships then I guess Ollie's my only relationship in this pack."

She had a wry little smile and eyes that sparkled. "Right," Everett swallowed, unsure of where she was going with this.

"I don't know." She shrugged, tucking her hair behind her ear and a serious expression crossing her face. "Having a scent match is great but once that initial excitement simmers down, it's just like any other relationship. It needs work and equal commitment."

He didn't know what to say as she stepped closer. Her tongue slipped out to wet her plump lips.

"There's something to be said about a slow burning attraction, though." Was her voice always this low and husky? "Dancing around each other for weeks or months. Getting to know them, growing to care for them. All the while never being quite sure whether the other wants it to go further and enjoying the sweet torment of it all at the same time."

The air crackled between them. Electric. He could feel the heat of her body right in front of him, and he could touch her too, if only he just reached out and—

"Oh my god!"

There was a loud hiss as the pot of water on the stove boiled over, small blue flames turning wild and orange. The carefully crafted spell between them disintegrated as Juno raced over to avert the impending disaster.

Everett watched her dart around, waving a sponge and the pot lid. What the fuck was he doing waiting? Why did he not know what she tasted like? Why weren't their scents so mixed it was impossible to tell where one started and the other began?

"Leave the pot, Juno," he ordered her with a deep rumble in his chest.

"What? Why?"

Without looking, he reached over and turned the flame off before stalking towards her.

“Fucking finally,” she teased, with a knowing grin.

The audacity of this little witch. Ordinarily, his first instinct would be to spank her ass red. But the thought that it would trigger Juno made him feel cold towards the act. No matter, he would just have to get creative. Maybe make her beg for his cock and thank him for the privilege.

But first, he had to get that insolent smirk off her face.

Everett cupped a large hand on the back of her neck, bringing her face to his. Their lips met in a clash of reckless desire. Scent match or no scent match, it didn't fucking matter so long as he could keep kissing her. She met his desperation with her own, the intensity between them detonating any doubt. A pained groan slipped from his throat as he slanted his mouth over hers to deepen the kiss.

It was nowhere near enough.

In one smooth motion, Everett had Juno hoisted up in his arms. Back against the fridge, legs wrapped around his waist and her pert little bottom in his hands. Devoured her mouth again, claiming every whine and moan slipping from her lips. He'd never been goddamn harder in his life as he crushed his hips against hers, burying his face into her neck as he felt her slick dampening the front of his sweats. *Peaches, sugar, cream.* He sucked her sweet flavour from her skin growing more unhinged as she consumed all of his senses.

His plans to tease her and edge her and deny her his cock flew out the window, along with the pretence that he had any control left when it came to her. One taste and she owned him. He had to be inside her. To sink into that drenched little hole and watch her mouth drop open as she took him. All of him. The swollen tip, thick veined shaft and his pounding knot. He'd get her slick on his tongue another time 'cause there sure as hell was going to be another time.

Everett reached between them and shoved the front of his pants down, freeing his straining cock. He slid the tip along the edge of her soaked panties, pushing it to one side before plunging the broad head of him inside.

“You're so fucking thick,” Juno panted. Her nails dug into his neck. *Fuck yes.* He wanted her marks all over him.

“Yeah?” Everett lowered her slowly, watching her eyes roll to the back of her head as he filled her just that bit more. “Am I stretching this little pussy

out?”

She bit her lip and nodded. “And you haven’t even knotted me yet,” she said breathlessly.

Everett groaned. “You’re fucking trouble, you know that?” Almost there. He could feel her slick sliding down over his knot. “You can’t say shit like that to me.”

She had the nerve to blink owlishly at him, the picture of innocence. All while his cock was buried in her cunt. “Why not?”

“Makes me want to fuck you so hard you’ll feel me for days,” he snarled as he pounded the last few inches of him deep inside her, relishing the delicious jiggle of her still clothed tits. He was going to suck those hard little nipples until she begged him to play with her poor ignored pussy. Another time. *Another time.*

“Well?” she whispered, cheek against cheek. A chaste scent mark in sharp contrast with her tongue snaking out to trace the contours of his ear. “What are you waiting for then, big guy?”

This fucking hellion was going to be the death of him.

“Don’t want to be too rough with you,” he grunted, pulling out slowly before sliding back into her slick cunt. *Fuuuuck.* He could *hear* how wet she was.

“That’s a shame.” Her legs tightened around his waist at the same time as she clenched her inner muscles, choking the absolute life out of his cock. *So much fucking trouble.* “I was hoping you would fill me up so full I’d be a dripping mess of your cum when the others get home.”

Everett’s world narrowed down to the impish omega wrapped around his painfully hard length, and his pure primal need.

Fuck her.

Knot her.

Breed her.

All rational thought was shoved aside as his alpha instincts came to the fore, her inflamed words tipping him into rut.

JUNO

Juno knew it was possible to send an alpha into rut outside of a heat. But it had been more a theoretical concept. An offhand mention in the same breath as heat spikes when learning more about her designation at the Omega Village. *While more difficult to trigger, a rut episode will usually pass in much the same way as a heat spike does — once the subject reaches climax.*

It was very different to sense the change come over Everett while she was wholly at his mercy.

Her pulse fluttered in her neck and he ran his nose along it, scenting her. Picking up a million little signals her pheromones were sending out. He fucked her slowly, lifting her and dropping her on his length. Up and down, up and down. Using her slick pussy to wet his cock. His nostrils flared at her involuntary whines and thickening perfume. Attuning himself to give her exactly what she needed. Harder, rougher. The magnets on the fridge flew onto the floor like shrapnel.

It was right on the edge of too much for her. So close to feeling claustrophobic, so close to being too aggressive. But she trusted him. Trusted his alpha. Any inklings of apprehension she might have had was soon overridden by the building pleasure between her legs.

He was hitting the pleasure epicentre of her cunt with a frightening precision and on top of it all, the stretch of him was unbelievable. Juno wasn't lying earlier. He really was *so fucking thick*. The only thing that would feel better than being stretched out like this was coming all over his fat cock.

As if sensing the direction of her thoughts, his chest vibrated with a guttural purr. The tremors ran through her, down to where they were joined.

He locked eyes with hers, black pupils overtaking crystalline blue.

“Gonna breed this hot little pussy full of my cum, omega.”

Yeah, that’d fucking do it.

Juno’s legs tensed around his waist, her whole body tightening up as she splintered. Suspended forever in the moment before the free-fall, her vision incandescent.

Then pressure. Her slippery, well-fucked cunt stretching even further as he pushed his knot inside her. Locking right against her G-spot, his shortened thrusts grinding with the most blisteringly unholy pleasure as she came again. Saltwater and razor-sharp eucalyptus swallowed her whole. She couldn’t stop her body convulsing as she felt the warm, wet gush of his cum inside her.

God, that felt good.

“Juno, *shit*. Juno. *Juno*.”

Was that her name? She was far too blissed out of her freaking mind to know for sure.

“Knotted her against the goddamn fridge, what the fuck is the matter with you?”

They were moving now. Her head lolled against a muscled shoulder and she sighed contentedly. A sudden drop followed by a soft, sinking sensation. Two large hands roving over her back.

“I’ve never gone into rut outside of a heat before. Are you ok? Please say you’re ok.”

He was upset? That wouldn’t do. It was the last thing he should be feeling after a performance like that.

Juno blinked and lifted her head. They were on the couch in the living room, still very much knotted together. Everett’s brow was creased with concern, mouth downturned.

“You just fucked me into a brief sex coma,” she said, patting his stubbled cheek. He blinked as she snuggled back into his shoulder.

“So...you’re not hurt?” he asked slowly.

Juno tilted her head slightly and pulled his lips down to hers for a lazy kiss. “Definitely not,” she promised, grazing her nose against his. “I don’t think your alpha could hurt me.”

Everett looked down, his face flushed. “We didn’t even manage to take our clothes off.”

Her fingers found the hem of his shirt, slipping underneath and scraping her fingernails lightly along his stomach. “We can do that now if you like,” she teased.

Everett closed the distance between their mouths, cradling her face as he kissed her like it was their first of the night. Shirts came off and her skirt was shimmed up and over her head because, well, it couldn't very well go south when they were tied together. Undressing each other carefully like newlyweds, strangely shy with their revealed bodies despite what had just transpired.

She traced a puckered scar on his shoulder (he came up second-best in an encounter with a tree branch as a child) and he kissed a little raised mole on her chest. He asked if she'd gotten it checked recently and she rolled her eyes and said yes. But deep down she liked that he cared enough to ask.

