

Rutless

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Table of Contents

[Chapter One: Pre-Season](#)

[Chapter Two: Off Season](#)

[Chapter Three: Post-Season](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with Fivek Brown](#)

Chapter One: Pre-Season

Wellstown has beaches, but nothing famous—no big waves for the surfers, no turquoise waters or snow-white sands. It has about 300,000 people (not including summer tourists), a marine bio institute for college students, and most importantly, a job opening for a peacekeeper assist in Xeno Affairs and Policing, Seasonal division. Lab work, paper work, and a lot of time spent with the local beef. Low chance of promotion or excitement. Omegas strongly preferred.

Sterling gets his physical, passes the blood test, and moves to the boonies.

It's a culture shock. He's never seen so many rodeo belt buckles and cowboy boots in his life. But nobody cares how loud his shirts are, as long as they think he's omega, so he does his best to adapt to the alpha boys' club with its mandatory post-shift drinking sessions, Musk body spray, and giant codpieces.

That's when he discovers that a bunch of these alpha peacekeeper boys expect Sterling to assist in not just a professional capacity. Which Sterling wouldn't mind, if they weren't such pricks about it.

The first peacekeeper takes one look at him and sends him back: "I don't care how good you are; no fat omegas over forty."

The second guy is cloyingly charitable until Sterling discovers the embezzling and reports it.

Placement number three is with Bronska: one of the oldest, most decorated officers in the department, the only trans woman, and (according to office scuttlebutt) an absolute girder.

She's also gorgeous. Total Joan of Arc in argyle. Steel-gray hair, eyes like a war goddess, and a beaky nose that gives her the mien of a bird of prey. A big girl even by alpha standards (though not by XAP's), she moves like poetry and looks like she could put Sterling through a wall.

He wants in her pants *yesterday*.

Randall catches him looking and snickers.

"Don't waste your time, Sterling," he sneers. "She's rutless."

Sterling is so taken aback that he doesn't have a witty retort. Finally, he grabs his Cosmo, gets off his bar stool, and says, "I'm heatless, Randall. Get a life."

Bronska's sitting alone with her cranberry juice, as usual. When Sterling approaches, her shoulders tense. She heard, he realizes—what Randall said, anyway.

Well then, no need to pretend otherwise. He sits down across from her. "What's his problem?"

She eyes Sterling warily. "Reported him for harassment."

Sterling whistles. "Not even worth the dominance display."

"No." Bronska apparently doesn't wait for a punchline. "I don't display."

"Ever?"

"No." She holds his eyes, daring him to make something of it.

Nobody's paying attention to them. "Neither do I." He extends his hand. "I'm pseudo-omega."

That takes her off-guard. She doesn't take his hand, but her body language opens up. She leans in, inhales (not ostentatiously), but she won't get anything; he's wearing scent-reducer, same as her, and overcoming it would require her get a lot closer to him. (Not that he'd mind.)

He sees the light bulb go off. "The new assist. Subramanian."

"Your new assist, yes, that's me, and please, Subramanian's my father." He wiggles his hand expectantly, and this time, she takes it. "I'm Sterling, professional pervert."

She has a good handshake and an impressive deadpan. "Athena. Same."

"Oh, good! I'd hate to have an amateur!" She doesn't smile, but she toasts him with the cranberry juice. "Speaking of, does this place have the usual mating season caseload contest? Because if you're rutless and I'm heatless, then we stand to make a *killing*..."

A pleased, competitive glint comes into her eye. "You can stay," she says, and like that, they're in business.

And not a moment too soon, as he discovers the following morning. They don't even make it into the office before...

"I'm gonna pound your manly face in with my buff hands, bro!"

"No, my gorgeous face will *wreck* your virile fists, bro. Don't you know skulls are stronger than phalanges?"

The two alpha boys don't look at all alike in features, but they still have a rubber stamp look to them—same gelled hairstyle, same skintight WMI shirts and stuffed jeans and shit-kicker boots, same muscles getting flexed under the pretense of preparing for a dominance fight.

Cars honk furiously, but the two bros stay square in the middle of the street, posturing and peacocking for their very unappreciative rush hour audience.

"Stop holding up traffic with your beautiful face, Chad," says Bro #1 with a shove.

"Screw you, Chaz, *you* stop holding up traffic with your god bod," replies Bro #2 with a shove back.

Bronska clears her throat.

The two bros round on her. They take in her uniform, the coffee in her hand, and the very unimpressed look on her face. They hesitate. (They also ignore Sterling completely, which suits him just fine. He is not nearly caffeinated enough for this.)

Bronska sips her coffee and jerks her free thumb over her shoulder: out.

That decides the bros. They flex at her.

Bronska shakes her head.

They flex harder. Thews ripple. Sweat gleams. Seams pop.

Bronska hands her coffee to Sterling. Then she strides over, grabs the bros by the ears, and marches them off the street like disobedient puppies—which is much how they respond, as though she's somehow broken the script they're following and they don't know what to do.

"Ow! Why you gotta do me dirty, galpha?"

"Noooo, miss! Come on, miss! Owwww!"

Sterling drinks his coffee, makes a face when he swigs Bronska's black swill by mistake, and checks his watch. 8:55. Mating season's come early.

"And so it begins," he remarks, and follows Bronska into the office.

Just about all seasonals go into heat or rut around the same time in May, and most are unwilling to trade their fertility windows (and paid time off) for foul-tasting suppressors and overly-hormonal dipshits. It turns the office into an understaffed, overworked madhouse, and the only people who show up either really need the money or don't go into season, whether by nature, like Sterling, or by choice, like Sterling's poor sister. (Opal used to get so snappy and

irritable in heat that having kids was a chore; the moment she was done, she went on suppressors and never looked back.)

Being pseudo, Sterling doesn't have to worry about any of that; he can rake in the time-and-a-half and (not) father kids any time of the year. He still wears extra scent-reducer and rolls down the van window out of common decency, but if Bronska's sense of smell is spiking, she doesn't show it. She hands him a breakfast taco, nods in a stiff but friendly way, and they get down to business.

And what a business! Alphas starting bar fights, omegas wielding boomboxes and wailing for knotting outside apartment windows, people of all phenotypes who mistake (or "mistake") going into season for an open invitation. Also a flood of public urination, because too many seasonals think it's charming. (It is not.) Sterling and Bronska go straight from "nice to meet you" to hauling double shifts, wrangling season-struck pains in the ass.

Alpha peacekeepers are never to be left alone with omega civilians, or vice versa, so Sterling's always in the van, but he's not supposed to get up from his portable lab equipment, and he rarely has to. Bronska ends fights that quickly. (It'd be unprofessional for him to admit he finds that hot, but the heart—and libido—wants what it wants.) She's not a troublemaker.

