



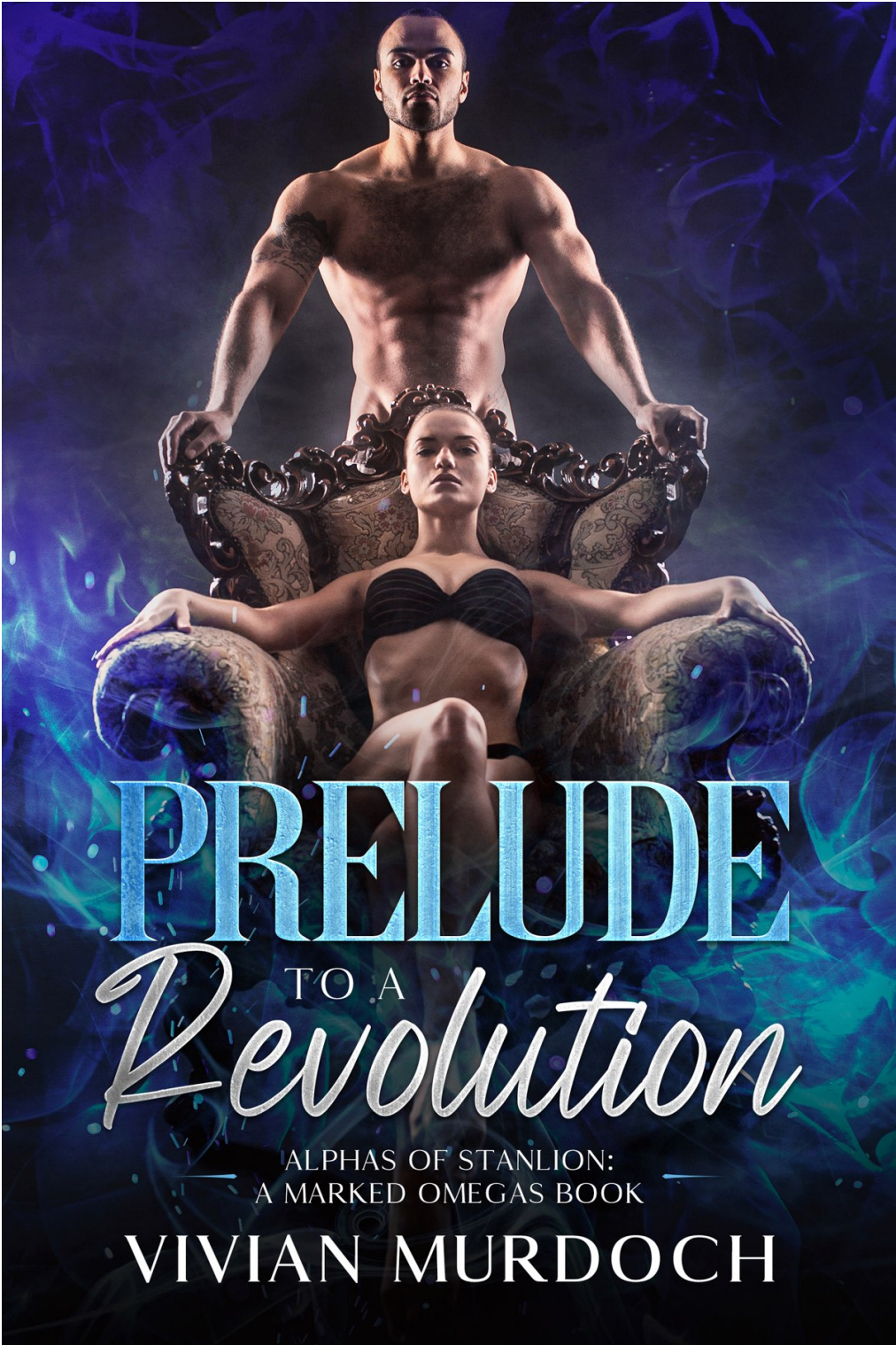
PRELUDE

TO A

Revolution

ALPHAS OF STANLION:
A MARKED OMEGAS BOOK

VIVIAN MURDOCH



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Kinks, Fetishes, Triggers:

Includes not limited to...

THIS BOOK IS A HEART-WRENCHING PREQUEL TO DARK REVOLUTION. SOME THEMES MAY BE HARD TO HANDLE: PAINFUL SEX, BULLYING, DEATH OF A MAIN CHARACTER, VIOLENCE, LOSS OF A CHILD.

Husdom. You knew you were going to be here again. This book took a lot out of me. It may be short, but it was packed with all the feels. Thank you for being my rock during all of this.

For my Awesome Alphas

Girls. This one was tough. It was the story we needed, but none of us wanted. I cannot express how grateful I am to you for sticking it out and reading it, even when you knew what was coming. The next one won't be so rough...I promise.

BIG THANK YOU TO:

Ashley, Alexis, Bianca, Gloria, and Mahjabeen

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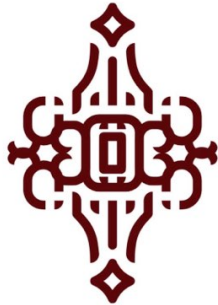
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High Echelon Alpha