Their exploration continued inexorably downwards. His hand covered hers, guiding her fingertips as they brushed her damp lower lips together. It was lewd, fucking indecent really, feeling exactly how tightly she gripped the dense swell of his knot.

"You look so good like this," Everett murmured. The husky resonance of his voice sent tingles down the back of her neck.

"I like how full you make me feel," Juno breathed, with a minute shift of her hips against his. "Not just your cock and your knot..."

Oh Jesus, was she really going to say this?

"...but your cum as well."

The arm banded around her waist tightened as his chest heaved. As if breathing in her words reawakened the beast within him. Her heart was racing in her chest. Oh, she was in for it now. She caught herself smiling and tried to stifle it by chewing on her bottom lip. Everett surged forward, catching it between his teeth instead.

"Hooooooly shit."

Ollie stood frozen in the entryway, eyes like saucers and his bags sliding off his shoulder. He scrambled to catch his expensive gear before it hit the floor.

"Hey Ollie," Everett said conversationally, while his hands roamed south to give her ass a squeeze. "How was your night shoot?"

Her panties were still on, just skewed to one side to accommodate Everett buried between her legs. She could feel the cool air on her asshole as Everett groped and jiggled her cheeks. He had to be doing it on purpose. Juno could not even fathom how vulgar it must have looked from Ollie's perspective.

"It was good, the weather held up thankfully and Jesus tap-dancing Christ I shouldn't be here."

“Why not?” Juno piped up. “We’re naked in the living room, so really, we’re the ones who shouldn’t be here.”

“You’re so smart, baby,” Everett purred in her ear. He looked at Ollie from over Juno’s shoulder. “But since you *are* here, Juno was just telling me how much she likes being full of cum.”

The cheek of this alpha! His knot and cock, which had been gradually softening inside her, was thickening again. She was about to give him a piece of her mind when Ollie spoke up behind her.

“Oh that’s...very interesting,” he said in a strained voice. Juno could see the outline of his cock pressing against his zipper. Well, that was certainly a new and — if she were being totally honest with herself — *welcome* development.

Everett ran his thumb against her lower lip. “Unfortunately I wasn’t able to get to this smart mouth of hers and as you can see, I’m rather preoccupied now.”

Juno let him push his thumb past her lips as she held his gaze and sucked.

“Yes...yes you are.” Ollie stepped closer, magnetised by the view before him. “Always happy to lend a helping hand, Ev, you know that.”

Juno released Everett’s digit with a wet pop. “Your knot is never going to go down at this rate,” she sighed theatrically.

He began doing distracting things with his lips on her neck. “You let me worry about that.”

Ollie stroked her cheek and she shivered slightly at the first touch of him. “Only if you want to,” he murmured, his eyes soft and loving despite the heat of the situation.

Juno yanked him closer using his belt loops and began unbuttoning his jeans. She gave his T-shirt a little twitch and he reached behind his neck to pull it off. He groaned as she freed his stiff length, then threw his head back when she took the dark rosy tip of him into her mouth and swirled her tongue, tasting his macadamia and coffee flavour.

The sound of Everett spitting distracted her momentarily and then seconds later, his wet fingers found her clit. She jerked in his lap, moaning as Ollie slid deeper.

“Focus, baby,” Everett chided her with an amused grin.

God, he was infuriating. Tight little circles just like she liked, fresh slick mixed with his saliva swirling over her sensitive little nub. Juno dug her fingernails in Ollie’s thigh, trying valiantly to shove aside the building

tightness in her belly. She bobbed her head over his cock, making sure to run her tongue along his shaft. Ollie had a fist wrapped around his burgeoning knot and his fingers carded through her hair to help guide her.

“He’s very gentle with you, isn’t he?” Everett observed. “Do you need him to fuck your face a little?”

Juno didn’t think Ollie was breathing when she looked up at him. His cock grew even harder on her tongue, the head of him pressing insistently against the roof of her mouth.

It was so different like this, Juno realised. Roughness with care, from someone who would die before he hurt her. Designed for pleasure, not for bending her to their will. She wanted it. Wanted him to use her and feel power in watching him fall apart.

She uncurled Ollie’s fingers from his cock, moving his hand to join the other one in her hair. Placed her palms flat on his thighs, loosened her jaw and opened her lips, swollen pink from Everett’s earlier kisses, in an O shape.

“Juno, if at any time I do anything—” Ollie said shakily, his words cut off by a desperate grunt as she pulled him towards her and his cock hit the back of her throat. Everett chuckled darkly, rewarding her with faster, more insistent swipes of his fingers and exquisite friction as he began to surge up into her as much as their knotted bodies would allow.

Was there such a thing as a tender face-fucking? Because Ollie managed to give her one. Stroking her cheek, keeping her hair off her face while making sure to never pull or tug on her strands. Short careful thrusts so he didn’t bruise the back of her throat, but still controlling the pace so she was at his mercy. Always watching her reactions, gauging every moan and choking noise to make sure it was never too much.

Doing this for Ollie all while she was still stuffed full of Everett’s knot was unbelievably fucking hot. She imagined the rest of the pack coming home, seeing her filled up and used by these two alphas and that’s all it took. Ollie’s cock stifled her scream as she came apart, legs shaking and her pussy clenching around Everett as the scent of her sugary cream slick filled the air.

“Fucking love watching you come and milk my knot dry,” Everett bit out, right before his second hot load of the night hit the back of her pussy. She could feel a tiny bit trickling out between her thighs, his knot unable to stem the sheer amount of cum she was overflowing with.

“I’m so fucking close.” Ollie looked down at her feverishly. Juno instinctively wrapped her hands around his knot, squeezing tight as he began

to lose control. Several hard, agitated thrusts between her lips and he was coming with a deep groan. Bursts of warm, thick cum landed on her tongue, filling her mouth as the excess slid down her throat into her belly.

Everett gripped her chin firmly with two fingers before she could swallow. "Show me how well you took care of your alpha," he demanded.

Juno shuddered with anticipation as she opened and presented her cum-filled mouth to him. His deflated knot slipped out of her with a filthy gush of their mingled fluids. His hand was there between them, waiting to collect the slick and cum in his cupped palm before he pressed the entire mess onto her waiting tongue.

"Swallow your present, baby."

"Jesus fucking Christ, Ev," Ollie breathed, half shocked, half awed.

She obeyed, revelling in the taste of Ollie's smooth macadamias with Everett's salty tang, sweetened with her juicy brown sugar slick. A sunrise coffee watching the high tide lapping at the shoreline, velvet and cosy between two purring chests. There was a dull pulse in the front of her skull. *Bond them.* Tiredness and hunger hit her all at once and she melted into Everett's waiting arms.

"Hold her, Ollie," she heard Everett say gruffly. "I'll go run her a bath and order a pizza."

ARI

His alpha instincts clawed at him. No matter how many times he reminded himself that Juno had shown her true colours and was just like every other self-absorbed omega, it did nothing to alleviate the raging, irascible beast in his chest. Urging him to fix, to comfort, to soothe.

It wasn't that the omega was upset, or hurt or angry. Ari would have preferred all those things over this. No, things were much worse than that.

She had gone cold. Utterly devoid of emotion, her scent almost undetectable and any trace of light missing from her normally luminous eyes. She showed up on time, submitted her assignments and participated in their last class together.

But *Juno* was no longer there. And he fucking hated it.

The next time he would see her would be at her final presentation. And then she would be gone, her complex, wonderful scent fading from memory. The thought sent panic through him.

It was why he found himself in the Faculty of Design offices hoping to catch one of her other teachers in a carefully calculated but apparently coincidental encounter. He was behaving insanely, potentially even jeopardising his job. But that did not stop him from leaping in front of the older alpha woman exiting the door of her office. His eyes caught briefly on the plaque that read *Dr. Christine Kelly*. Excellent. It was her General Design Principles lecturer. Which he knew 'cause he accessed her schedule in the staff portal like a *fucking deranged stalker*.

"Dr. Christine. Ari from over in Advertising." He stuck his hand out perfunctorily and she took it, confusion slowly crossing her face.

"How can I help you?" She flicked her sleeve to glance at her watch.

Right, straight to the point it was then.

“I was concerned about one of my students. Juno Liu. She takes my class as an elective but is from your faculty.”

Dr. Christine gave him a bewildered look. “Juno? But she’s been a model student. On track to receive a High Distinction in my class.”

Now was definitely not the time to have a surge of pride that she was doing so well.

“It’s just that she...” Ari trailed off, cleared his throat and tried again. “Well, you see, for the past week I’ve noticed, well, not so much as noticed but it’s been apparent to me that...” Fuck, why did he not think this through with more than a single brain cell before going in guns blazing.