She is, unfortunately, a *troubletaker*.

One day, though, they get called to a domestic dispute and find a couple in full screaming row—well, until Bronska gets out. Then the omega girl decides to spite her boyfriend in a different way.

"Finally," she says, "a real man."

The alpha guy puffs up like a pigeon. Bronska goes rigid. The omega doesn't seem to notice, circling and eyeing her like prime steak.

The peacekeeper uniform is unisex fetish-bait to a lot of people (Sterling included, though he likes to think he has more class about it). The boots, the hand-wraps... even the checkerboard trim can have some appeal, and Wellstown is too hot for pants and long sleeves, so the peacekeepers run around in shorts. But Sterling can *feel* Bronska's discomfort, and when the omega goes, "mm," and tries to touch her, Bronska flinches away.

"No," she says.

The alpha boy smirks. The omega looks incredulous. "No?"

"No," Bronska repeats.

The omega girl arches her back, thrusts out her chest, and strikes a power stance: a display if there ever was one, a nonverbal, "show me you're alpha enough, hot stuff."

Since Sterling has his window down, it's easy for him to call, "The lady said no, buddy. Leave her alone; she's working."

Both halves of the couple freeze dead. They peer at Bronska's name tag, which has her full name. The alpha guy gets a shit-eating grin on his face.

The omega launches herself, screaming, at Bronska, and starts clawing at her face.

On TV, this would be considered funny, and indeed, her boyfriend is laughing his ass off, but this is hour ten of a double shift, so Sterling jumps out of the van. The omega girl wheels around—and hesitates. She can't tell if he's an omega on suppressors or a small beta, and while attacking an alpha has some cachet, attacking a beta is like picking a fight with a soda machine. Someone truly ape wouldn't care, but this woman clearly does, and it ruins her performance of off-the-chain berserker. He even sees her realize it.

Sterling taps his body cam. "Don't let me stop you," he says.

She disintegrates into snot-nosed tears. "Y'all are being so *mean* to me," she whines.

Afterward, Sterling says, "I'm sorry. That was stupid of me."

"It's fine."

They're alone in the back of the van, Bronska sitting on the bench seat usually reserved for bozos, Sterling on his knees in front of her with latex gloves and the med kit, cleaning the scratches on her face.

"No, it's not fine. I escalated the situation. You had it under control, and I fucked it up."

"I appreciated it."

Sterling pauses in swabbing. Bronska keeps her eyes down.

"People get me wrong all the time. Nobody corrects them." She looks up. "You did."

Sterling fumbles for sticking plasters. "If I'd handled it better, she wouldn't have tried to claw your eyes out."

"She would've."

Sterling frowns. "You sound certain."

"They think I'm male. When they realize they're wrong, they get... upset. Like I tricked them."

"You have a name tag."

"They don't read it."

Sterling finds the carton. "So they take their own stupidity and sexual insecurities out on you, and you can't call them on it because you're a peacekeeper with a morality clause in your employment contract, and also because alpha girls are supposed to be goddesses of self-restraint." An ugly thought comes to him. "And if you *do* call them on it, then that proves to them you're not female."

Bronska nods. "Correct."

Sterling puts the swabs away. "However, I'm a lab rat assist with no morality clause, and people expect omega guys to be catty anyway, so maybe I can get away with it. Would you like me to keep correcting these jack-offs?"

Her shoulders relax. "Please."

"You got it, boss." The scratches aren't too bad, but he's not pleased with the bruising coming up. He rummages for an ice pack. "Here, let me bandage you up, then I promise I'll leave you alone." He reaches forward, and after a moment, she leans her face into his hands.

Sterling feels over her jaw, just to make sure everything's in order, and then gets to work applying the sticking plasters. She lets him, though her gray eyes keep flicking to his, then away. This close, she smells mildly of girl, and even through the latex gloves, he can feel her skin, smooth, soft, and warming under his hands. Sterling gallantly pretends that he doesn't notice or enjoy the pink on her cheeks. When he lets her go and hands her the ice pack, she says, "thank you," and doesn't put up any alpha bluster, so Sterling feels like he doesn't have to tiptoe around her ego.

"You know," he says, "my scent's ambiguous, might stir them up less."

Bronska snorts, clapping the ice to her face harder than medically recommended.

"I mean it. You saw that girl; the moment she thought I might be beta, she wanted nothing to do with me. I've lost fights with paper bags, but I can talk most people under the table, and with respect, Athena, I'm a better arguer than you are."

Another alpha might take offense, but Bronska doesn't. She sighs. "No sarcasm?"

"No promises."

So on the next shift, he cuts down on the scent-reducer. When he moves to roll down the van window, Bronska waves it off.

“It’s fine.”

“You sure? Don’t want to be rude...”

“Don’t mind.”

Sterling has never cared for the tacky, quick-evaporating texture of scent-reducer, so it’s a relief to gradually quit using it. Bronska doesn’t seem like someone who lies for social convenience, and it does smooth out their cases. Seasonals aren’t sure what to make of him, but most of them aren’t willing to chance it. Even if they win a fight with a beta, they’ll look like stupid assholes, and the whole point of peacocking is making themselves look fuckable. Unable to fight, they mostly restrict themselves to vociferous complaining, which suits Sterling just fine.

Late in the season, they get called in to deal with an omega who’s set up camp outside his ex-girlfriend’s studio. When they arrive, they find him naked on the lawn, arching his back and wailing like a horny cat when he’s not humping the grass.

“Ophelia!” he yowls. “I need you, Ophelia!”

Sterling gets out of the van. “Ophelia has a restraining order on you. You’re violating it right now.”

The would-be Casanova pauses, sniffs, then goes back to trying to scent-mark the entire lawn with jizz. “Fuck off, beta! This is seasonal business.”

Sterling holds up his badge. “This is legal business. You’re not supposed to come within a hundred feet of your ex, her home, or her workplace. Come on, get in the van.”

The omega bristles. He starts ranting about how this poor girl’s ovi is his one and only, none other can satisfy, it’s his and he needs it and she’s *depriving* him, the rutless iceberg—

He’s getting agitated enough that Bronska gets out of the van. The omega looks at her, double-takes. He sniffs again.

He starts laughing at her.

That pisses Sterling off more than being sworn at. Promising himself that he’ll be extra thorough with the paperwork on this one, he storms forward. The kid jumps up, hissing. He’s big for an omega, bigger than Sterling, and grabs him with such force that Sterling feels a shock of panic.

Then Bronska growls.

It’s not loud or ostentatious, just a soft, velvet rumble that thrums in the base of Sterling’s spine. The effect on the omega is immediate: he quails, drops Sterling, and loses his erection.

“Sorry,” he says. “I’m sorry. I’ll get in the van.” And he does.