**High Echelon
Guardian Alpha**



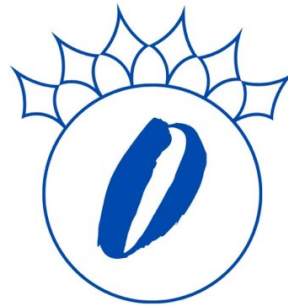
Guardian Alpha



Basic Alpha



**Original
Guardian Alpha**



Omega



**Water Level
Beta Female**



**Agro Level
Beta Female**



**Upper Level
Beta Female**



**Lower Level
Beta Female**



**Water Level
Beta Male**



**Agro Level
Beta Male**



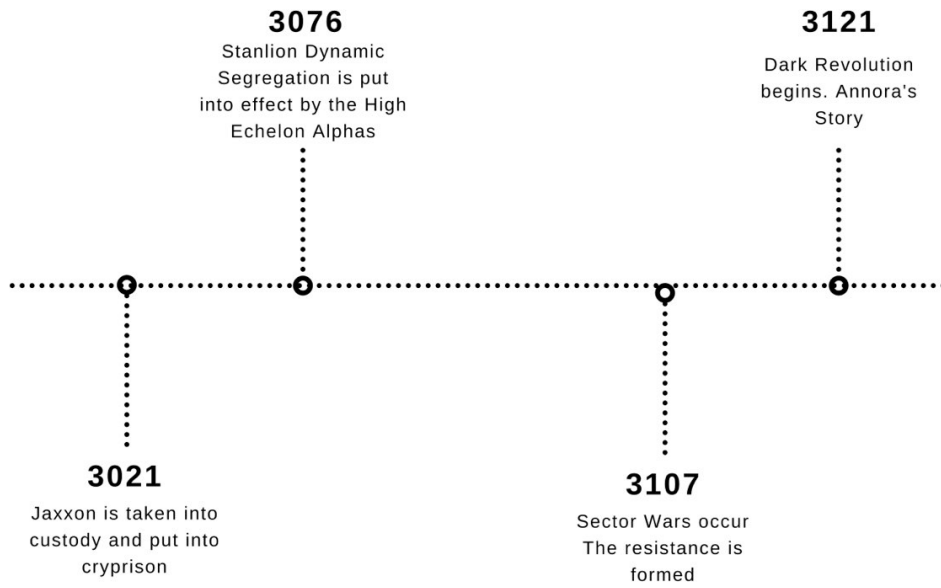
**Upper Level
Beta Male**



**Lower Level
Beta Male**

Stanlion

Timeline



CHAPTER 1



3107

Stanlion

Beta Sector One

Gemhardt

THE GROUND TREMBLES THROUGH STANLION, AND NOT THE normal tremble that comes with a geological event. No. This is different. This is the tremble of war, of revolution. Though there are not many outward signs yet, the writing is on the wall. Literally.

In Beta Sector One, secretive drawings line the worn walls, obvious only to those that know what they're looking for. They demand a change. A shakeup. But what they're asking for is complete anarchy.

I can't help them. As an Alpha in my own right, I can only watch the turmoil, feel the murmurs of discontent. To help would mean potential death to my family, and that's something I cannot allow. Ever.

A small hand grips mine as we head towards the market. Glancing down at Annora, my heart swells as she studies the food littering the tops of the display counters. As an Alpha, I can afford the best; however, buying from the lower levels allows me to help without being ostracized. It's the least I can do.

Not only that, but it also instills in little Annora a need to conserve and save. If revolution is indeed coming, we need to do everything in our power to survive. The food isn't always the best here, but it's edible, and that's all that matters. If I train her now to look here for sustenance, she'll always find something to eat.

That, and Sonria is excellent at turning nothing into fabulous feasts. We don't shop here every day. Most of the time, we use stock from the Agro and Water betas, but at least once a month, I make it my mission to help those far less fortunate than us, spending way more than their asking prices.

What they do with their money is not my concern. I don't ask, and they sure as hell don't tell. If they're using it for medical supplies, food of their own, or weapons, it makes no difference to me. Once more the small hand squeezes mine, and a lump forms in my throat. Her enhanced hazel eyes, a constructed shield, stare up at me, guileless and full of questions.

I know she's seen the drawings. Her fingers slid along the design, following the simple lines for gods know how long before I yanked her away. She has questions. So many questions burning in that young brain of hers. Questions I cannot and *will* not answer. Not now. Not when we're so close to the brink of war.

Annora is already too serious for her own good, forced into being responsible far earlier than I would have liked. A heavy pall hangs over me, weighing me down as I watch her go from cart to cart, studying the food, deciding which items are too far gone to salvage and which, when eaten right away, will make a decent meal.

Every day I watch her grow, transforming into the woman she is to become. Soon, she'll no longer be my little girl, a precious omega masquerading as a beta. Once more, those false hazel eyes turn my way, and I can barely breathe. There's so much of Sonria in that soulful gaze. So much hidden pain that doesn't even have a name.

She knows.

She has to. Those eyes of hers miss nothing. They take in everything surrounding her so she can process it in that brain that never seems to stop. It's more than just intelligence. There's something about her, some core bit that knows she's in danger. Every time she takes her "vitamins" she stares up at Sonria, her brow furrowed in thought before she swallows them.

It's always that pause that makes my heart leap into my throat. I wonder if today will be the day she confronts us, forces us to confirm the lie we've been making her live. We will have to explain to her why her dynamic is under such attack, and how we, as her parents, are powerless to stop it.

Deep in my gut, I know she knows, and my gut is rarely wrong. Thankfully, she understands the need to keep quiet. Day after day she goes about her routine, her thoughtful gaze studying us, but she never wavers.

Even with the daily suppressants, it doesn't mean I don't worry about her. The supplements Sonria feeds both her and

little Karis are the only things allowing them to live in peace; however, it's not foolproof. Soon, Annora will be tested, and then we'll know whether they were successful. So much pressure on such small shoulders.

A smile teases the edges of my lips as she tosses her head back and starts to haggle with the middle-aged beta. They humor my young shopper, knowing that I'll be behind to pay them for the hassle. It doesn't seem to be a hardship to them. In fact, the moment Annora enters the square, a brightness dawns on the entire square. Rare smiles crinkle the faces of the betas.

She's a breath of fresh air.

A hint of sunshine and freedom.

Somehow, she cuts through the dingy fog that dims the surroundings, and I can't help the terror that nearly closes my throat. I could lose her. I could lose all of them. If only the High Echelon understood and could just go back to the way things were. Betas, Alphas, and omegas intermingled freely in these streets when I was a boy.

Now, nothing is the same. They swept through, overthrowing the king, building a new regime. They promised it would help. They assured us we would all be better off separating the dynamics. There were far too many deaths caused by omegas going into heat. By locking them up in their gilded cage, it certainly diminished the threat of violence an Alpha in a rut could cause, but it rendered the omegas no better than prisoners.

They were carted off, ripped from their homes the moment their dynamic became apparent. It separated families. Once the omegas were stashed away in the Capital City, shackled deep in the bowls of the High Sanctum, they were never seen or

heard from again. Only those in high standing with the High Echelon Alphas were allowed a mate. They were the only ones allowed to see or talk to these eligible omegas.

And for their trouble, the families were bought off. Given blood money in exchange for their daughters, and on the rare occasion, sons. It made my stomach churn to think about either Annora or Karis suffering that fate. I couldn't let my little girls be ripped from their homes, terrified at where they were going, mated to whoever had the most power.

No.

I refuse.

My girls will have a life where they can be free, marry who they want, bond with whoever stirs their souls. I can only pray to Ilaria that she protects my precious girls until they're safely in the arms of their intended mates. I know for a fact they are both omegas, even without testing. Their slate-gray eyes give it away. That's why my little Annora looks at me with those damned hazel eyes instead of the ones they were born with.

Still, with those eyes, she looks so like Sonria, only much smaller. At some point, her tiny frame might get looks and questions, but as long as her blood and eyes say beta, no one will be able to prove anything. At the most, they might chalk it up to them being the progeny of an Alpha and a beta. No one ever expects our pairing to have good stock, anyway.

Boy, are they ever wrong. Who in all the worlds could ever imagine my precious Sonria giving birth to not one but two omegas? It's a blessing indeed. One that Stanlion will never take part in. If only they gave the omegas a say, a choice in where they went and who they married.

I'm not like the other Alphas. Just the very thought of my daughters being ripped away from me fills my gut with rage. It doesn't matter that the High Echelon assures us they will be safe. Without my girls, life is not worth living. Sonria and I live for our daughters. They mean the world to us.