The other alpha said nothing for a long moment, content to simply let him dig his own grave. When he was about to start a new sentence for a third time, she cut him off. “This your first year teaching?”

“Yes,” he replied, miserably.

“Look, I know it’s hard to curtail our alpha natures when there are omega students in the class. But you mustn’t treat them any differently.” She had thankfully misunderstood his true intention. “It’ll get easier with time, especially once you’re bonded to your own omega.”

The thought of bonding an omega made him feel ill. Then a flash of blonde, a haze of syrupy peaches and a radiant smile he had seen far too little of. *No. Fuck.* Ari desperately wished he was alone so he could bash his head against a hard surface.

He thanked the well-meaning woman and made a quick escape, feeling infinitely worse than he did before.

Ari had run his students’ names through a randomiser to determine the order of their final presentation. The universe decided it would be infinitesimally amusing to place her dead last. Unfortunately he had been discussing the logistics of it all with Alistair, who would be grading with him, so he did not have the luxury of running it again. Although knowing his luck, it would somehow end up producing the same result.

The first day had passed in a blur. The only notable interaction was being cornered by Priya as he was leaving. Her presentation had been in the

afternoon and she was still hanging around? He was hit by a disconcerting sense of déjà vu. Alistair couldn't save him this time either, having left immediately after the last presentation, apologising that he couldn't help pack up as he was running late for a meeting.

"Long day?" Priya asked, running a sympathetic hand over his arm.

Instead of answering, he looked pointedly down at where she had made contact and shrugged his arm out of reach. Alarmingly, she sidled closer.

"You know you're not my teacher anymore." She seemed amused by his rejection. Ari got the distinct feeling it would be in his best interest to move along to a location that was far more brightly lit with lots of witnesses.

"That's not true, I still have to grade your presentation," he reminded her swiftly.

Priya giggled like he'd told the most hilarious joke instead of stating a fact. She gave her long black hair a flick and her faint floral beta scent washed over him.

"Thanks again for defending me against Juno the other week. She's crazy." She said it with a derisive little laugh and looked up at him, clearly waiting for him to agree.

Despite him turning over the events in his head over and over since then, continually coming to the conclusion that he had been in the right, it did not sit well with him to be thanked for it. Priya's assessment of Juno grated as well, and Ari bit back the defensive instincts that rose up within him.

"I hope there's been no further issues," he replied woodenly, instead.

"Oh no," she said, violating his personal space further. "Thanks to you..."

Yes, he definitely needed to make his escape imminently. He adjusted the bag on his shoulder, lifting the strap up and back down, a clear sign he was making his exit.

"Well, if that's all, I best be—"

"I just don't even know why she's here." An air of desperation and thinly disguised animosity laced her words. "Omegas just want to be taken care of by packs anyway," she scoffed. "We're the ones who actually work hard and keep the world going, you know?"

"Juno's done very well in this class, actually," Ari informed her honestly. He really couldn't take her maligning the omega anymore. "I would've thought you of all people would be understanding of not being judged for your designation."

Priya looked stunned by his reprimand. He took advantage of her silence to take his leave.

Ari stared at the order of presentation in front of him, Juno's name taunting him from the bottom of the list.

"You alright there, mate?" Alistair nudged him as a student shuffled out the door, drowning in his own flop sweat after a disastrous display.

"Yeah, fine," Ari replied a little too quickly. He glanced at his watch — *lunchtime*. Thank Christ. "Do you ever wonder what you would do if you found your scent match?" he found himself asking his old friend.

"Well, I don't have to wonder," Alistair replied matter-of-factly. "I *have* found my scent match."

Ari swung his head around in disbelief. "You never told me this."

The other alpha shrugged. "It was a while ago," he said, impassively.

"What about Beth?"

"Oh, I chose her." Alistair flashed his wedding ring. "Clearly."

Ari stared at him sitting there like they were exchanging pleasantries at afternoon tea instead of discussing a monumental life event he'd never mentioned. "Mate, you are absolutely killing me here," he complained, giving his sideburn an anxious tug.

Alistair gave him an amused sidelong glance before he looked away, eyes distant. "I'd been with Beth about two years," he recounted. "One night on the tube home, an omega scent absolutely knocked me on my arse. Like, I genuinely could not stop myself getting off at the wrong station to follow her. I think the only reason I was able to control myself somewhat was because she was bonded already. Dampens the effects a bit." He scratched the back of his neck, looking mildly embarrassed. "Bloody good thing too because it took all of five minutes chatting with her to realise we had wildly different values."

Ari's brow creased. "What, you knew that from five minutes?"

Alistair chuckled humourlessly. "She said she couldn't believe her scent match was black. And asked if I had a job at least because her prime would have a hard enough time accepting me into the pack as is."

"Oh bloody hell."

“So yes.” Alistair gave him a tight-lipped smile. “I’m proper pleased with my decision to remain with Beth.”

They sat in silence as Ari processed Alistair’s awful story. Whoever was in charge of scent matches certainly had a twisted sense of humour.

“Do you think it’s all rubbish then?” Ari asked him. “Scent matches?”

“Ah, who knows. So long as Beth’s willing to put up with my sorry arse, it’s not my concern, really.” Alistair stood up, looking at Ari expectantly. “Now are we getting lunch or not? I could murder a chicken katsu right now.”

She walked in at the end of the day and suddenly Ari wasn’t tired at all. How was she somehow more beautiful each time he saw her? It was like revisiting a classic artwork and finding new details to admire each time. The flattering curve of her neckline framing her inked collarbones. The adorable way she closed doors with a bump of her hip. Her unconsciously crossed fingers for luck as she stood in front of them, her presentation materials in hand. Sticky sweetness, creamy silk and utter lusciousness.

“Hi Ari.”

It was deeply, deeply unfair how right his name sounded on her lips.

She greeted Alistair as well but Ari paid so little attention she could have called his friend a frothing wanker and he would’ve just smiled and nodded in agreement.

“Hi Juno. You may start whenever you’re ready.”

Her pitch presentation was excellent, of course. She had taken the very broad tagline assigned to her for a fictional bank (*‘Secure your tomorrow, today’*) and built a multi-channel brand campaign around it. The main outdoor component built trust and brand awareness with the public, targeting high corporate density areas to specifically drive business customers to the bank. Not many of the other students had managed to nail that particular part of the brief. She had mock-ups of billboards superimposed in real life locations, print ads (because the demographic of people who made the financial decisions for large businesses still read newspapers) and even a rough storyboard for social videos (for tech-forward startups and smaller fish).

Ari had the oddest sensations coursing through him. Satisfaction at how well she had done. Astonishment over just how much she had taken in everything he had been teaching. A lingering dread, as he couldn't see how this omega in front of him was the same one who would attack a fellow student, particularly in light of Priya's odd behaviour yesterday.

And finally, possessiveness, because it was preposterous that this brilliant, competent omega was not *his*.

Ari ran his hand through his hair, blinking hard to try and clear the alpha fog. He stared at her presentation boards, willing himself to find something, *anything* to distract him.

"The logo," he said suddenly. He pointed at her main outdoor ad. "Would be better in the other corner as it would follow the direction of the action better."

There, now she could think he was an asshole.

He looked up at her and instead of annoyance or frustration, she had a triumphant little smile.

"I *blue-boated* you, Ari."

Juno reached down and pulled out an identical mock-up of her outdoor ad — save for the logo which she had placed...in the exact corner he had just told her to.

God fucking dammit.

It all went back to his very first lecture. The fable of the blue boat — a deliberate design choice (i.e. a blue boat) placed for the sole purpose of giving clients something to give feedback on. *Everything's great, just get rid of the blue boat.*

Ari glanced at Alistair who was watching this all unfold gleefully. *Oh, you're fucked*, his knowing little smirk said.

Alistair didn't waste a single second once Juno thanked them and shut the door behind her.

"She's yours, isn't she?"

Ari shut his notebook with a loud smack. "You are too observant for your own good, you miserable gobshite," he muttered with no real heat.

"*Do you ever wonder what you would do if you found your scent match?*" Alistair mimicked Ari, putting on a truly offensive falsetto. "I don't need to be Sherlock bloody Holmes to solve that mystery." He leaned forward on his arms so he could get a good look at Ari. "Christ, how have you dealt with having her in your class the whole semester?"

Ari busied himself with tidying up a day's worth of takeaway coffee cups. "By not wanting or needing an omega," he said waspishly.