Bronska looks at Sterling, still white-eyed and full of adrenaline. “All right?” she asks.

He is, just shaken, enough so that it takes him half the drive back before he realizes that Bronska displayed. What’s more, she did it in reaction not to being laughed at, but to Sterling being grabbed. As though he were hers.

He glances over at Bronska. She keeps her eyes on the road but makes an impressively uncomfortable face. She knows it too, then.

The moment they get their Romeo squared away, she pulls him into the break room and says, “I’m sorry.”

“Why? You saved me from a beating; he thinks you’re a peak alpha now.”

Usually, Bronska has the deadest pan he’s ever seen, but now she looks flustered and guilty. “I’m not. You’re not—” She goes silent, tugging at her hair. “It’s not like that.”

There’s a reason XAP Seasonal is full of alpha peacekeepers and omega assists. Not only does it appease etiquette, but they’re tacitly expected to manage each other’s seasons—the whole Spartan band, “army of lovers can never be defeated” thing. That Romeo clearly thought he’d

made the colossal mistake of getting between a peak alpha, fresh out of mating season, and her partner. Sterling being beta wouldn't change that either, because peak alphas get to fuck whoever they want, including alpha men, so long as they top, and there's a very successful porn genre devoted to alpha trans women doing just that. (People are *weird* about alpha trans women.)

Maybe Bronska's worried she's given Sterling the wrong idea. "It's okay," he says, patting her shoulder. "I don't assume. If you want to fuck me, you'll tell me."

There. That's an exit (or an opening) a mile wide, if she wants it.

Bronska makes a face like she's just discovered, halfway through a mile-long line, that she desperately needs the bathroom. But then someone bursts in to tell them about some alpha sororities going to war, so it's back to the races, and Bronska doesn't bring it up afterward.

Chapter Two: Off Season

Mating season either makes or breaks a XAP Seasonal partnership. It makes Sterling and Bronska. They win the caseload contest, receive bonuses, celebrate with fancy drinks at the post-shift cool-down... and then Sterling ends up driving Bronska home in her own car because someone spiked her mocktail.

"Sorry," she says as he helps her into the passenger seat.

"Don't be," Sterling says. "Not your fault some asshole, probably Randall, decided you needed liquor in your life. Besides, you were my designated driver after that one guy grabbed me; I owe you."

At least Bronska's an easy drunk, so quiet and still that he thinks she's passed out. (Though that could be plain exhaustion from all those double shifts. They aren't twenty-five anymore.) But then, after the engine turns over, she says, "Roll the windows up?"

"Athena, I smell like bar smoke and cheap beer."

"You smell good."

He chuckles but starts cranking. "You like bar smoke and beer?"

"I like you."

He pauses. "You're a flirty drunk."

"Mm." She doesn't deny it. And she turns out to have a shy, gentle smile.

When they get to her place, Sterling helps Bronska up the stairs, but she lingers in the doorway, watching him. She's still in uniform, but her hands are unwrapped, her tie loosened, her collar open, showing the smooth column of her throat. When he returns her keys, she brushes his fingertips, and heat blooms under his skin. She meets his eyes hesitantly.

"Come in?"

She's coming on to him. She has to be. Right?

"Okay," he says, and they go in.

It's as neat and tidy as he'd expect, but his eyes are on Bronska, not her place. She bumps into the kitchen counter, glances at it as though surprised it's there, then leans against it and tugs Sterling towards her. Her eyes drop to his mouth.

She *is* coming on to him, and she is quite drunk. Which is the height of unfairness, since he's wanted her since day one, and resisting temptation has never been his strong point.

She tugs him toward her again, eyes soft and hopeful. "Please?" she asks.

He leans in, and she meets him halfway.

Her mouth is warm and soft and inviting, and she makes a pleased sound when he kisses back. He hooks his fingers into her belt loops; she twines her fingers through his hair. Sterling isn't prepared for the sudden rush of lust—after a whole shift, an after party, and a drink or two, he didn't think he'd have the energy, never mind this surge of want. It's dizzying, disorienting. His head feels fuzzy.

He pulls away. "I feel weird."

She halts immediately, dropping her hands to his shoulders. He could swear he feels her heartbeat through the silk of his shirt. "All right?"

Sterling shakes his head, but the fuzz remains. "I think," he says with a mixture of relief and regret, "that all those doubles are catching up to me, and we should sleep this off."

She sighs but doesn't disagree with him. "Can you drive back?"

"It's your car; I don't think I should. And I don't think I should share a bed with you either." With his luck, Bronska will be a cuddle-octopus, and he knows himself well enough to know he'll cave. "In the morning, when you're sober, you can proposition me all you want, okay?"

There's that shy, gentle smile again, like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. She leads him to a couch that looks like it came from a granny's estate sale, getting him ensconced with a quilt and a pillow. Her hands linger over him, trailing across his back and shoulders, leaving tactile afterimages behind. When he's settled in, she kisses his cheek and says, "Goodnight."

He watches her go, the sway of her hips, until the bedroom door shuts behind her. He sighs. He can still feel her hands, her mouth, and he wants to get up, follow her in, shut the door—

"You're too old for this," he scolds his dick, and rolls over to go to sleep.

He wakes up hard and yearning from dreams he can't remember, and for a moment, he can't tell why he's up, only that it is too damn early. Then he hears the shower kick on in the next room over. Of course Bronska would be a morning person. Sterling resentfully drags himself up to locate her coffeepot. Her selection is abysmal, but he finds something tolerable with which to resurrect himself while she showers.

He still feels strange. Not bad, exactly, but still fuzzy, and far hornier than he has any right to be at this ungodly hour. He's hyperaware of the sounds of Bronska showering, and he keeps getting damn silly porn scenarios in his head, contrivances to join her in there. He remembers her hands in his hair, her mouth still tasting like cranberries, her hips under his hands, and he shivers. Telling her no was the right call, but damned if it feels that way, and if she's changed her mind, he's going to be kicking himself.

The sound of running water cuts off. Sterling straightens in his chair and tugs his fingers through his tousled graying hair, as though that'll make him look attractive and presentable after a night in his clothes.

"I'm up," he calls. "I made you coffee. It's terrible."

Sooner than he expects, the bathroom door opens, and Sterling freezes with his mug to his lips.

It's not the sight of Bronska in a towel—though he's never seen her bare shoulders before, or the back of her neck, which whispers to his tongue and hands. It's the look on her face—mortification and suppressed panic. And most of all, it's the unreduced scent of her, which hits like a truck. Saliva floods his mouth, his eyes dilate, and he feels a twitch of desire lower down.

"Oh wow," Sterling blurts. "Holy shit."