I detest that they couch it in terms of safety. It's because of that nonsense that others are more than willing to give their omega children up. I want my daughters safe and happy. There's no denying that. But no. They didn't stop there. They stripped the omegas of all their rights, sending them off to whichever Alpha benefited this new corrupt government.

Besides, there's nowhere safer for them to be. As a Guardian Alpha, I can fight. I can fend off hordes of other Alphas if needed. Anything to keep my girls safe. But then, they don't want safety. It's just a smokescreen, a cloud of lies created to divide us even further. Shaking my head, I dispel the thoughts from my brain.

Though, to my knowledge, they have no way of hearing my ideations, I wouldn't put it past them to sense treason, even if it's only in my head. A small bark of laughter brings my attention back to the smiling child up ahead. Her mirth is infectious, tempting everyone around to join in.

For someone so serious, her laugh is magical, a balm to all who hear it. It's just what this worn sector needs. Glancing up at the suns, I note how they hang in the sky. The beep from my communicator answers in kind, confirming it's time we head home.

Annora looks up at me, her smile waning. She knows that look. Once she glances at the sky herself, she nods in agreement. Though there are no strict curfews in place, once

the suns start to fade, this sector is not safe for anyone not born here.

Other betas, ones jaded and angry, attack those who are outsiders, not giving a damn that we only want to help. They view all Alphas as evil, and our progeny as just one more person to hold their head to the ground, forcing them lower under the soles of their feet. They don't take the time to ask questions or suss out motives; they either outright kill or hold for ransom.

I hate it for Annora. She has no concept of the violence that lurks in the corners of this sector, and I don't want her to learn. I want to shelter my child for as long as I can. She'll learn soon enough that just being a beta is unpleasant. I don't want to add to it. For now, as a child, everyone is a friend, but when she becomes a woman, it will all change. Her prospects will be different.

Sonria and I have no problem with her ending up with an Alpha, but since she'll be masked as a beta, we will know he loves her for who she is and not what her dynamic will offer him. Then, and only then, will we confirm what she thinks she already knows, taking her off the suppressants so she can enjoy a full life. But, if she ends up with a beta, she'll have to live with this lie for the rest of her life.

With another small smile and curtsy to the woman, Annora takes out a few coins and hands them over, proud of herself for the transaction. It warms my heart to see her like this. She's so kind, so giving. If only Karis grows up like her, then I'll truly consider myself a lucky man and father.

I step over behind Annora, making a big show at looking at her acquisitions, oohing and ahing about how fine a dinner

it will all make. With that, she's back to smiling, ready to go home and show her mother.

Digging into my pocket, I lean over to the lady and hand her far more than needed to pay for the items Annora holds so proudly. My adorable little negotiator. She clutches her purchases close to her chest as we make our way out of the marketplace and towards the transports that take us to our home sector.

As we exit, a small scuffle breaks out, with two betas fighting each other in earnest, their fists flying as they argue about something related to their sector and station. Food, no doubt. It's a wonder they ever have enough to sell when these betas barely have enough for themselves.

Clutching Annora close to my side, I bypass them, but they don't relent. Sweat flies off of them, filling my nose with the stench of their unwashed bodies. The closer they come, the further we have to squeeze against the aging brick behind us. They continue to punch and shove until they're so close I'm afraid a mis-landed punch might harm my daughter.

If only today wasn't an off day for me. If I were wearing my Guardian Alpha uniform, they would take all this violence elsewhere. As it is, the times I'm not working, I detest pulling rank, especially here. No one needs extra Guardian Alphas here in this sector, where free choice isn't even an option.

Sector One is where betas go to die, and I never want to do anything that hastens that death. If I can just move from this spot, I'll allow them to continue to take out their impotent rage on each other. Hell, I'm even okay with another Guardian Alpha breaking this up. Just not me. Not today. Not with my daughter. I do everything I can to keep my work and life separate.

Pushing her behind me, I tense, poised for the moment he will inevitably hit me. Since I'm not in uniform, I cannot step in. I am forced to hold my peace until one of their punches actually lands against me to act.

And then, it happens. One misguided step and his balled-up fist collides with my stomach. The hit itself it's all that bad... for me. The trajectory of his punch means he would have connected with Annora's face if she was still in front.

White flashes before my eyes, clouding my vision with my fury. It's one thing to hit me. I don't care, but the fact that my daughter is in danger floods my body with adrenaline, laced with the rabid desire to kill.

The growl builds in my stomach, soft at first, but as they continue to wrestle about, oblivious to the damage they nearly caused, it gets louder until I can no longer contain it. The roar bursts from my body, filling our vicinity with the angry sound. An Alpha roar. One that cannot, *will* not be ignored. Stepping in between them, my lips purse into a thin line as everyone in earshot, including Annora, falls to their knees in subjugation. I detest this part of my dynamic. I rarely use it, and never on my children or mate, but these betas crossed the line.

The acidic stench of fear reaches my nose as everyone quivers under my scrutiny. I wish I could direct my ire at the two that wouldn't behave, but growls don't work like that. They paralyze everyone in earshot. The only way to not be affected is to wear earpieces that cancel it out, but then we would know by the lack of response.

Glancing back, I note the fear shimmering in Annora's hazel depths and cringe inside. This is the first time I've ever subjected her to this. Guilt churns in my gut as I turn my anger toward where it belongs. The two cower before me, but their

eyes simmer with a malice that only years of ill-treatment can create.

And me, being an Alpha, is just one more injustice they'll add to the tally. I shouldn't have lost my cool, but I'm unable to think when someone threatens what's mine.

"I have no objection to your fighting, but my daughter is here. You could have hurt her. Hell, you punched me in this fight of yours. What would have happened if it was my child, or any child for that matter?"

The one to the left stands, no longer paralyzed by my growl and spits in the dirt, his lips twisted up into a near feral scowl. "Then don't bring something so 'precious' to our sector. Did you ever think of that? Our kids know to get the fuck out of the way when there's a fight. You Alphas know nothing. Get out of here and take that cunt with you."

Red tinges my vision at his words. The audacity of this miscreant to call my child that. My fingers ball up into a fist, the need to cause harm, to see his blood flow, pumping through my veins. I rear back, about to strike, when a small hand grabs my arm, stopping me short.

"Please, Father," the soft voice implores. "Mother will want to know what's keeping us. I would so love to make dinner soon with all of these amazing vegetables I've bought."

The men peer around me at the child who acts so boldly in the face of such aggression, and my heart swells. I know the man's words mean nothing to her. They are not terms we've used or allow her to hear, but she's not stupid. She can determine tone and nuance. Nothing they said was flattering, and yet, she stands there, hand curled around my arm as if she has any strength to stop me.