Alistair levelled him a look that said he was letting that particular comment slide for now but they would be revisiting it later. "Well, she's clearly very bright and doesn't strike me at all as a racist so you're already doing better than me," he said diplomatically.

"Though I have a whole host of other problems." Ari pointed with his chin at the order of presentation, reminding Alistair that Juno was still his *student*.

"Well, she won't be your student any longer once you grade her. And she's not even from our faculty so you won't have any further influence over her education." Alistair rose, shrugging his jacket over his shoulders. "Ethically a little grey but certainly not illegal — is what I would tell you as a friend." He pushed his chair back under the table with a definitive thud. "As Head of Advertising, however, I would direct you to the university's code of conduct."

"It doesn't matter. I don't want an omega."

Ari could feel Alistair's pitying gaze burning into his back.

"You have to get past what Amelia did eventually, Ari."

Hearing her name still sent chills along his spine. Ari didn't know how to respond to that so he didn't. He felt enormously tired all of a sudden and thought wistfully of his couch as the two of them made their way into the hall.

Only to see Priya's open hand descending on Juno's cheek, slapping her so hard the omega was thrown against the wall.

JUNO

Juno was buzzing as she left her presentation. She thought back to when she first brought up the idea of blue-boating Ari to Ollie. It was his “*You have to. You HAVE to!*” followed by a manic little giggle that sealed it for her. She still couldn’t quite believe that it worked. Her thumbs flew across her phone screen as she bounced along.

HE TOOK THE BAIT

Three little circles popped up immediately (he must have been waiting to hear how she did, bless him) and then a flood of excited gifs came through. Juno laughed, trying to focus on how well she had done rather than the fact that she had seen Ari for what was likely the last time.

“You bitch!”

A sharp stinging blow whipped across her cheek from out of nowhere. Her body was caught completely unaware, the force of it sending her reeling. Then, impact. Shoulder, hip. A glancing knock on her head off a hard, flat surface. *Vincent’s rancid breath across her face as he gripped her hair in his fist.*

“Why is he blowing me off? What did you say to him? I know it was you, you fucking whore!”

He was shaking her head back and forth and her scalp screamed as clumps of her hair were torn violently away. The muscles in her neck strained as she fought consciousness. Just let him take what he wants. Let him get this out of his system so it’ll be over quicker. Hair grows back and bruises heal.

A roar of anguish. An alpha. Another alpha? Just one alpha. Because Vincent wasn’t here. Vincent was dead, and the person being ripped away

from her body was not a long dead alpha but a screeching, enraged beta.

“Help her, Ari. I’ll deal with this.”

Barking. Hate barking. Can’t ignore, can’t disobey. Two alphas. There were two alphas after all. But none of them were Vincent?

No more alphas, I can’t take it.

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Juno flinched at the shaking hand on her cheek. A pair of dark, devastated eyes swam into view. She couldn’t stop trembling. She was losing control, her limbs and racing heart not her own.

“You have to get here now.” The alpha was on his phone begging. “Ollie, she needs you.”

Ollie?

A scent memory rose up instinctively. Steam curling from a warm comforting cup of coffee, hugged between cold hands. Snuggles and crinkled laughing eyes. *Safe.* Where was he?

A whine slipped out and she sensed the acidic burn of Ari’s stress. His hands were ghosting over her skin, too afraid to touch but desperate to comfort her. Coffee blurred into tea, citrus-laced and aromatic and a viscous drizzle of honey.

This one’s yours too.

Ari let loose a choked sound when she clasped his forearm, trying to ground herself back to reality. Voices and imminent footsteps tap, tap, tapped at a far corner of her brain. He scooped her up in his arms, carrying her into a nearby classroom and shut the door.

You are not back there.

A shaking hand stroked her hair, and his cheek pressed against her forehead as he curled the tall length of his body around hers protectively. Her nose slid easily into the crevice between his chin and neck and she breathed his ambrosial scent in.

They have no power over you any longer.

“Please tell me this ok — holding you like this,” Ari said, fingertips playing over her skin. “I need you to be ok,” he whispered, his voice breaking.

She wasn’t ready to talk yet. Instead, she found his hand with hers and looped their pinkies together. He squeezed back tight in understanding.

She'd never seen Ollie angry before.

It was kind of...hot? Maybe it was because he was so angry on her behalf. He was so careful as he embraced her, taking her from Ari as soon as he arrived. Telling her what a brave and clever omega she was as he rubbed soothing circles on her back. But his face was thunderous as he glared at Ari, demanding explanations.

“Priya’s been after her for months. Juno told me you thought *she* was the aggressor. Do you think that now, Ari? Are you satisfied now that it’s come to this?”

Ari was distraught, Ollie’s words unable to inflict more pain than the flagellation he was giving himself. Ollie scoffed, turning away from him and focusing on Juno.

“Does anything hurt, sunshine?”

Everything and nothing. How to explain it to him? Her cheek on the surface, and her heart deep below. Yet everything was numb and she still had no words.

Ollie didn’t push further, grazing his cheek and neck over her shoulder and leaving her with the most lovely cloud of his scent.

“Did you at least have her seen by a doctor or nurse?” he hurled at Ari.

“Yes, I-I had a first aid officer come by. I asked that they didn’t stay after they were done because I didn’t want her to feel unsafe around a stranger,” Ari replied dejectedly. “He said she was just in shock but was physically ok and left an ice pack for her cheek. I was able to pull Priya off before she could get a proper grip on her hair and—”

Ollie interrupted, white with fury. “She tried to pull Juno’s hair?”

Ari looked stricken and nodded. Ollie pulled Juno even closer and pressed loving kisses along her hairline.

“Oh sweet girl, I’m so sorry,” he whispered, understanding exactly why she was frozen like this. “Can I take you home to your nest? I think I know a few people who want to give you some snuggles right now.”

Juno released a tired little sigh and Ollie lifted her like she was air, making his way towards the door.

“Ollie, I—”

“Save it, Ari.”

The passing streetlights lapsed across her face in a hypnotic rhythm. She stared out the car window, letting the sparkling city blur out as her eyes unfocused. Ollie's hand was steadying and warm on her knee as he drove.

"I thought Vincent was alive again."

His fingers tightened reactively before gently palming even more of her skin.

"I could smell him," Juno continued tonelessly. "Feel exactly the way he used to hurt me." She laid her head against the window. "I was doing so well too," she mused quietly to herself.

"You *are* doing well," Ollie corrected her fiercely. "Being triggered doesn't make you weak or mean you haven't worked hard. You can't be strong all the time, and you don't need to be. I certainly don't expect that of you."

Juno stared at him, slightly awed at the maturity of the tirade coming from the ordinarily puppy-like alpha. Ollie ploughed on, unaware of her transfixed gaze. "And during times you can't be strong, letting me be here for you...it's a privilege, Juno." He faced her, radiating sincerity. "It's a blessing to love you."

She couldn't stop the cascade of emotions even if she tried. Everything that had been held back from the moment Priya's hand connected with her cheek to right now came flooding out.

"I really want to kiss you right now," she sobbed.

Ollie laughed, bringing their clasped hands up to his lips and kissing her knuckles. "We're almost home, sunshine. Then just try and stop me from loving the fuck out of you."

When Juno told Isaac that Ari had reached out wanting to talk, the very last thing she expected him to say was—

"Invite him to the house. How about this Saturday? Everyone will be home for our game night anyway. Tell him 5pm, before things really kick off."

It was...unsettling. Nevertheless, the invite was extended and he accepted, probably grateful she didn't just send him a profanity laced response. Saturday 5pm rolled around and she opened the door to an

extremely nervous Ari. His hair was the longest she'd ever seen it, curling around the nape of his neck, though he had clearly tried to tame the strands into some sort of neatness. Despite him making an effort in his outfit, there was still an element of unkemptness he couldn't escape no matter how hard he tried. Neckline slightly pulled to one side, frayed edges on his sleeves and his heavy boots scuffed on the toes. Juno didn't mind it though. It would've been more alarming if he'd turned up in a suit.

Isaac held his hand out, popping up from behind her like a haunted house attraction. They exchanged introductions, shaking hands a bit too firmly. Something *alpha* passed between them, a sense of finality thudding as Ari dropped his eyes a moment later and Isaac gave him a curt nod.

Juno fought the urge to roll her eyes. "If you want to measure dicks, do it later," she complained as she swished back inside, ignoring Ari's spluttering and Isaac's cough.

She sat in the lounge room between them, feeling a bit like she had just introduced two thoroughly incompatible cats to each other. Ari's ratcheting anxiety only grew worse with Isaac's beady-eyed assessment and she felt the need to say something.