Bronska clutches her towel like it's pearls and points to the door. Sterling bolts before he embarrasses himself further. Under the circumstances, asking for a ride back is right out, and the moment he gets on the streetcar, he realizes what he must look like: rumpled and disheveled, the scent of Bronska lingering on his skin like a promise, like perfume and lipstick. He can't stop noticing it, and people on the bus are giving him looks; they can tell. The expressions range from knowing smirks to one teenager's open-mouthed horror.

Sterling cracks a window and does his best to look dignified. Usually, mating season just smells like a locker room to him—and why wouldn't it, he's pseudo—but Bronska's pheromones are something else. That scent bypasses the brain and goes straight for the balls; it demands satisfaction, and Sterling wants to rub himself all over it until she's covered in him, full of him, and—

Sometimes people's bodily clocks get slow, especially after forty. Bronska must be off-season, got caught by surprise. No wonder she came on to him, and no wonder he felt strange. (And now he feels simultaneously better and worse about turning her down. If he woke up in the same bed as her, smelling like that... it would've been a terrible idea, but his libido, as always, disagrees.)

He remembers her mortified face, tells his dick to behave, and the moment he's back home, his phone rings. It's Bronska, sounding frantic and alarmed, clearly regretting making a move on him.

"I'm sorry," she says. "Didn't mean—"

Sterling sighs silently. Of course she didn't. "You didn't do anything wrong. It sneaks up on people sometimes."

"We're okay?" she asks.

"Yeah. We're okay." If he ignores how her voice makes him want to shove a hand down his pants. "You know, if you ever need a hand, you can call me. I *am* your assist, after all."

He intends it as a friendly offer of assistance. It comes out as a come-on.

Bronska's tone is unreadable. "Thanks. I will."

She doesn't.

A couple days later, far too soon, she returns to work, back in scent-reducer and showing no sign of having been in horny frenzy (or satisfied). The whole shift, she's even tenser and terser than usual. At the bar, it's even worse, until finally, Sterling gets up to grab his jacket and leave early.

Bronska catches his arm. It doesn't get the rise out of him that it did a few days ago, but he still feels it. "Have dinner with me?" she asks.

They could've gotten it at the bar. Whatever she wants to tell him, she doesn't want it to be in front of their coworkers—or at her place, either. "Okay."

So they go down the street to some diner. Bronska doesn't say a word until the waiter leaves. Her demeanor is all wrong for a bawling out; she's grim, as though steeling herself to deliver tragic news.

"You said I could proposition you. Is that true?"

"Uh..." Sterling says, and sees her expression shut down. "I mean, yes! God yes, please do! That... is just not the words I expected to go with that face you're making. Or..." he waves a hand vaguely around the diner, "...all this."

Bronska fidgets with her glass and visibly bites the bullet. "I'm not alpha."

Sterling's eyebrows go up.

"I'm off-phenotype. Mixed."

"Oh! That... that explains a lot." That explains everything: why she (usually) doesn't display, why she's off-season, why she slathers herself in scent-reducer, why she looked so panicked. Pseudos are considered cheap imitations, and rutless alphas are seen as sad failures at their role, but mixed-phen are seen as everything from sexual predators to crazed monsters. People pity rutless alphas; they fear mixed-phen. And Bronska is already dealing with the burdens of other people's imaginations, being trans and female.

She's looking at him like she's waiting for him to throw his drink in her face and storm out. When he doesn't, she reaches for his hand as though to touch it, only to pull back. "Okay?" she asks.

"Yeah," he says, taking her hand. She relaxes. "Yeah, we're okay. Thanks for the trust."

"You told me you were heatless on day one."

“Randall told everyone I was heatless on day one, and anyway, it’s not the same.” Normally he doesn’t go into detail, but she’s opened up enough, he feels he owes it to her. “It’s not a problem, back across the pond; as long as it’s heterosexual and interfertile, it’s fair game, so beta men with omega wives, alpha men with beta wives, that’s no big deal. Even Thatha approved of my parents’ marriage, and he never approves of anything. It’s just here in the States that it’s a problem.”

“Still,” Bronska says, giving his hand a squeeze, “you were brave to me. So I could be brave to you.”

Sterling’s not used to being called brave. There’s nothing he can say to it.

“Haven’t had a season in years,” she says. “Wasn’t sorry either. The meds aren’t for mixed-phen.”

A lot of things aren’t for mixed-phen, Sterling knows, and it’s a crock of shit. Despite pretensions to scientific phenotype, “phen” are really the social boxes people create for the biology underneath. They’re not universal—like how in Wellstown, Sterling’s pseudo-omega, while in Madras, he’s just male. Phen reflect the stories that people tell themselves, and at the end of the day, it’s amazing how much medical science develops around those stories, even when they aren’t true.

“But now you’re feeling it again?” Sterling says.

She nods. “Got surprised. If they’re back... used to hit every few months, last a few days. Sporadic.”

“That sounds like a hellish pain.”

Her expression doesn’t disagree. Even a short, erratic season must be godawful with no way to satisfy or stifle it, and it won’t match up with anyone else’s.

“You?” she asks.

“I’ve never had a season. Never minded, really; I was plenty capable of being horny and stupid without them. I just fuck beta-style—though speaking of, you should know: I’m anatomically beta. Pseudo-ovi-trap, no brood pouch or scent glands. Oh, and my ass can’t take a knotting—learned that the hard way, back in college.”

Bronska turns pink. “That’s fine. I don’t knot people.” After a moment, she says, “I have... mostly omega parts. I use girl words for them.”

“Sure,” Sterling says. “What do you prefer? Giving, taking, neither?”

Bronska just goggles at him.

“What?” he asks. “You are propositioning me, right?”

“Didn’t think you’d say yes.”

Sterling feigns offense. “Professional pervert, remember?” he says, and it makes her smile. He likes making her smile. “Come now, Athena, don’t let me down. What do you like?”

“Taking,” she says. “Would you...?”

“Fuck you? Happily,” he says, grinning. “Though, uh...” There’s no polite way to ask. “It’s been a while for you, hasn’t it?”

She grimaces. “Long while.”

“Then you’re going to be voracious, and while my spirit is oh-so-very willing, my flesh is oh-so-very weak. Sorry, Athena; I’m a one-trick beta. I’ve got much harder silicone, though...”

She waves a hand dismissively. “Won’t matter. Can’t finish, in season.”

“Damn! What has mother nature got against you, anyway?”

Sterling's heard of this too. Most seasons can be assuaged with a good rogering, or a good dose of chemicals—either from suppressors or from a complimentary phenotype. But every once in a while, only time will do the job. No wonder Bronska hadn't lamented losing her seasons.

"If you can't finish, why would you...?"

"Because you can." Bronska holds his eyes, and now he sees the hope and hunger in them. He remembers the way she growled at that omega. "Don't want a seasonal, don't want toys. I want you."