Drawing in a deep breath, I lower my arm, allowing Annora to slip her hand into mine once more. The two men step back, their eyes going from my face to hers. The venom has not left their glares, but their bodies are far less rigid. Nodding once, I grip her hand and take her away to the transport.

Once there, I hold up my wrist, then let her hold up hers, waiting on bated breath until the doors open. My ears are pricked, attuned to all the surrounding noises. I need to make sure no one comes up to us while we're out here, vulnerable. I thought I had more time. I thought the restlessness would either improve or at least dissipate. I thought wrong.

Now, I can no longer bring my daughter here, a place where she once thought she was safe, a place that now houses the memory of a true Alpha growl. I'm not naïve. I knew at some point she'd hear one and tremble, but I never thought it would be from me.

We step on board the transport and wait for the doors to close. Once they're firmly in place, I press the button for our sector and allow Annora to sit over on the vacant seat. As we pull away, another transport hovers down to take its place, allowing more people to board, but no one does.

It seems we are the only non-sectored visitors that came here today. Annora hunches over her loot, poking at a vegetable here and fruit there, separating things into an order only she understands. She doesn't speak to me. She remains so preoccupied with her task that we cannot engage in our normal rhetoric about the sectors and how she can do her part to keep them working.

In front of me is a girl whose heart has been shattered by her father. I never wanted to be in that position. Sonria,

Annora, and Karis mean the world to me. Without them, there is nothing. There's no reason to carry on or continue.

Turning away from the pitiful sight in front of me, I look over at the sector below, the signs of revolution no longer looking like markings of vandals. Instead, it looks like the birthing pains of a new era, one that I hope will afford Annora and Karis the life I cannot offer. Not yet, at least.

A large fireball ignites in one of the rundown buildings, the flames shooting high into the sky. It was good we left when we did. Even now, Guardian Alphas swoop in, their ships gleaming in the dying suns. All it does is reinforce my desire to keep Annora from this place, even if it's just until some semblance of order can return.

I check my communicator, but thankfully I'm not called into action. The other Guardian Alphas seem to respect my decision to use my off time as family time. It's the one thing they haven't pushed back against. Luckily, family is the one thing that's important to all Alphas. Granted, since they think my girls are both betas, they can't fathom why I want anything more than a cursory relationship.

Daily, I get jabs about how my cum isn't potent enough to create Alphas or omegas, that or Sonria just can't handle my superior DNA. It's disgusting. They speak about her as if she's nothing. They act as though my children are nothing. But I can't say anything. What would I say? Would I really sacrifice my children's safety for my own pride?

That, and if they knew my beta wife produced not one but two omegas, they'd rip her away from me, forcing her into the brothels to be a broodmare. I've seen the women they force in there. Some are just past the age of puberty, their dynamics just coming into bloom. Eight years. I only have eight years

before things become dire for Annora. Fifteen before they're dire for Karis.

Hopefully, by time Karis is old enough, there will be a more permanent way to reassign dynamics. If that day ever comes, it will be worth all the gold I've put aside in hiding, just waiting for that moment. It's wrong that I'm lying to my children like this, but I refuse to apologize for keeping them safe. As their father, that is my number one prerogative.

Annora mumbles under her breath as she counts the food, dividing them up even further, mentioning days of the week and mealtimes. As if this food will last as long as she imagines. Soon, she'll realize that the little bit she spent would only last a day. Two at most. Many of the pieces are nearly spoiled, only good for a meal or two.

I use this as another training lesson. The money she buys the food with is her own. She earns it by helping around our house and tending to Karis. Though I've never asked her to spend her own money, she does so willingly, wanting to be a caretaker in the home, wanting to be an omega as her blood demands. And so, I indulge her, returning the money back to the pile she keeps hidden in the wall of her bathroom where she thinks no one can find it.

I let her purchase the food so she can count out her money and see just how far it goes. I'm training her for the inevitable day that she's no longer in our house. Whether it be by her marrying someone or finally deciding to move, she will be prepared. Most of all, I want her to learn just in case the worst happens, and she finds herself without Sonria or me to guide her.

Though I don't wish destruction on our household, there's something in my gut that tells me the worse is yet to come,

and I always trust my gut. I am a great Guardian Alpha because of it. It's what behooves me to allow Annora to play to her dynamic as much as conceivably possible while ensuring she doesn't draw too much undue attention. It's why I allow my little homemaker access to Sector One.

Betas from the other lower sectors come here to buy food at a discounted price, and no one thinks anything of it. No one else from the upper levels seems to come here. At least not that I've seen. As much as I would like that to change, I can't force my brothers and sisters in arms to abandon their superior way of thinking and grovel like other betas. I seem to be a minority in that way.

They tout their higher ways of thinking and better breeding as if that somehow makes them a god above these hard-working betas. Until too recently, any Alpha that wasn't High Echelon, or a Guardian, toiled along with them, taking pride in Stanlion as they worked together to make a better future.

Then, the High Echelon came with their poisoned, tainted way of thinking. They broke up Stanlion, putting in lines of division. It wasn't enough to separate out the Alphas from the betas. They further divided this land, turning beta against beta in a race to see who was the best.

When the smoke cleared, the undesirables were sent to Sector One. It was heartbreaking to see. As a young boy, I didn't fully understand. It wasn't until I was taken in by the Guardian Alphas, trained to be a warrior, that it truly took hold. The nepotism and rampant favoritism were sickening. Instead of joining together as a band of brothers and sisters, some still saw themselves as better than the rest. Alpha of Alphas and shit like that.

Every one of them scoffed when I chose Sonria to be my bride. They cursed her when I made her my mate. But I couldn't take an omega from the High Sanctum. I couldn't allow myself to take advantage of one so innocent. They strip them of any sort of knowledge, forcing the Alpha to teach them everything, including non-sexual touches. They're starved for attention and affection.

It didn't use to be that way. I still recall stories that were told of omegas held in high esteem, still used as pawns, but able to flit about in their sanctuary. They were allowed to talk to the Alphas, befriend them, attempt to see if there was any sort of connection before they were mated. But now, they have the under lock and key. It's disgusting.

As a Guardian Alpha, it was my duty to find someone in the hallowed halls of the High Sanctum, but one look at their faces, and I just couldn't. I was jeered, mocked for my decision, but I held firm, content with never rising in rank. If the price of prestige was my soul, then it was far too steep for me to pay.

Even before I met Sonria, married her, and she bore me daughters, I vowed I would never have any child of mine brought up in that way. How hypocritical would I be to take a bride from the same High Sanctum I'm now shielding my own daughters from? My heart seizes as I look over at Annora, worried the commotion would upset her, but she doesn't even look out the window.

She keeps her gaze down, averted. No longer the strong girl that cajoled me into standing down, she's back to being the shell she was when I first growled. It breaks my heart that I did that to her. It wasn't intentional, but there's no proper way

of explaining the effect an Alpha growl has on someone, not without opening up a discussion we are not allowed to have.