"Ari, you had something to tell me?"

He looked at her, breaking Isaac's hold on him. Yes, good. Focus here instead of at the alpha that looks like he's mentally skinning your flesh.

Ari leaned forward, elbows on his long thighs and hands clasped. "I thought you should know that Priya has been expelled," he intoned flatly. "She showed no remorse and it was a very easy decision for Alistair. Especially since he witnessed everything that happened. It's since come to light that she has a pattern of this behaviour," he shifted uncomfortably. "Chasing alphas and exhibiting prejudice towards omegas. This was the first time it escalated to violence."

It was certainly a relief to know she could go back to school next semester and not have to worry about running into Priya.

"I'm sorry she set her sights on you, Juno. I'm sorry I did nothing to stop it and only made it worse. I'm not making excuses when I say this but my own experience with omegas coloured how I saw you with her. And that wasn't ok."

His pain festered in him like a boil. Juno wanted to lance it and release the immense, agonising pressure he had put himself under for so long.

"Tell me," she murmured, the soft request more disarming than a harsh

demand.

Ari flicked a look over at Isaac, who had not moved a single muscle, and turned back to Juno with a slight shudder.

“I was in a pack in London. Friends I’d grown up with. We were closer than brothers, and they were everything I wanted in my chosen family. Two of them found their scent match in the same omega so she joined our pack. Amelia and I didn’t love each other like that but I respected and cared for her as my pack omega.”

His hands were trembling as the buried memories clawed to the surface, undead and poisonous.

“Then I fell in love with Lucy, a beta, and everything changed. Amelia didn’t want me but she didn’t want anyone else to have me. Slowly but surely, she turned my pack against me and they cast me out. And I lost Lucy too in the end, because she couldn’t deal with the guilt and who I’d become without my brothers. I wouldn’t have stayed either. I was a depressed, bitter mess of a person and because I’d bonded her, she felt everything.”

Ari angrily wiped a tear from his cheek with a broad swipe of his palm. It was hard for Juno not to reach over and do it for him.

“So when Alistair offered me a job on the other side of the world, I took it. The bond had been fading already from the stress our relationship was under. Not seeing her every day sped up the process. I swore I would never have anything to do with omegas ever again. And then on the first day of what was supposed to be my fresh start...”

“I walked in.”

“You walked in.”

The silence stretched between them, a tightrope of emotions and possibility.

“I thought if I resisted you, it would prove somehow that my old pack didn’t have to stay with Amelia just because they were scent matched. So I told myself you were like her, Juno. Selfish. Narcissistic. Hating betas simply for their designation. I saw what I wanted to see. I was wrong, so wrong, and you paid for it. I’m so sorry,” Ari said, shame and remorse eating him alive.

“Thank you for sharing your story and for your apology,” Juno replied, softly.

Unsure of where to go from here, they stared at the floor and pushed their toes awkwardly into the carpet.

“Ari.”

The reminder of Isaac's presence in the room was like the crack of a bull whip. They both turned to see the prime alpha rising from his chair.

“Do you play gin rummy?”

ARI

Juno and her alphas were all eerily quiet, staring at their tiles in deep concentration. Gin rummy using mahjong tiles with suited card faces — something Isaac had brought home after a business trip in Hong Kong — was apparently a staple of game night with the Rivera-Gunnarsson pack. The green and white blocks clicked rhythmically as each player adjusted their hand.

Ari started as a cold, wet sensation grazed his arm.

“Oh, sorry mate. Just trying to give you a beer.”

Isaac’s bonded was all smiles as he held the bottle out for him. Ari took it gingerly before trying to focus back on the game. He was supposed to be learning the rules so he could switch with whoever lost.

How the fuck am I here right now.

Miles clinked his bottle with Ari’s and took a long gulp as Ari dutifully matched him. Surely there were hidden cameras somewhere. His eyes instinctively made a beeline for the perfectly ordinary ceiling corners.

“The alphas are just on edge right now after everything,” Miles said discreetly out the corner of his mouth. “Once they see that Juno is fine it’ll be ok.”

Ari didn’t understand any of this. “How do you know?”

The beta levelled him a knowing look. “Please,” he scoffed. “There’s a reason *those* three are playing with Juno right now and Julian and I are not.” He used his bottle to point at the table. “Juno’s doing her best work right now.”

Everett had laid three Jacks down. As soon as he discarded a tile and ended his turn, Juno let out a squeal and did a happy little shimmy in her seat.

“I won!”

She clicked her final tile — the fourth Jack — next to Everett’s set.

“Fuck,” Everett swore, looking down at his hand.

“Oh no!” Ollie exclaimed, “Look how many tiles you have left.”

“I’m aware,” Everett said shortly.

“Wow, I’m not last for once,” Ollie continued, unwittingly rubbing salt in his wound.

Isaac just sat there with a bemused smile, turning his final tile over and over with his fingertips. There wasn’t really a need to tally up, especially when Everett grumpily revealed a pair of Kings he still had. Juno blew him a kiss from across the table and he responded by mouthing something Ari couldn’t catch from his perspective. The reaction from Juno was immediate, her mouth falling open as she squirmed in her seat. Everett rose, looking pleased with himself despite his loss, and offered his chair to Julian.

The mountainous alpha trudged over to the pair of them, picking up the snack and dip bowls along the way.

“Chip?”

Ari glanced at Miles, who had his brow raised as if to say ‘*told you*’. Ari thanked Everett before taking a bite.

“That dip is bloody good,” Ari said as he went for seconds. And then thirds.

Everett chuffed from deep in his chest. “Course it is. Juno and I made it.”

Ari watched him bring it over to the table to offer Juno some, his open affection for the omega softening his blunt features considerably. Juno gave him the most adorably appreciative doe eyes, thanking him with a little scrunch of his tummy. Something in Ari’s chest twinged painfully like a phantom limb.

Ollie proceeded to lose the next round, even more spectacularly than Everett had lost his, and called on Miles to take his place. Ari held a fresh beer out for him, unconsciously holding his breath until Ollie trotted over to take the peace offering.

“So...I don’t like being angry at people I like,” Ollie began, after they’d sipped in silence for a few moments.

“Oh, I deserved it though,” Ari responded immediately. “100%.”

“Good, we agree then,” Ollie shot back. They exchanged timid smiles and drank some more, thankful to have something to occupy both their mouths and hands.

“Just...don’t hurt her again,” Ollie said quietly, scraping at the bottle label with his fingernail.

How could he when he would never see her again? Why would he ever be an issue when he was firmly in her past and they were her future? What was his life supposed to look like after he left tonight?

There were a lot of things Ari wanted to ask.

Instead he just inclined his head. “I won’t,” he promised.

Ollie’s genuine smile lightened the dead weight on his chest slightly. He gestured at the gin rummy game with his thumb. “Is it making sense yet?”

Isaac must’ve had bat-like hearing because he waved them over. “I’ll sit out this time,” he offered. “Let you and Julian play a few more rounds to get the hang of things.” Isaac’s hand brushed lingeringly along Julian’s shoulder as he stood up, causing the young beta’s ears to flame uncontrollably.

Juno gifted Ari a smile as he sat, eyes a little too bright from her drink being refreshed constantly by attentive pack members all night. He began to stack his tiles, trying not to focus on how intoxicating the perfume of a happy, fulfilled omega was. Plush, whipped and delicately sugared vanilla cream, the surface smooth and inviting just pleading for him to run his tongue along and—

“Ari, it’s your turn.”

“R-right, ok. Sorry.”

The hardest thing was how easy it all was. Easy to start teasing the other pack members for their awful hands. Easy to find delight in each other’s clever moves. Easy to laugh, easy to let go. It didn’t matter who sat across and beside him, whether Juno was there or not, there was an effortless connection between them all.

“Do you guys play any other games?” Ari asked as he helped shuffle the tiles ready for the next game.

“What, bored already?” Miles needled him.

“N-no, of course not. I meant—”

“Don’t tease him,” Juno chided from behind him, ruffling his hair. Fuck, that felt good. It took everything to stop himself leaning back and chasing more scratches like an eager pup.

“We kind of go through phases,” Ollie provided helpfully. “Classics like UNO and Pictionary. Sometimes we’ll try newer, more obscure games too.”

“There were those quiz-type games we did for a while too — with our phones and the TV,” Miles added, clicking his fingers.

“Would you ever do something like Mario Party?” Ari asked.

The last thing Ari expected was Miles and Ollie groaning, with the latter waving his arms frantically trying to shut him up.

“Don’t mention Mario Party,” Ollie hissed, leaning close so he could keep his voice down.