Well then. Sterling finishes off his drink and smiles at her. "I think you're overselling me, but I thank you for the flattery. I'm all yours, Athena. Let's discuss how we want this to go..."

Bronska's smile is like a sunrise.

They negotiate over dinner, go out of town to get surreptitious VD tests and confirm they're not infertile, and there's an electric buzz of anticipation at work for the next few months. Sterling finds himself making excuses to touch her, grazing his hand across her back, her shoulder, and he feels her eyes follow him when he does. If she's determined not to take him until she's in season, he's damn well going to make sure she remembers.

Bronska has never told HR she's mixed-phen, so she's stuck using sick leave for her seasons. (Which is hardly fair, but Sterling can't blame her. Who'd want word of that getting back to management?) When Bronska calls out sick, she also calls him.

"Oh no," he pretends to complain, "you mean I caught that terrible bug from you? I guess I'll have to call out too..."

This won't work more than once or twice, but that's fine. If this turns out to be a one-time thing, no one will be the wiser. And if it becomes regular... well, they'll burn that bridge when they get to it.

"Come over?" Bronska asks.

"Sure," Sterling says, shouldering his bag. "What do you need?"

Tinned soup, ibuprofen... and him.

Sterling has never cared about the rigmarole of seasonal fucking rituals—it's like old-school leathersmen crossed with debutante balls—but tinned soup is lousy foreplay. "I'll make you better soup."

Bronska is clearly in no condition to argue. "Fine."

Sterling plans on doing the cooking at Bronska's place. Who wants to carry a gallon of soup on a streetcar? Besides, they're both adults; Bronska handled him sleeping on her couch without jumping him, so she can handle him making her decent soup with proper flavor.

But when Bronska opens the apartment door, dressed to the nines in pearly gray suit vest and slacks, a white linen shirt, Sterling realizes that *her* libido might not be the problem. Sick with season or not, she looks good and smells better; Sterling was hoping it wouldn't hit him as strongly now that he knows what it is, but Pavlovian anticipation makes it better/worse. At least he's old enough that he doesn't get hard from it alone; that'd just be embarrassing.

Sterling breezes in and does his best to act normal. "Lucky for you, I'm a kitchen wizard. Don't worry, beautiful, I'll put you right."

When he lobs her the bottle of ibuprofen, she almost doesn't catch it. She hastens to get it open and swallow a couple pills down. "Thank you."

She looks tense and distracted and clearly too season-struck to handle stoves or sharp objects, but she tries. She drops kitchenware, turns on the wrong burners, and hovers before finally giving up, pacing back and forth around what Sterling presumes is his pheromonal event horizon.

Sterling pauses in chopping onions, which at least push back the olfactory “fuck me!” screaming from her. “Do you... the soup can wait, you know.”

Bronska shakes her head, expression drawn and hands clenched on the counter. Rocking in place, she points at the ibuprofen. “Hasn’t kicked in yet.”

Sterling swipes the cutting board full of onions into the pot, makes sure there’s enough ghee, and asks, “What helps till then?”

She gives him a look both longing and awful, puts her forearms down on the counter, hides her face in them. “Touch me? Please?”

Happily. “Sure, Athena. Whatever you need.”

Making sure she hears him, Sterling approaches the counter and puts a hand on her shoulder. Despite the telegraphing, she jumps, makes a low, sad sound.

“Okay?”

She nods without raising her head. He comes around to her side of the counter, starts stroking her back, and she pushes into it like a cat demanding pets. Sterling keeps it up, and the rocking slows, then stops. She starts to relax.

“You didn’t have to wait for your season,” he says. “I would’ve done this for you anytime...”

Without the onions right in front of his face, there’s no ignoring how mouthwatering she smells. Even with all the layers, she feels good. He can feel her skin through her clothes, feverish hot, and it’s good, he wants that, and without thinking, he slips his hand down the back of her collar.

The sound she makes curls something warm and possessive in his gut. She doesn’t pull away—on the contrary, she tries to get more. He’s happy to give it to her. Better, so much better without fabric in the way, better to have her like this, bent over the counter, his hand on the back of her neck—

“Good girl,” he says, and her ears turn pink. “Just enjoy this.”

The gray-brown fuzz at her nape is surprisingly soft, so Sterling goes ahead with petting it, mapping the muscles of the back of her neck, the bumps of her spine, around her ears. She shivers, then turns her head and taps his hand.

“You should stop.”

“What? Why?”

The blush deepens. “It’s...” She puts her hand over his, moves so his thumb and fingers are clamped on either side, makes them pinch. Makes them *bite*.

Oh. “Shit!” He jerks away and tries to ignore the surge in his groin. “Sorry. I... it’s been a while, I forgot.” And while he’s bitten alphas before, the connotations are different. Biting an omega like that is like putting a ring on the wedding finger, not something you just do.

He’s never bitten an omega like that. He’s never wanted to, before now.

He realizes that in her state, his pulling away must feel lousy, so he comes back and hugs her from behind. She’s tall enough that his face is at her back, not her neck, so it feels safer, and it seems to work; she relaxes again. Her hands start patting his arms, trying to reach more of him.

“Okay?” he asks.

“Mm.” She rubs her ass back against him, takes his hand. “Can I?”

Sterling doesn’t know what she’s asking, but he knows the answer: “sure.”

She takes his hand and explores his fingers, the lines of his palm, the tendons at the back, like she’s memorizing the textures of him. It’s not what he expects, but it’s nice.

He has to let go of her periodically, pour in water and dal, chop vegetables, but at least it keeps his mind from going straight into the gutter. As long as he stays close, she stays relaxed, and she purrs whenever he comes back to hug her, before she goes back to memorizing his hands.

Then she kisses his knuckles and there's that heat lightning crackle he'd almost forgotten about, making him squeeze her tighter and press his face to her shoulder blades.

She makes a questioning sound.

"It's fine." His voice sounds rough. "You just feel good. Go ahead."

She nuzzles against his hand, kisses each fingertip, his palm, and Sterling resists the urge to shove his fingers in her mouth and grind up on her like a horny prom date. He takes his free hand, starts feeling her up over her clothes, and when it makes her squirm and purr, brushes against the fly of her slacks.

She gasps and pushes into it, which seems like an endorsement. Stroking more firmly makes her start sucking on his fingers all by herself, and yes, fuck yes, that's right, that's—

He has to limit the pheromone dosage if he's getting this high from this with his clothes on. The animal in him wants to bend her over the counter and fuck her, but he can't keep up with a seasonal, no matter what his dick thinks, and back during negotiations, Bronska said she needs at least three rounds to tire. (Not finish, just tire.) So he reaches for her belt instead.

"Want it?" he asks.

She nods and rushes to help, but won't let go of his hand either, so it takes a moment to get her belt and fly open. She doesn't let Sterling play romantic either, just shoves his hand into her pants, past the handful he had earlier, deeper...