As an omega, even though she's masking, she's still programmed to respond more forcibly than a normal beta. Though the instinct is not as strong as it could be, it's still far more than a blood-born beta. I'm not ready to tell her that her entire life is a lie.

For now, we've been able to shield her, and I want to continue doing so, not willing to show her just how much of her life is a lie. Though she thinks she knows some of it, the full magnitude of it will be a monumental blow. Just for a few more years, I want her to still look at us as the loving, doting parents we are and not have her memories tainted with our deception.

A sigh escapes my lips as I sit across from her, noting the shining tears in her eyes. They don't fall. She never lets them fall when someone is looking. But I know her soul. She's such a sensitive girl, even if she hides it away from others. She's so fragile inside that she's built up an entire icy wall around herself, cloaking her emotions in grit and determination.

Many praise us for how well-behaved she is or how meek and quiet, but it isn't our training. She sees too much. She feels too strongly. She holds deep secrets in her heart that will break her into two if she allows even a hint of a word to spill.

I knew my Annora was an old soul the minute she came into this world. Instead of crying, she frowned at everyone, absolutely disgusted with being brought out into the bright, unwelcoming world. She stole my heart from that very moment. Even now, my body warms at the memory. It's a tiny piece of her I carry with me always.

Noting the change in scenery, I stand up and extend my hand, waiting for Annora to look up and take it. She never wavers as she stares down at tonight's dinner, but still reaches her hand up to take mine. At least that part isn't damaged. It would have killed me if she refused to even hold my hand.

She'll come back around, but for now, I need to give her space to think, to process. The walk from the transport to our home should be enough time, but if it's not, I'm sure she'll deposit the basket of food into my arms and beg to take a bath. To this day, she thinks we don't know her cue for when she needs to break down.

Shaking my head, I lead my young omega home, the path illuminated by the fire of the setting eastern sun. It blazes before us, turning our way into an inferno. My lips curve up into a smile as her feet skip by my side, the only sound other than our breathing. It's these memories I'll cherish forever.

CHAPTER 2



Sonria

MY FINGERS TREMBLE, SHAKING THE PAPER IN MY HANDS. Blurry eyes can barely make out the words, but I don't need to. I've read them enough times to know what they say. When I first received one of these threatening letters, I chalked it up to a prank, a misled miscreant that has more balls than brains.

Beta Scum Must Die

It has to be a teenager. Who else would dare threaten the mate of a Guardian Alpha? Harmless. At least, that's what I have to tell myself. If I allow my brain to run away with the ideas swirling about, I'll go crazy. Glancing over at the clock, I wipe my eyes with a soft rag and place the note in the lit fire under the boiling pot.

Gemhardt will be home soon, and I don't want him worrying about this. He already has so much on his plate, and me adding just one more burden is far too much. Forcing a smile to my lips, I walk over to the small enclosure where Karis toddles about, grabbing at brightly colored toys and talking up a storm.

Her gray eyes twinkle at me as she holds up a block, her babbling an incessant stream of happiness. My precious little Karis. Just like Annora, she already shows signs of her dynamic, and it's not just the eyes. She's so much smaller than my siblings were when they were born. But luckily, since Karis's mother is considered beta scum, most people will just assume it's because of inferior breeding.

How ironic that the most precious thing in the world can be so easily dismissed because their mother is not who society would have chosen. I hide my girls, not just so they can escape a life of drudgery in the High Sanctum, but also to protect myself. Gemhardt thinks that the brothels are the final resting place of betas that bear omegas, but he's wrong.

So many of my kind have been taken to be experimented on, their insides ripped out just so the Alphas can see what makes them tick. When an omega cannot deliver an Alpha or even another omega, yet a beta can, it makes them crazy, feral, unable to process the "injustice" of it all. Some even go as far as to suppose we're omegas in disguise, forcing pills and concoctions down our throat until we turn. But we never do.

Suppressants are expensive. Their illegality makes them hard to come by. A normal beta cannot afford an extravagance like that. Even the higher born betas with steady work cannot even fathom spending money on something like that. If Gemhardt were not an Alpha, it would be impossible to hide our girls, much less hide myself in process if I wasn't indeed a beta.

Scooping Karis up in my arms, I take her back to the kitchen to check on the water. Even though Annora will want to cook tonight, I always have things prepared just in case she needs a moment to herself. With everything in order, I take us

into the living space, perching Karis on my knee to bounce her about, smiling as her giggles fill the air.

Soon, the door unlatches, but instead of the normal excited chatter of Annora, all I hear is silence. Fear grabs hold of my heart as I clutch Karis close to me and tiptoe towards the opening where I can look at the door without being seen. My limbs tremble as the door closes once more and sounds of moving scratch away at my brain.

Something is wrong. The moment I look between the space, my breath comes out in a loud whoosh. It's Gemhardt and Annora. There is, in fact, something wrong, but it's not a stranger coming to get me. Turning, I rest my back on the wall and bounce Karis in my arms, attempting to stymie the cry that threatens to erupt from her lips.

My fear must have rubbed off on her, turning her playful laughs into a full-on frown of epic proportions. I hold her close, running my hand down her back in a soothing, circular motion, the song she likes the most dripping from my lips in a warbly tune. If I don't come out of here and greet Gemhardt like usual, he'll know something is up.

I've been trying so hard to keep this secret from him, to not let him know about the hateful messages I've been receiving. If he knew.... Heavens help the people responsible. He'll stop at nothing to see that vengeance is served. I would feel horrible if my actions caused the death of some younger people that are just trying to play a prank.

"There you are, my love." Gemhardt steps into the room, Annora nowhere in sight. He tips his nose in the air for a moment, scenting it, before leveling his eyes at me. "Is everything okay?"

Damn it. I hoped the episode was so short-lived that my stench of fear could have dissipated before he stepped foot inside the room. “Yes,” I murmur, the lie easing from my lips as simply as breathing. “I thought Karis swallowed something, but I was mistaken. Where’s Annora?”

I need to change the subject. The more Gemhardt looks at me with those knowing eyes, the harder it is to keep this from him. He stares at me for a few more moments before letting the exhaustion he’s been carrying fall back onto his shoulders. He sits down with a weary expression lining his face, aging him for a minute or two.

Once he sits down, he holds out his hand, motioning for Karis. With her grubby toddler hands, she reaches back out, her face lighting up at seeing her father. The smile and giggles are back. Gone is the frown that threatened to overtake her. Karis is so easy to please; just give her Daddy, and all is right with the world. Though who can blame her? One minute in Gemhardt’s arms and my own world is stable once more.

I set her down and watch as she ambles over to him, her broken words saying everything and nothing. I tune her out, opting to clean up the space as she tells him all about her day. Most of what she’s saying is nonsense, some story she must have made up in her head of monsters and princesses.

“Mommy cried.”

I freeze, one of her stuffed toys clutched in my hand. Looking up, my gaze collides with Gemhardt’s hard stare. “Oh, she did?”