“Why not?” Ari whispered back.

“We don’t play Mario Party in this house, Ari.” Isaac’s booming voice echoed across the room, startling Ollie and Ari like misbehaving schoolchildren.

“You mean *you* don’t play Mario Party.” Everett’s footfalls were heavy as he strode over. “Cause you’re a *goddamn fucking thief*.”

Miles threw his hands up. “Here we go,” he said in a deeply resigned tone.

“For god’s sake, Everett, let it go,” Isaac said, massaging his temples.

“Don’t tell me to let it go, I will never let it go!” Everett hollered. “There were *two* other A.I. players yet you chose to steal *MY* fucking star!”

“And I fucking won, didn’t I?” Isaac roared back.

“The point of Mario Party isn’t to win, it’s to *PARTY!*” Everett punctuated the final word with a slice of his huge hand.

Juno was watching them with the most undisguised look of glee on her face, dining on the revelation that these two commanding alphas had one weakness — a long-held grudge over a pixelated star.

“How long has this argument been going on?” Ari asked Ollie out of the corner of his lips.

Ollie counted on his fingers, mouthing the numbers under his breath. “About 12 years,” he finally said.

The argument deflated as quickly as it started, the exact same way it always did according to Miles (they agreed to disagree). The rummy tiles were abandoned soon after as their Greek feast arrived. They had seven fat, overstuffed gyros and a mountain of oregano feta chips to contend with. Ari ate more than he should’ve and they all sat around afterward looking like slugs draped over the furniture, unable to do anything except complain about how they should’ve stopped eating sooner.

Juno made an offhand comment expressing an interest in VR gaming so of course several of them leapt up immediately to get the console set up. It’s how Ari found himself on the sofa alone with Julian.

“This is my first game night too.” The soft-spoken beta said shyly,

blinking like he couldn't believe he was here. "I'm having a lot of fun."

Ari gave him a surprised look. "I didn't realise how new you were to the pack."

Julian ran a hand through his thick black hair. "Yeah, I still can't believe it sometimes. Like look at all them and I'm just here like—" He made a sweeping gesture with his hand as if to indicate how woefully inadequate he was.

"Don't do that," Ari admonished him immediately. "Betas have a place in pack dynamics just as much as other designations."

Julian ducked his head, embarrassed. "Well, thank you," he replied almost imperceptibly. "I wasn't expecting Isaac to give me a chance to be honest. I mean, Juno and I weren't even anything back then. But I'm grateful. It would've been hard to lose Juno again."

Ari's brain was stalled on one part of Julian's nervous babbling. "Back... then?"

Julian's mouth opened and closed soundlessly like a goldfish as panic overtook him. "Um, I-er..."

"It's ok, Julian."

Juno had reappeared, laying a calming hand on his shoulder. He grasped her fingers, laying a kiss across her knuckles. They exchanged a few words, heads close and noses almost touching before Julian stood up, gave Ari a nod and left.

Ari was extremely conscious of the fact that this was the first time they had been alone together all evening. He smoothed the creases on his pants with damp palms. She sank into the armchair next to him, their knees on the verge of making contact.

"I met Julian through my old pack. They weren't good alphas to say the least and we both suffered." Juno's eyes were far away as she absentmindedly traced circles on her neck. "Luckily, I got away and qualified for the bond dissolution trials at the National Omega Commission."

She wasn't tracing circles, Ari realised. She was tracing scars. Raised scars of old, viciously delivered bondmarks. The tattoos, her reaction to Priya's attack. It all came together. A mosaic of trauma and adversity she had overcome, crystallising into the woman in front of him.

Bent not broken.

"Fuck," he breathed. "I'm utter garbage for piling on top of what you've already been through."

She leaned forward on her elbows, eyes luminescent and penetrating. “Don’t minimise what happened to you, Ari. You lost your entire family, everyone you loved. It’s no small thing.” She broke her gaze and Ari felt like he could breathe again. She continued haltingly as she picked unconsciously at the skin around her fingernails. “And with Priya...I judged her too, you know. She was rude so I was rude back. But it can’t be easy being a female beta either. With the balance of gender and designations the way they are in our world, many packs look like this one. I mean, why should I have so many amazing men to love and she can’t even find one? Someone can only feel unwanted or left behind so many times before it twists them into something ugly.” Juno looked up with a wistful expression on her face, and Ari couldn’t help staring at her inked neck. “It’s a shame she didn’t focus on what she *did* have rather than what she didn’t.”

“How...” Ari cleared his throat and began again. “How can you sympathise with her after what she did?”

Juno’s next words etched themselves on his very soul. “Anger is poison, Ari. Compassion is free.”

He wanted to surge over and pull her up into his arms. To feel her skin on his skin, breathe the same air as her, just for the chance that glimmer of her light would infuse him too. Brown sugar sweetness balancing all the places he was bitter.

Measured footsteps approached, and Ari sensed the arrival of the prime alpha before he saw him. Alphas didn’t test each other often anymore — it would make day to day life a bit too savage for modern sensibilities, baristas fighting customers, business meetings turning into brawls — but Ari had capitulated to Isaac almost instantaneously. Worse was that he was certain Isaac hadn’t even been trying to contest him.

It was why his blood froze when Isaac stopped directly behind Juno, staring him down like a sentinel.

“Thank you for joining us tonight, Ari.”

He knew a dismissal when he heard it.

Ari unfolded his tall body from the sofa and rose, letting Isaac and Juno escort him out. He was halfway down the steps when he paused, looking back over his shoulder at Juno and Isaac framed by the front door like a Baroque painting. *The Queen and her Black Knight*.

Look but don’t touch.

“You passed with flying colours by the way.”

Juno lifted a hand to her chest. “Thank you.”

Ari inclined his head respectfully. “You deserve it.”

They both knew he wasn’t talking about her grade.

A chill came over him as he walked away, a bittersweet depression numbing him from the inside out. He felt banished from his home all over again. Only this time, there was his beautiful scent-matched omega at the centre of it all. A sun who shone a light on the very best parts of the family who orbited her. He tumbled from her gravitational pull, icing over.

She was happy.

She was happy without him.

JUNO

“My omega thinks he’s mine, you know.”

Juno watched Ari disappear from view. Isaac brushed against her forearm and she moved to the side to let him close the door.

“It takes more than a scent match to be deserving of you, Juno,” he said gravely.

“I know, I know.” She waved her hand placatingly. “I meant that it’s hard to see him like this. Yes, he fucked up but he didn’t *make* Priya attack me. She’s responsible for her own actions. They just both have their own issues and it just...collided badly and I was the collateral damage.” Juno let out a resigned sigh.

Isaac skimmed her now-healed cheek with his thumb, pinning her with an assessing gaze. His careful touch trailed down her jawline to tilt her chin up slightly. If anyone saw them, they would swear he was about to kiss her. But Juno knew he was just looking at her, *really* looking at her. He tenderly tucked a blonde lock of hair over her ear, apparently satisfied with his perusal, and the moment was broken.

He made a motion to leave when Juno spoke up again. “Why did you invite him tonight?”

Isaac went still. Juno swore a ripple went through his sleek body as he tamed the alpha within.

“Seeing what could have been, everything he lost...no one will punish him more for that than himself, don’t you think?”

The icy satisfaction in his tone unnerved her. She let out an uncomfortable laugh. “You’re hardcore, you know that?”

They were in the eye of a tornado of Isaac’s making.

“No one hurts the ones I love, Juno.” A vow so unyielding it could’ve been written in blood.

Then he left, leaving her to flounder under the weight of his words.

Ollie looked down at the ostentatious invitation in his hand. He turned it over as if to confirm something then flicked it back over.

“We’ve never been invited to a NOC fundraising gala before.”

Juno reached over and took the heavyweight card from him. Was that real gold leaf on the edges? Surely the budget for that could’ve been allocated somewhere more appropriate. Housing victims of abuse, providing omegas with minimally-invasive empathetic medical care, fixing that uneven pavement right outside her therapist’s office.

“Don’t look at me, I’ve never been to one of these fancy things,” she said, sliding it back towards him over the kitchen counter.

Isaac walked in, making a beeline for the coffee machine and Ollie perked up. “You know anything about this?” he asked, barricading Isaac’s access to his morning jolt with the invitation. Isaac gave it an annoyed little flick, like he was getting rid of a gnat, and silently began making himself a coffee.

“You have to wait,” Juno mouthed at Ollie soundlessly. Ollie instead held the card out, inching closer and closer to Isaac’s face like he had a death wish. He was millimetres from making contact when Isaac snatched it from him.