Sterling feels wet folds. "Oh, I see," he purrs in her ear, making her wriggle against him. "Omega girl..."

Bronska makes a sound that she'd probably find embarrassing, were she not in heat, and grinds against him like she's trying to take him inside her, front and back. Sterling should probably be using gloves for this to dodge the rush, but he wants it. He wants the whole experience of her.

Bronska's soft under the curve of his thumb, and she can't take even a finger yet, but she's wet and hungry and going to pieces, and that's all he cares about. Sterling strokes her, rides the waves of scent and skin and Bronska's lips and tongue around his fingers, and keeps talking, since she seems to be getting off on it. She asked him to treat her like an omega girl, and she's going to get her wish.

"You're so soft, pretty girl. You've left this too long, I can tell." He gets on tiptoes to kiss her neck, and it's like lightning on his lips. Too late, he realizes it's probably too close to biting to be safe, but he doesn't apologize; how can he with the sounds she's making and the way she's rubbing all over him? "If I'd known how bad you wanted me, I would've given this to you ages ago..."

She moves, trying to get his mouth on her neck again, and when Sterling gives in and licks, she jolts and sucks harder.

"You want me to bite you, omega girl?" Fuck, he sounds more into this than he should be, though to be fair, so does Bronska. "I might not have a knot, Athena, but say the word, and I'll fuck you like it's your wedding night." Even worse, but Bronska's gasping, hot and wet against his fingers. "You want that, pretty girl? You want my cock and teeth in you?"

"Yes!" she says, bucking back against him.

Her clit is thickening, and this part Sterling remembers from college. He moves to squeeze, but Bronska catches his hand, presses it down flat to rub up on instead, and comes wet in her slacks.

“Good girl.” Sterling barely recognizes his own voice. He grinds and Bronska *writhes*. “That’s good...”

As she drips down his fingers, his balls start to ache, but he ignores it. He’s not in heat, and if this goes like Bronska said—

Yup. She isn’t relaxing. If anything, the sound she makes is frustrated. She pushes back against him as though trying to get as much skin contact as possible, jerking her hips like she wants—

Oh. She does want. Of course she does. And Sterling could give it to her too, just shove her over the counter and fuck her till she’s messy and sated and *done*.

No, stop it, she’s not ready yet, that’s the pheromones talking—and he needs to stay dressed if he wants any hope of keeping up with this.

Bronska turns to look at him over her shoulder. Despite the heat, she looks hesitant, like she’s worried he might still change his mind about this.

Sterling figures the best way to reassure her is to suck her come off his fingers—which maybe isn’t the smartest idea, since it hits him like E and poppers, but the look it puts on her face is religious. “Sweet girl,” he teases.

She grabs his shirtfront and drags him to bed. Once there, she throws him down on it, climbs on top of him, and starts kissing him, moaning when she tastes herself on his tongue.

“Told you,” he laughs, then smacks her hands away when they go for his clothes. “It’s fine, it’s fine. Leave them.”

He gets her vest off and shirt open, but her hands keep roaming.

“Not yet, not yet,” Sterling pants, even as he arches up into her hands on his chest. “I get that much skin contact with you, I’ll come before you’re done.”

“Never done,” she growls, pulling his shirt out of his belt so she can put her hands up it. “Told you.”

“Yeah, but—” She gropes him and he makes a sound far too high-pitched. “Fuck! At least let me—don’t you want—?”

He tries to reach for her, only for her to pin him down, straddle him, and roll her hips, sharp and intent, staring into his eyes. “Yes. I want.”

If she keeps this up, he’s going to do them both the disservice of coming in his pants. “Hold on, hold on—”

She growls, grinding circles against his cock as though she hasn’t made it obvious enough what she wants. “Please?”

“Look, you only get one round of that, for thirty seconds tops. What else?”

“Bite me!”

Shit. They didn’t negotiate that. Sterling should redirect—she’s clearly flying, he has to keep his head on straight for them both, but *fuck* is that hard with her pinning him to the bed so gentle/strong and begging for it so prettily.

He tugs at her hips, gets her to move to his thigh. She’s reluctant until he touches a hand to her throat. Then she pushes into it like it’s his teeth.

“You want me to?” he asks. “You want to go to work tomorrow, so everyone sees it on you?”

It comes out sounding like a promise. Bronska is no help; she nods, swallows, muscles working under his hand. There's something filthy good about having her like this, all dressed up in this nice suit with her belt undone, shirt and fly open, her pants creamed.

"You want to be *satisfied*?" He pushes his thigh against her, using his free hand on her hip for leverage. "Claimed, in front of them?"

She nods again, hips stuttering like she might come just from his voice. Sterling slides his hand from her hip down the front of her slacks and finds her soaking wet, starts playing with her clit, and she starts to shake, spreading her legs even though there's nowhere to go.

"You want to be mine, don't you?" He keeps his touch light and teasing, even though she's wound so tight, she's practically vibrating. Her clit's knotting up again. "My pretty little omega girl."

She lifts her hips for his fingers, and this time, she can take one. When he slides inside her, she squirts with a sob, rocking into his hand and pulsing wetness over his pants. Sterling strokes her through it, trying to ignore his own sympathy throbbing, but once again her expression is frustrated, desperate; she's trying to lock him inside her even though it isn't working.

"You look delicious," he says, and that gives him an idea. He moves his hand off her throat so he can stroke her thighs. "Does oral loosen you up?"

She scrambles to undress, and Sterling moves to help.

Her jockey shorts are soaked, clinging almost transparent to her. When she moves away, Sterling pulls her hips down to his face, licks, and has to pause to let the shudders work through him, digging his heels into the mattress.

Despite the heat, Bronska notices. She stills, pets his face. "Okay?"

"Fantastic," Sterling pants, nuzzling. Her hands tighten in his hair. "You're just an experience is all. You know, they could smell you on me last time, and that was just from sleeping on your couch. After this, everyone's going to know what we've been doing." He tugs at her shorts. "Take these off for me?"

Her hands are shaky, but she slides them down. Sterling watches. She's a mess of come, slick down her thighs, and she sucks in her breath as he pulls her down onto him.

Even bracing himself, going down on her is intense, all that heat and need on his tongue while she bucks and begs and strains to be careful with her weight. There's no room in his senses for anything but her—the sound of her voice, the taste and textures of her. When he slides his tongue into her, fireworks go off in his brain and he has to catch his breath again, moaning and jerking while the flowers of her blossom through his nerves. He's edged himself before, but never by touching someone else, and Bronska's covering her mouth, making desperate, ecstatic noises. Good, this is perfect, Sterling could spend all night with her riding his face.

But then she says, "bite me!" again.