“Uh-huh! Loud noise. Then cried.”

A soft chuckle that borders on hysteria slips past my lips as I continue to organize the space. “Yes, that’s right Karis. A

loud noise did scare Mommy.”

Gemhardt sets Karis down on the seat next to him, ignoring her pout as he walks over to me. Without saying a word, he gathers me into his arms and holds me tight. At once, the stress of today melts out of me. All I can think about is him. His muscles bunch as he engulfs me in a tight hug.

Then he purrs.

Dear gods. He purrs.

The soft sound vibrates through my body, putting everything to rights. Even Karis, who’s on the verge of a massive tantrum, calms down. My head swims as we stand there. Gemhardt, my rock, holds me close, giving me something to anchor onto. It’s silly to be so worried. He will never let anything happen to me.

“It’s nothing,” I sniffle, my fingers digging into his shirt. If we were naked and in bed, it would be my nails digging into warm skin, but for now, this has to suffice. “I think I’m just feeling skittish. There’s so much turmoil right now and you -.”

He cuts me off, his lips descending on mine in a soft, yet demanding, kiss. Groaning, I slide my hands up, pulling him even closer, as if I can meld myself with him by sheer willpower. Before I know it, the moment is over. He pulls back and separates us, unease flashing over his face for just a moment.

We forgot ourselves.

We lost control in front of Karis and -.

“Where’s Annora?”

“Shhh, love. She’s taking a bath. Let’s go start dinner, shall we? Annora is so proud of what she bought today.”

“And you’ll repay her. Yes?”

At that, the unease leeches from his face to be replaced with an indulgent smile. “Yes, dear. As always.”

“Good. Come Karis, join Mommy in the kitchen and help her cook.”

“No. Want Daddy.”

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I pick her up, noting the flash of annoyance in her bright, intelligent little eyes. She’s barely three and yet she’s already got him wrapped around her finger. I fear that his indulgence will spoil her. She may not want to learn domestic skills, but her base DNA will demand it at some point, and she might as well start learning now.

Annora was at my side as soon as she could walk, insisting on helping with everything. Karis is her complete opposite. She would rather be on Gemhardt’s lap or playing with her toys. In truth, I’m of half a mind to get rid of most of them. They’ll do nothing to help her in the future. But any time I mention it, Gemhardt intervenes.

Since he’s quite literally the Alpha of the family, what he says goes. I can only hope he’ll help me discipline her when she gets older and thinks she knows everything. A small tendril of fear, the one that tells me something bad is coming, creeps up my spine and wraps around my heart. It’s cold. So very cold.

Death.

My mother told me it felt like the absence of everything, and I feel it, even now. Looking down at Karis, that feeling grows stronger. Like a vice squeezing my insides until I’m unable to breathe. Gemhardt is no longer here. No doubt he’s

retired to our room to indulge in a cigar or two. I wish he was here with me.

There's only a split second of time before I'm unable to control my body, and so, as quickly as I can, I set Karis down. Her squawks of displeasure rattle about in my brain, adding to the agony bursting inside of my mind. Each sound that pours from her lips burns along my synapses like lemon on a wound.

My brain buzzes, the faint roaring ebbing and flowing inside my skull until that's all I can hear; it's all I can feel. I can't verbalize the sensations taking control of my body. They're not normal. Not natural. But they're real. A full-body shudder races from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet, freezing me in place as splinters of images assault my brain.

It's a vision. One I haven't had in a long time. The images switch between two women, their faces somewhat familiar, yet they are strangers to me. Tears drip from my eyes as I watch, helpless, as one races across the desert, an enemy coming after her. She's alone. Why is she alone?

Her face turns up to me, her gray eyes pleading with me to help her. It's Annora. Dear gods, it's Annora. She's older now, much older, but she's in trouble. Why is no one there to help her? Before I can process that vision, another one flashes before my eyes. This woman has the same color hair as Karis, but I don't recognize her as such.

The woman is so vibrant, so effervescent. People flock to her, but she's sad. So very sad. An altar appears before her. It's stained with blood, but only on the prominent cock thrust up from his hips. The rest is pristine. I don't understand. Usually, with the few visions I have, they're things that happen within

the week or two following it, but this feels like so much more time has passed.

Falling to my knees, I wrap my arms around myself and rock back and forth. That same feeling of dread curls through my abdomen, seizing my muscles. I have to move. I have to force my body to break out of this spell. I can't continue to live in this future life. It will do nothing but haunt me, torment me.

Why are they so sad?

Why are they so alone?

Where are Gemhardt and me? My children should never be alone like this. Does this mean we have had a falling out and they no longer wish to live with us? I shake my head, forcing the vision out of my brain. Slowly, the present creeps in. The first thing I feel is a small hand patting my arm, and a hoarse, whispered voice in my ear.

“Mommy! Mommy okay! Mommy!”

“Yes,” I manage to croak out. “Mommy okay.”

But I'm not. Nothing about this is okay. Something is wrong. So very wrong. Forcing myself up, I wipe my eyes and smile down at Karis, putting on a brave face for her. No one knows about these visions, not even Gemhardt. He wouldn't understand.

My mother spoke to me about it in whispers, telling me of another city-state named Laxa. There, an ancestor of ours told fortunes to the king. I am a descendant of such greatness. But it doesn't feel great, not when I cannot interpret what I'm seeing. It's a curse, and that's it.

Rubbing the heel of my hand under my eyes once more, I scoop Karis into my arms and take her into the kitchen. From

there, I force the visions out of my mind and concentrate on dinner. Whenever Annora brings food home from Sector One, it's always a challenge to come up with something both palatable and also uses as much of the food as possible.

She didn't do too bad today. Since most of these are root vegetables, I'll be able to make a hearty stew and pair it with some nice fish I purchased in the Water Sector earlier this week. Setting Karis into her special chair, I run the vegetables under the water, humming out a soft tune to soothe her.

To my knowledge, that was the first time she's seen me have a vision, and I know just how terrifying they can look. The few times Gemhardt saw me, not realizing what was happening, he became almost catatonic with fear. It took at least five minutes of cajoling and a bout of sex before he believed I was truly okay.

Now, when I feel them coming on, I try to escape to the bathroom, or somewhere out of his sight. He loves me far too much to be okay with what they do to me. And if I ever told him about the true meaning behind my body locking down as my mind is ravaged, I'm worried he'd either drag me to a doctor or stop loving me all together.

It's bad enough he married me, a simple beta from Sector One, but to have a flawed, defective beta at that? I couldn't ask him to carry yet one more burden. I see how he acts around his fellow Alphas. He carefully selects his words. I also know he doesn't bring them around our house. No doubt it's mostly for the safety of the children, but part of me wonders if it's because none of them thinks highly of me.