“Forgot how annoying little brothers are,” he muttered under his breath as he flipped the card over. “Oh, right. Yes. We’ve never been invited before until now.”

“Because...” Ollie drew out the vowels for longer than necessary.

Isaac glanced quickly at Juno before smashing the invitation into Ollie’s chest, shutting him up. “I had reason to make a sizeable donation this year. Particularly to their bond research and development team and scent matching department.”

Juno tugged at the collar of the borrowed shirt she wore. Was it hot in here? Maybe she needed to check where she was in her heat cycle. She grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl and made a hasty exit.

“We have to make time to find appropriate outfits,” Isaac called after her. “On it!” she squeaked as she scooted away.

Juno wasn't sure if *appropriate* was the right word. In fact, she was sure it was the wrong word. Because there was nothing *appropriate* about the way the green silk hugged her willowy frame, creating the illusion of dips and curves where she was fairly certain she had none. The off-the-shoulder neckline framed her tattoos perfectly. The skirt had just the right amount of fullness to swish dramatically as she walked, before the high slit revealed almost her whole leg.

Miles had spotted her first, then went on to describe so many filthy scenarios involving him, her and the fucking dress she had no choice but to pull up her skirt and shove him under it. He was more than content to leave with his face absolutely doused in her scent but Everett shouldered him into the bathroom and told him to wash. “No one gets a whiff of our omega's slick but us,” he snarled, and then had to deal with his possessiveness riling her up all over again.

They were fashionably late as a result.

Juno wound her arm around Isaac's proffered arm as she carefully made her way up the steps towards the venue's entrance. She gazed out at the shimmering sea right at the edge of the stupendous waterfront estate. Members of the upper echelons of society milled about the top, surrounded by a truly excessive amount of perfectly styled flowers.

“So this is what an influx of alpha money can buy,” she noted dryly. “Shouldn't they put the money from something like this towards the things they're fundraising for?”

Isaac placed his other hand on top of the one looped with his. “Well, the idea is that if you schmooze the wealthy packs properly, they'll be more likely to open their wallets.”

“Society is fucked.”

“Agreed. Shall we?”

They continued up the steps, the rest of the pack trailing behind them. “Thank you for the donation you made, though,” Juno added quietly after a beat. “I-I don't mean to be ungrateful.” Isaac gave her hand a quick squeeze

in understanding.

Juno had already made a game plan to anxiously stick to her pack like glue all night. The last thing she expected was to see three familiar faces huddled together. Before she knew it she had broken away from Isaac with an excited gasp and made her way over to the group.

“Juno! Omg, guys, it’s Juno!”

She was quickly enfolded in a three-way hug with Aisha, Marco and Layla — the omegas who had helped her match her to Ollie’s pack.

“God, you all look amazing,” she gushed. “Especially you, Aisha. Congratulations on the baby!”

“Babies,” Aisha corrected her proudly. “Two little boys. They’ll be the death of me, I can already tell. This is my first night out since they were born and I have a breast pump in my bag.” She held up her giant handbag, gesturing at it with a dramatic flourish of her other hand. “Really fits in with everything, doesn’t it?”

“Well, the breast pump and I have that in common, that’s how out of place I feel,” Juno admitted wryly.

“Oh I know, these things are always a bit naff,” Layla reassured her. “Everyone’s trying to pretend like they belong here and most of us are just as nervous as each other.”

Marco leaned close, casting a furtive look about. “Just avoid the ones who think that being here means they’re better than everyone else. You’ll recognise them, they’re the ones with their heads just shoved right up their asses.” He punctuated his words with a far too graphic pointing gesture.

The bright flash of a nearby camera made Juno flinch. “Are there usually so many photographers at these things?” she asked, frantically blinking white spots out of her vision.

“You haven’t heard?”

“*Sage North* is here.”

“You’re kidding,” Juno said incredulously, giving the crowd a quick once-over but failed to spot the beautiful omega actress. “I *love* her. Especially how strong she’s been after the bullshit Sawyer Callahan put her through.”

The mention of the mega-famous alpha actor made the other three omegas prickle up immediately, like prey deploying defensive tactics against a predator.

“Ugh, Sawyer Callahan.”

“Talk about a walking red flag.”

“Team Sage, seriously.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd and it quickly became apparent that they were trying to get everyone to move inside for introductory speeches. Juno panicked slightly as the others spotted their packs easily but soon felt a hand slip reassuringly into hers. She looked up to see Julian smiling at her.

“Come on, the others are over here.”

JUNO

Julian led her over to their table and pulled out her chair so she could sit down next to Ollie and Everett. She glanced at the two empty seats beside them.

“Where’s Isaac and Miles?” she whispered. Before Ollie could reply, the lights went low and the MC approached the stage. Juno recognised who he introduced — Dr. Anita Kokotis had spearheaded the bond dissolution trials and worked with Juno directly several times during the process. It was strange seeing her all done up instead of in a lab coat. Though as she looked down at her own gown, it really felt like their time together was a lifetime ago.

“I am pleased to announce that after the overwhelming success of our bond dissolution trials, we will now be offering our groundbreaking treatment to the general public.”

“Wow that’s big, isn’t it?” Ollie said as the room applauded the news. Juno nodded, a bit lost for words. Hopefully many other omegas who had been trapped in situations like hers could see a way out.

“I know some of our successful participants from the trials are in the room tonight, and I want to thank them for trusting us with the process. Thank you for your hard work. We wouldn’t be here without you.”

Everett slid his hand over her bare knee under the table and gave her a proud look that made her heart stutter.

Dr Anita ended her speech by directing their attention to the silent auction. “Each item will benefit a different aspect of the National Omega Commission’s operations. We thank you for your generosity in helping us continue our important work.”

In the midst of the applause and chatter that followed, Isaac and Miles slipped into their chairs.

Juno leaned over Everett so she could talk to Isaac. “Where have you two been?”

“Nowhere,” Isaac replied immediately.

“On an unrelated note, the second floor balcony is positively deserted,” Miles added without an ounce of contrition.

“Miles, your tie is a little—” Julian made an askew motion with his hand.

“Oh my, you’re right,” he said, using his phone’s front camera to fix himself up.

“Did we miss anything important?” Isaac asked Everett.

“Bond dissolutions going public, we want money,” Everett grunted.

“Succinct, thank you.” Isaac turned back to his plate.

The evening wore on and they all pretended they knew exactly how to bid on a silent auction and acted like they belonged in that lavish room. Isaac bid an absurdly high amount on an item that would go towards room and board at the Omega Village for those in need. “Because I rudely missed the speeches due to unavoidable circumstances,” he explained. Juno did manage to chat with a couple other omegas she knew from the trials, pleased to see them doing far better in their current circumstances compared to before they went through the dissolution process.

Juno was retouching her lipstick in the bathroom when another omega made her way over to the basin. Her scent reminded her a little of Miles with its wine notes but was far more fruity and bubbly. Juno gave her a polite smile before turning back to the mirror, her hand frozen halfway to her lips while her brain was screaming *OMG you’re in the bathroom with Sage North!*

She could feel Sage’s shy tentative glances her way, particularly at her tattoos. It didn’t feel malicious in any way, probably the same way Juno was also trying not to be obvious about looking at the famous omega out of the corner of her eye. After a minute of this, Juno exhaled loudly, letting her anxiety rush out of her before holding her hand out.

“I’m Juno,” she introduced herself, praying she hadn’t overstepped or misread the situation.

Sage let out a silvery laugh and clasped Juno’s hand with hers. “Sage, but I think you know that.” Juno cringed internally at the contrast between Sage’s husky smooth American accent and her own comparatively broad Australian

twang.

“If you want to ask something, you can,” Juno prompted her with a friendly nod.

Her green eyes widened and she looked around quickly to see if they were alone. “Were you in the bond dissolution trials?” she asked in low, hushed tones.

Juno felt such a strong affinity for the other woman in that moment, like seeing a version of herself from almost four years ago. “Yes, I was,” she replied. “It’s hard but they will take amazing care of you here.”

“I-I’m just a bit worried about the mental fortitude aspect. What if—”

“You’re Sage Fucking North.” Juno snipped her doubt off at the root, knowing how important it would be to keep her spirit strong. “*He’s* nothing. You can do this.”

Sage took a deep breath in and released it, trying to get her trembling hands under control. Juno gave her a quick hug, steadying her before a wordless conversation passed between them. *You good? Yeah, thanks.*

She was halfway out of the bathroom when Sage spoke up.

“My name’s Sophia by the way,” she said, quietly. “Sage is just a stage name.”