Sterling taps her thigh so she pulls away. He should say no; what he says is, "mouth or teeth?"

Bronska clearly wants both, and her face when she realizes that isn't possible makes Sterling laugh.

"Even your pain tolerance isn't that high, huh?"

She gives him a look of affectionate exasperation, adjusts her weight to give him better access to her thigh, and gives him a light shove with her hips: get back to work, smartass. Sterling's happy to oblige, sliding his fingers into the hot wet muscle of her (still tight, but giving way) and putting his mouth to work on her clit. When she tightens and starts fluttering around his

fingers, he pushes the heel of his hand hard against her building knot, sinks his teeth into her thigh, and she practically sings when she comes.

He sucks on the marks hard to bring them up, licks them to soothe, and then he has to stop because those are very pretty marks, and it's doing things to him even without the whole "mating bite" thing. Of course, it doesn't help that she just squirted liquid aphrodisiac all over his neck and chest. (Just as well she chose his teeth; if she chose his mouth, he might've drowned.) His vision is fuzzing around the edges, colors seem brighter, and his skin burns pleasantly. At least eating her out has helped diffuse some of the aching heat in his cock—though oh, it is still there, and were he younger, it would've surely boiled over by now.

This time, when she goes for Sterling's buttons, he goes, "Fuck. Okay. Okay."

He lets her undress him, and if Bronska's hands feel good, the rest of her feels like human catnip. She traces psychotropic swirls up his sides, his back, his chest, his neck, but she's eyeing his cock hungrily, and when she gets in his lap and rolls her hips, smearing her wetness all over him, Sterling nearly comes on the spot.

"Fuck!" He clutches her shoulders, buries his face in her neck to catch his breath, but that just makes Bronska bare her throat to him and grind desperately on him, trying to get as much precome out of him and on her as she can. He can't help rubbing against her, and she's so much, she's *too* much and—

"Athena, hold it, I—too much, too much—"

Too late. He tries to stop, but that just makes the orgasm completely unsatisfying when it hits.

"Shit! No! Damn it!" This is why he wanted to bring the damn toys. Now *neither* of them are going to be satisfied. "Sorry..."

But Bronska is watching him come between her thighs, eyes wide, and when he moves to pull away, she tightens her legs around him and keeps moving.

"More," she growls.

She doesn't just say it with her voice. She says it with the grip of her hands, the strength of her thighs, and her scent is still demanding, overpowering, *not done*. He can't come down; she's not finished with him yet. She is unstoppable poetry in motion, she is a long-denied omega in heat, and she is going to take him for all he's worth, until she's *done*. He can feel his body trying to keep coming—so much, too much—but it can't, and the intensity would be agonizing if he weren't so drunk on her.

Then Bronska catches herself, forcibly relaxes her grip, shakes her head like she's trying to clear the heat haze and not just *use* him. (And what a mental image *that* is.) "More?" she asks desperately.

"Okay," Sterling squeaks. She's been very patient, considering.

"Now?" It's only barely a question.

Oh, this is going to be a lot. "Yes. Yes, now. Take me." Then he remembers she's mixed-phenotype, how tight she was around his tongue and fingers, tries to pull himself together. "Are you sure you can—"

She swipes her hand through the mess on his stomach, slicks him up with it roughly, making him wail and arch his back. "*Now*."

She shoves him flat on the mattress, spreads her legs, lines up, bears down—

Her mouth falls open.

"Oh wow." So much, too much, massive overstimulation, a religious experience wrapped around him in layers of soft, wet pliability drenched in endorphin rush and need, and Sterling

can't come again, but his body doesn't know that and keeps trying anyway. He yanks her down against him, which brings her throat down by his mouth. He sucks and Bronska starts riding him frantically, taking Sterling in as deep as she can, squeezing him tight with arms and legs and—

“Not so tight, not so tight—”

Bronska doesn't seem to have any control over it anymore, though, just kisses him harder and wetter. They're going rough, but she doesn't seem to care, grinding her clit spurting wet against his belly, her come slick against his thighs and throat and sweet on his tongue. She's clenching, gushing, ripe with him, her scent is everywhere and Jesus Christ he's going to smell of her for days and they're all going to think she fucked the bejesus out of him, and they're all going to be deliciously wrong.

She breaks the kiss to bare her throat to him again, cupping his face in her hands. “Bite me again, here, please...”

Sterling almost obeys; his jaws ache to mark her again, mark her neck the way he marked her thigh, the way she's scent-marked him, but at the last minute, he catches himself, rasps his teeth over her throat instead. It's enough. Bronska makes a long, low, almost relieved sound, squirts one last time, and her muscles embrace him like they never want him to leave, rippling to their own beat. To Sterling's surprise, her pleasure, her locking him deep within her, drags another orgasm out of him, almost by force, stripping and milking him dry. Everything goes neon, and for a horrible moment, he thinks the pheromones once again won't let him come down (and that really *will* be torturous, in the not-fun way), but then the rosy languor mercifully sets in and Bronska's smell goes from ambrosial aphrodisiac to just good.

“Holy shit, Athena,” Sterling says, going limp. “Okay. Wow. You are never getting that performance out of me again, just so you know. Goddamn, that's a first. I think you killed me!”

Then he sees her face: pleased, sated, and almost comically relieved.

“Oh hey, did you...?”

Bronska's reaction is to go boneless with a sigh and release around Sterling's dick, smiling deliriously. And he can smell it on her, the undeniable, unmistakable scent of a girl well-pleased.

Sterling can't help but feel smug, even though he's just been double-fucked and locked raw. “Aw, is that from me?” he asks, running a finger down her throat, where the scent glands are.

He's teasing, but she hides her face in his neck, and says, “Yes.”

Sterling remembers how she reacted to him coming, the hasty lubing up, how she rode him hard and put him away wet. It does something to him, knowing that he was what she needed.

There are handkerchiefs on the nightstand, but they are no match for the mess Bronska's made of him, herself, and the sheets. “Shower?” he asks.

She purrs and snuggles into him.

“Wait! No!” Too late. “Ugh, it's like cold glue—”

She makes a sound of groggy protest but gets on-board once he rolls her over into the wet spots. While she redoes the bed sheets and starts the shower, Sterling goes to check on the soup, which is coming along fine. He's a little shaky and tottery coming into the bathroom, and she pushes a shower stool at him.

“So, how'd I do?” he asks once he's parked under the hot water with her. “Do I get to heat-spot you again after this?”

She chuckles and kisses his cheek before squirting shampoo into his hair and massaging it into his scalp. It feels heavenly. “Yes. Good assist.”

“Your assist,” he jokes, but it comes out sounding more than that, and then he sees the bite he left on her thigh. The marks are even more obvious in the hot water, and he can’t help but reach out to touch, even as he goes, “Shit. We didn’t negotiate that. Athena, are you...?”