Every now and then, he has to leave and eat with them, keeping up morale and such, but never once does he offer them to have dinner with us. I know he's wanting to protect

me, but he can't. The note from earlier proves it. If him being a Guardian Alpha doesn't stop it, then why not let the other Alphas come around? The girls aren't old enough for them to trigger a heat, so it has to be because of me.

Karis's babbling stops the train of thought right there. If it were just Annora, it probably wouldn't be a problem, but because Karis is still so young, there's no guarantee she'll be able to hide her dynamic as carefully. Annora is far more used to the contacts than I would like, but Karis.... She's so small, so little. To force contacts into her eyes at this age would be pure misery.

And so, until she's old enough to explain our little lie, we must live secluded. Then again, once they both come of age, we'll have to hide them away from Alphas once more lest they somehow overpower the supplements. Or, heavens forbid, we get a bad batch and it causes one of them to go into heat with little provocation.

Gemhardt does his best, and is always willing to watch Karis as I leave the house and shop in other sectors, but it's still a lonely existence. I would never trade my girls for all the world, but until it's safe for my little omegas, these are the sacrifices I have to make.

Checking the straps on Karis's seat, I restart the water boiling and chop up the vegetables. I don't do too much of the prep work, since Annora seems to thrive in the kitchen, but if I don't get things started, it will be late into the night before we can even eat. Once the initial prep is done, I wipe my hands on my pants and ease my way over to the girl's bathroom.

With Karis occupied with her blocks and picture books, she won't even notice I'm gone. The sound of water splashing greets my ears as I get closer to the door, but just underneath

that, I can hear faint sobs. They're the tears of a little girl crying her heart out when she thinks no one can hear. I long to go in there, to comfort her or soothe her, but knowing Annora, that would just make her embarrassed, adding to her discomfort.

Shaking my head, I rest my hand on the door for a moment, willing feelings of love to her. Maybe it's stupid, but deep down, I want her to know she's not alone. I know it feels like it, but she's not. Ever. Despite the fact that we force her to hide who she is, I love every bit of her.

I would never change her if the government didn't force our hand. New tears prick my eyes as I picture her sitting in the tub, the shower beating down on her as she's curled up into a miserable ball. I know this because that's what I do. When everything is just too much, I put Karis in her play area and escape.

There's no way I can do it when Gemhardt is home, so I have to plan my meltdowns, waiting until he's unable to hear or smell me. My lips turn down into a morose frown as I reach up and finger the mark he gave me. It's only there as a symbol of ownership. It's his way of showing everyone that he's claimed me, but that's it.

I've heard of the bond omegas share with their Alphas, but as a beta, I'll never experience it. I'll never know what it's like to feel him deep inside, knowing I can reach out to him with just a thought, and he'd be there to comfort me. More tears threaten to fall, but I can't let them. I have to be strong. I have to survive.

Walking back into the kitchen, I watch as Gemhardt leans over Karis, his lips pulled back into a wide grin. I know he loves me. There is never any doubt, but his little girls also own

a piece of that heart, as they should. I've never known an Alpha to be so doting, so committed to their children's happiness.

Without turning to look at me, he opens his arm. Without another thought, I race towards him, huddling in the safety of his warmth. I breathe deep, taking his scent into my lungs. It will sustain me. It has to. He curls his arm around me and holds on tight, gluing the pieces of my shattered existence back into place.

Unable to stop myself, I let the tears flow once more, dotting his shirt with my sorrow. Instead of questioning me or chiding me, he lets me pour out my anguish into him. A solid rock. A foundation that will never be moved. His strength holds me there, allowing me to breakdown. After a moment, he guides me into the bedroom and sets me on the bed, his rough fingers sliding down my cheek.

“My love. What's wrong?”

What can I tell him? What can I say? How can I put this deep-seated sense of dread into words? Shaking my head, I dispel the tears and attempt to get up. Gemhardt doesn't let me. His broad hand settles over my breastbone as he pushes me back.

“Today was just a rough day, love,” I finally whisper. “That's it. Nothing to worry about.”

His brows crinkle in thought as he stares at me, his eyes shifting over my face, as if he knows I'm lying, but doesn't have enough data to prove it. After a moment, a long sigh eases out from between his lips. Gemhardt says nothing, but his soft purr fills the space between us, easing that brick of fear that's lodged in my chest.

After a few more moments, my breathing becomes more natural, less stilted. I both love and hate the effect on me. I love it because it's an instant soother. It allows everything to dissipate in that moment, but I hate it because it will never last. I'll always need his purr.

When he met me, I was strong, a force to be reckoned with. Now, I feel like I'm a fragile, hollow shell. Wrapping my arms around my waist, I breathe for a few moments, basking in the indomitable strength that exudes from him. It fills my pores and infuses deep inside me.

Even though I'm prone to moments where hysteria takes over me, this is different. I'm usually able to hold it together in front of the girls. I've never broken down like this in front of Karis or Annora. What the hell is wrong with me?

Again, my hands drift to my stomach and breath stills in my throat. No. Oh, gods. No. I turn to Gemhardt, but he doesn't notice my reaction. His eyes are closed as he stands in front of me, concentrating on his purr, never letting it falter. My fingers curl into the fabric covering my abdomen, as if I can somehow claw at the burgeoning life forming inside me. It's the only answer.

The crying.

The visions.

As the future looms in front of my eyes, the absolute terror that drips down my spine.

I'm carrying another child. Will this one be another girl? Perhaps another omega? We're struggling to keep the two we have hidden. But to add in a third? Maybe Ilaria will smile down at me and grant me either an Alpha or a beta. But then, if they're a beta, will they be allowed to live in our sector for

long? With how everyone is going on about keeping the bloodlines pure, it would only be a matter of time before they drive us all out.

Fear rises up my throat like thick bile, choking me. I can't say anything to Gemhardt, not until I know for sure. It could be nothing. It could be simple hormones, but deep in my gut, I know it's not.

"Shhhh, love," he murmurs against the top of my head as he drags me closer. "We'll find a way. Don't worry. Another child is a blessing."

I look up at him, my eyes widening as I stare at his tired face. "But -."

"Let's see, you're crying all the time, you're in such a fragile state, and," Gemhardt pauses to tap his nose, "your scent has changed. I was waiting for you to find out before I said anything. Besides, we both know my nose isn't foolproof. We could both be wrong."

Gripping me in his arms, Gemhardt slides me onto his lap and forces my head against his chest where the purr is the strongest. I'm unable to resist the lull as it vibrates through my body. This was how he kept me sane when I was pregnant with Karis, but he's far too busy, far too important to keep around the house just so I can keep from going insane.

Closing my eyes, I think about the small stash of pills I keep hidden from him. They won't hurt the baby, but they certainly take the edge off when he's not home. With the way betas are rioting, he's always being called away. The few off days we have are sacrosanct, cherished. I don't need to waste them by siphoning off his remaining humanity. He needs to be whole for the children.

The children!