Juno paused at the open door. “It’s lovely to meet you, Sophia. Next time I see you, you’ll be on the other side, I know it.”

As she left, she desperately hoped for Sophia’s sake that was going to be true.

Juno spotted Ollie’s telltale messy mop of hair in the middle of the room and smiled, deciding to take a detour at the bar before heading back to her pack. A row of champagne glasses was calling her name. Right as she was choosing her new best friend, her ears picked up a familiar name being said by a decidedly unfriendly voice.

“I saw Isaac Rivera disappear with that boyfriend of his.”

She quickly grabbed a champagne and glanced over surreptitiously to see if she recognised the speaker. Red hair, omega, stunning old Hollywood vibes. But a total stranger. Juno nonchalantly slithered closer to see if she would continue.

“This is a *high class event*,” the omega complained with an annoyed huff. Her conversation partner, another omega, nodded sycophantically. “What are they even doing here?”

She must have been one of the ones Marco warned Juno about. Head up ass? Check.

Juno wasn't sure what came over her but she reached over and tapped the redhead on the arm. “I heard he's about to get a second boyfriend. Can you believe the audacity of that man?” she said, doing her best impression of a gossiping Rivera *Tita*.

She gave Juno a once-over and did little to hide that she found her wanting. Alas, her thirst for gossip won out and Juno got a strong punch of her rose-heavy perfume and she moved closer. “How do you know?” she asked with an edge to her voice.

“Well, because I brought him one, silly.” Juno chose that moment to take the first, refreshing sip of her champagne as the other omega made scandalised gibbering noises. “I never did introduce myself did I? I'm Juno, Pack Rivera-Gunnarsson's omega.”

To her credit, the omega recovered quickly, her gaze sharpening and a disingenuous smile curling on her lips. “Emma. *Bonded* to Pack Grosvenor.”

The name and perfume together rang a bell. *Oh. Everett's scent match.*

Emma continued, falsely sympathetic. “Not bonded? They dragging their feet with you?” She turned to her original conversation partner and elbowed her until they were both giggling.

“Oh definitely not,” Juno replied, completely unbothered. “If anything, *I'm* the one dragging my feet.”

Annoyed that her barb hadn't landed, Emma stopped laughing and regarded her coolly. “Well, good luck with them. It's all a bit *unnatural* if you ask me, the prime and that beta. And such a shame you'll never be Everett's scent match,” she gloated, clearly expecting Juno to reel from her finishing blow.

Juno stepped closer, just a little too into Emma's personal space, coiled and ready to strike. Emma stood her ground but Juno could see the slightest wobble in her lower lip. “It is a shame,” Juno said, her voice dangerously soft. “Your bigotry that is. Is it that he's a beta or that they're both men?” Emma wouldn't meet her eyes and Juno's lip curled in contempt. “It's both, isn't it? My, you're quite the multitasker, aren't you. And I wouldn't worry about the whole scent match issue. Turns out you don't have to be one to be

knotted on every surface of the house.”

Emma looked disgusted. “God, you’re crude. You’re perfect for him.”

“Yes, she is.”

A large hand slid around her middle, spanning almost her entire waist. She was pulled back against a hard body and engulfed in a wave of briny sea and foam. “She bothering you, baby?” Everett’s voice was so filled with lust he may as well have licked her bare skin in front of everyone.

“Definitely not,” Juno assured him, sliding her arm atop his. “She’d have to matter to bother me.”

“Mm, good.” She held back a shiver as the vibration of his deep voice travelled all the way down her spine.

Emma chose that moment to give her hair a calculated toss, exposing her bondmarks and flashing her giant wedding set. A moment later, her overpowering floral scent hit them. Everett’s grip tightened on her hip in anger at her blatant manipulation.

“Oh sweetie, that’s just sad,” Juno cooed at her, diffusing Everett’s tension with a light scratch of her fingernails on his forearm.

Everett pressed his nose into her neck, inhaling her scent and letting out a satisfied purr. “Your scent makes me so goddamn hard when you’re a defensive little omega for your pack. I fucking love it.”

Yep, that was definitely his heavy cock nestled between her ass. “You still here, Emily?” Juno said, breathily.

Emma grabbed her friend as she walked away. “Ugh, they just let *anyone* attend these things now,” she complained loudly. The other omega cast a wide-eyed apologetic glance back at Juno and Everett. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even know who Isaac was, to be honest,” she said hurriedly, earning her a hard yank from Emma. Everett didn’t give his scent match another glance, focused entirely on driving Juno crazy with the smallest yet barely publicly acceptable touches.

Isaac’s smooth liquor scent enveloped her as he sauntered next to them, watching Emma push through the crowd probably in search of her alphas.

“What happened to *compassion is free*?” he asked her mildly.

“Not for homophobes,” Juno replied immediately before sculling her entire glass of champagne. It wasn’t as badass as she was hoping it would be, as she felt a rather unladylike burp bubbling up. She tried her best to quash it but it ended up coming out as a sort of wet hiccup.

Instead of being turned off, Everett let out a groan. He was grinding so

hard between her cheeks. Juno swore she could feel the raised ridge of where the base of his cockhead met his shaft, even through the layers of clothes between them. Then she made the mistake of imagining him slapping it hard on her throbbing clit right before he shoved his length deep inside her. A needy whine slipped out.

“Fuck, can we leave now?” He sounded like he was one pheromone inhale away from rutting her right then and there.

Isaac looked amused by Everett’s situation. “I think we’re done here, don’t you?” he asked her.

Juno smiled up at her prime alpha.

“Let’s go home.”

EPILOGUE

ISAAC

Isaac looked down in distaste at the link Miles had sent him. Page Slick had clearly been out in full force the night before, filling its feed with party snaps accompanied by the most inane captions.

SPOTTED: Pack Rivera-Gunnarsson's prime Isaac and hottie alpha Everett loving on their NEW omega. Get the exclusive scoop on the tattooed beauty only with #PageSlick #NewPackAlert

Did that sort of thing really grab people's attention? Displeased, Isaac swiped through the photos. They had cherry picked the ones where Isaac and Everett had looked the most lecherous as they surrounded Juno. None of them had public Pixelgram accounts so Page Slick had decided to tag his corporation's account. That didn't seem right.

Though it pained him physically, he clicked through and read the accompanying article. It was all clickbait and rampant speculation. His anger grew like a wildfire the more he read. They didn't even have Juno's name. In its stead, they spent far too many paragraphs hypothesising about her tattoos. The designs she'd chosen, the placement of them. Red circles indicating what they suspected were bondmarks. Linking that with the news of bond dissolutions going public and that she was a likely trial candidate.

Vultures, the lot of them.

Isaac picked up his phone with far too much force and dialled his executive assistant. “Block all media calls,” he instructed her shortly, hoping she knew his annoyed tone was not directed at her.

“Already done, darl. Don’t worry, the assholes won’t get anything.”

Isaac knew he’d made a good decision hiring the motherly but secretly hard-as-nails beta five years ago.

“There was one outlier, though. I was going to let it slide but I noticed he had the same surname as your omega. Ben Liu ring a bell?”

Juno’s brother.

“Send me his details,” Isaac instructed before thanking her and hanging up. His heart thudded in his chest as he dialled.

“Hello?”

“Ben. This is Isaac returning your call.”

“Isaac. Fuck. Thank god you called back.” Ben’s relief was palpable even through the phone. “You’re Juno’s prime, aren’t you? She’s safe and happy with you?”

“Tell me why you called,” Isaac shot back, refusing to give an inch before he knew what Ben’s intentions were.

“Pack Zhao know, Isaac. They want her back.”

TO BE CONTINUED

BONUS

For an extended version of Miles (and Everett) discovering Juno's gala dress, pop over to my website www.elianaleeauthor.com/bonus.

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I wrote this book in secret. During my son's naps, when I should've been working and while laundry sat unfolded in a pile.

But a book does not get finished and released in secret.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eliana was 11 when her teacher instructed her to write a letter to her future self. “I hope you’re an actress or an author!” she wrote. She would read it at 21 and laugh at how differently her life had gone.

But over the years, she developed a love of reading and a love of stories. Her favourite parts of movies and TV shows were when characters looked at each other a little too long and she often wondered why the characters in her books weren’t kissing already. It led to her discovering the romance book genre and all the weird and wonderful sub-genres that populate it. She fell hard and fast — much like the protagonists — and ideas that wouldn’t let go began percolating in her head.

So she decided to write.

Eliana Lee lives in Melbourne, Australia and wants to keep telling stories about people who look like her.

And no, she’s not going to be an actress. 1 out of 2 isn’t bad?