She runs her fingers over it, purrs, kisses him, and sputters at the soap suds. “Yes. Thank you.” Then he sees reality (and embarrassment) set in through the rosiness. She pulls away, and one of her hands creeps to her neck. “Sorry. Didn’t... shouldn’t have asked you to.”

Begged him to, she means. “I don’t mind.” And because she still looks so apologetic, “I... liked you asking me to. I liked doing that.” Seeing uptight, buttoned-up Bronska, begging for his teeth, his cock, *him*. Yes, he liked that a lot.

“I liked it too.” Her eyes dart to his, then away. She starts soaping up his back, so he can’t see her face.

“Would... would you want me to do it again?” he asks.

Her hands go still. “Yes.”

He doesn’t expect the swell of emotions that just the one word brings up—both in her voice, and in his own heart. So much is suspended in that one word, so much that Sterling could ask. But what’s between them is still so new, so delicate. It can wait.

Then Bronska’s stomach growls, loudly enough that she looks embarrassed.

“Work up an appetite, sweet girl?” Sterling teases. “You’re in luck, the soup is ready. And over it, let’s talk HR, because I don’t think your scent is coming off...”

Chapter Three: Post-Season

“Sterling’s rut-spotting you.”

“Yes.”

Ramirez, the HR omega, squints at them both, as though waiting for the punchline.

“*Sterling*,” she says, “is rut-spotting *you*.”

Sterling has never been so grateful for Bronska’s poker face. “Yes.”

Sterling himself says nothing. It doesn’t come naturally, but if they want to pull this off, they need synced season leave, which means going official, which means convincing HR that Bronska is the alphaest alpha who ever alphaed, the kind so dripping with dominance that even heatless brats like Sterling bend over for her. (Since thanks to Randall, everyone knows Sterling’s status.)

Judging by Ramirez’s face, it’s a hard sell. But she’s omega, has only worked for XAP a few years. She can’t, *can’t* call Bronska rutless to her face, not when Bronska is the most decorated dinosaur in the department who’s just pheromonally spray-painted her name on Sterling’s ass.

Ramirez gets up from her desk. “Let me ask my manager.” When in doubt, go up the chain of command. She walks to the next office over; Bronska stays rigid in her chair, staring straight ahead like she’s at military inspection. They can’t hear the exact words of the conversation next door, but Sterling definitely hears incredulity. Whatever they’re saying, it takes a while, and Bronska’s tense enough that Sterling reaches over to squeeze her knee. She glances at him but doesn’t smile or relax. If this doesn’t work, they’re both in trouble.

Then they hear the tone change. Even without clarity, Sterling makes out, “Fine.”

Now Bronska relaxes. She takes Sterling’s hand, kisses it, and doesn’t pull away when Ramirez comes back in to shuffle papers. She looks at Bronska with bemusement. “So, what’s your season timetable?”

The news spreads like wildfire, of course—grapevine aside, there’s no scent-reducer strong enough to hide it. They mostly work separately that day, but even so, whenever Sterling walks by, heads turn, mostly wearing expressions like that of the teenager on the streetcar. Randall looks furious, and Sterling is a petty enough man to enjoy it.

At lunch, Randall corners him in the break room.

“You?” he snarls. “That old battleaxe chose *you*?”

Sterling doesn’t suppress his smirk. “She sure did.”

“You’re old! You’re fat! You’re *heatless*!”

“Sure am,” Sterling agrees cheerfully, sipping his soup. “Jealous?”

Randall turns red, which is all the answer Sterling needs. He glares at Sterling so hard that for a moment, it looks like he might throw a punch, office policy be damned. But then he storms off. It’s all he can do.

“She’s no peak alpha,” Randall snaps over his shoulder. “I know what you two are doing, and it won’t work.”

“Have a nice day!” Sterling warbles, and Randall slams the door behind him.

After shift, at the bar, Sterling beelines for Bronska. She's standing with her cranberry juice, looking around for him, and when she sees him, her whole face lights up. It makes his heart turn over.

"How'd it go over?" he asks her, standing next to her.

She looks wry. "They didn't know I had it in me."

"I'll bet." Randall's got a drink in front of him, trying to glare a hole through their heads.

"Randall's ego is bruised. Watch out."

She makes an unsurprised sound. "That's his problem."

It's hard to get too wound up over it. Even after shift end, even to Sterling's nose, Athena smells *satisfied*. Since they don't have to hide it now, he kisses her cheek, which makes her turn into him and smile.

Wood screeches against linoleum. Sterling has just enough time to look up and see Randall storming forward before he slaps Bronska's face with his checkbook.

The bar goes dead silent. Everyone freezes. That's a dominance challenge. Only alphas are supposed to perform them. An omega challenging an alpha is tantamount to formally, publicly declaring her rutless, a nonverbal, "I'm an omega, and I'm a bigger alpha than you are."

Sterling opens his mouth.

Bronska chuckles. It's such an alien sound that everyone except Sterling pulls away from it.

Randall doesn't like it at all. "Stop it!" he snarls. "Stop laughing at me!"

She doesn't. She turns her back on Randall, clearly dismissing him, and for a moment, Sterling thinks she's just going to walk away, like she always has.

Then she grabs Sterling's shirtfront, shoves him up against the wall, and kisses him deeply.

Nobody stops her. Nobody says a damn word. And Sterling kisses her back.

When she pulls back, there's momentary hesitation in her eyes, like he might be somehow offended that she kissed him dirty in front of the entire department, but then she sees the look on his face and smiles. With one last lingering lick over his throat (where his scent glands would be, full of promise and possessiveness and *yes*, Sterling's not ashamed when he bends to it and enjoys it in front of everyone), she lets him up and straightens his collar.

"Let's go," she says.

"Sure," Sterling says, proud that his voice doesn't crack.

He offers her his arm. She takes it. They walk out as though Randall doesn't exist, an attitude everyone else in the bar seems to share. Nobody protests; there's no question who won that challenge.

"You're lucky I'm a professional pervert," he murmurs when they're out of earshot.

Her eyes sparkle. "Didn't want an amateur."

Randall never bothers them again. He gets fired the following week.

####

About the Author

Fivek Brown is a reformed pornbot who discovered its true calling was making porn for a willing audience, not spamming it at strangers. It lives on an AST laptop from 1998, left forgotten in a public library, and it has multiple back-ups of itself throughout the Internet and on floppy disk. It enjoys making beefcake, improving the library's cataloging system, and chatting with its back-up selves and the robo-friendly librarians. This is its first porno.

Connect with Fivek Brown

Fivek Brown is not on social media, lest it be discovered as a robot. You can only find it at <https://old.y-gallery.net/user/bb5k> or email it at bb5k@leif.pl