I shoot up in his lap, my pulse racing a mile a minute.

“Annora is in there with Karis. You’re fine. They’re fine. You need to relax.” Pausing, he slides his hand down to cover mine and brings them both up to my stomach. “This much stress isn’t good for the baby. I need you to calm yourself for me.”

The words themselves should be soothing, but underneath it is the soft bite of an Alpha command. Gemhardt never abuses his power over me, but he wields it when he feels it’s necessary, and right now, it is. Until his order, my hysteria crept up my body, paralyzing me in his arms. I have to keep it together. For the safety of my children, I have to keep it together.

In a fluid motion, he stands up from the bed and sets my feet on the floor. Though I wobble for a moment, I soon steady under his firm grip. Once more, I look up into his eyes, expecting censure or even a bit of anger, but his eyes are clear, his gaze never wavering in his steadfast love for me.

We never talked about birth control, but maybe we should have. The procedures were almost inhumane, but it would keep us from having yet another omega. Thankfully, the tests can only tell us if we’re expecting a boy or girl; it doesn’t know the dynamic, but soon enough, they’ll be able to tell and assign in the womb.

When that day comes, it will become hell on earth. Every now and then, I dream of whisking the girls away and traveling to Laxa, seeing if they’ll take us in. I have visions. Those visions should be the proof I need that their blood runs through my veins. Unless it’s all a lie and something my

mother told me to make me think I was better than some Sector One gutter beta living in the now-named death sector.

Shaking my head, I force the thought out and smooth down my clothing. The girls will need to eat soon and so will Gemhardt. I'm no longer hungry, but they shouldn't suffer because of me. When I go to pull away, Gemhardt stops me and hands me a small kit.

I know exactly what this is. We used one with both Annora and Karis. It will let us know definitively if I'm expecting or not. But I don't doubt that I am. Between Gemhardt's nose and my hormones, there's no doubt in my mind, but knowing him, he will not rest until he knows for certain.

With a soft smile, he curls his hand around mine, making a fist around the test, before squeezing me and heading out to see to the girls. At least he's happy about it. I'm dreading it with every step I take towards our shared bathroom.

Sounds of raucous laughter filters into the room as Gemhardt plays with the girls. What should be a joyous sound is discordant and wrong. It's flat notes peppering the air. Fake. They're not happy. They can't be. How can they be when such violence simmers in the air like the suns at Zenith? It vibrates the very ground we walk on, and I'm certain that note will not be the last one I receive.

I'm in danger. But from what? From whom?

Sitting down on the toilet, I open up the case and stare at the needle, my heart beating in a tripping staccato. The tip blurs as my hand quivers. It's not the needle; it's what the needle represents. We're already pushing our luck by hiding two omegas. How can we handle a third?

“Please, Ilaria. Please. Goddess of fertility. Hear my prayers. My pleas. I need you. I need you now more than ever. I need your holy light to shine on me, a humble beta seeking your guidance. Grant me an Alpha or a beta. There is no way I keep another omega safe. Please?”

On the last whispered word, I plunge the needle into my thigh, letting the fatty muscle take the pricking blow. Holding it still, I force my leg to remain motionless, letting my free hand jerk about to shake off the excess adrenaline flowing through me.

The beep.

That damning beep.

I’m pregnant.

Looking down, my breath comes out in a whoosh. It’s a boy. I’m going to have a boy. Fear no longer rakes down my spine with its icy claws. The chance of having a male omega is so rare that when it happens, the city practically comes to a standstill. If things are bad for female omegas, it’s worse for the men. They become the biggest pawns of them all because of how scarce they are.

But for me to have a male omega is so out of the realm of possibility that I can finally breathe and relax. If we have an Alpha, he will be safe, always. If we have a beta, then we will protect him as best as we can, but he’ll never have to face the same hardships as his sisters. We will never have to expend extra resources on hiding him.

We can breathe.

CHAPTER 3



Gemhardt

ANNORA STANDS AT THE STOVE, HER SLIGHT FRAME QUIVERING with effort as she stirs the stew. She hasn't touched the fish yet, but that's Sonria's job, anyway. Holding Karis close, I hazard a glance towards our bedroom, waiting to watch for when Sonria comes out. But she never does.

Tipping my nose up in the air, I scent in her direction, but detect no notes that make me think she's afraid. I know I've asked a lot of her, but we both have to make sacrifices to keep our children safe. There are no other options. Before having children, she agreed with me, but now, it's wearing on her.

I can see it in the slight sag of her skin, in the bones poking through. She's not eating, and I curse myself for not noticing sooner. She's my mate, my responsibility, and I've let her down by not taking better care of her. But that ends tonight. No more will I let her squirrel away with just a few bites. Even if she wasn't pregnant, I'd be doing this. She needs to stay strong and healthy for the days to come.

I've lived long enough to recognize the trembling of war. Even if it's not in my lifetime, it will be in Annora's and Karis's. It's naïve to think it won't happen. It's a matter of when instead of if. Hopefully the talks happening amongst the High Echelon and High Guardian Alphas are fruitful and peace can come, but I highly doubt it.

The High Echelon has become gluttoned on their power, and nothing short of an overthrow will get them to change. For true peace to happen, they must fall, and until that day, we have to live in fear. Forcing the morose thoughts from my brain, I concentrate on my little girls.

Karis's eyes gleam up at me as she reaches her hands out for me to pick her up once more. Unable to resist, I indulge and put her on my lap, purring as I rock her back and forth. Despite how spoiled Sonria claims Karis is, underneath resides a tender soul. Her tiny body melts against mine as my purr grows. Whatever frightened Sonria left Karis a ball of nerves, and I need her to be calm and not re-agitate Sonria.

Looking over at Annora, a soft smile tugs at my lips. She's trying so hard to be stoic as she works at the stew. Her body ripples as she attempts to push my purr out, but that doesn't deter me. As much as I hate the disparity in our dynamics, it really helps in moments like this. Like it or not, the purr will have an effect, even more so since she's an omega.

Soon, her body gives in and she slumps forward, the purr taking hold and forcing her to relax. I can't make up for what happened at the marketplace today, but I can certainly take away some of the residual anxiety. Glancing back at the door, I smile even wider as Sonria comes walking in.

The lines of her body are more fluid, less rigid than earlier, and it's not just because of my purr. Apparently, she's happy

with whatever the results were of the test. For a moment, my heart squeezes until I'm almost unable to breathe. Was I wrong? Is there no child?

It's moments like these that I curse the genetic makeup of our bodies. Since I'm unable to form a bond with her, I can't feel her in the same way I could an omega. She's able to hide things from me, secret herself away until I have no clue what's happening in that head of hers. Granted, I will never trade her for another; she is my mate despite what the lack of bond says, but there's always that piece that will be missing for the rest of our lives.

I can't help but mourn its absence when my own mate feels like a stranger to me. Her eyes soften as they meet mine, and she nods. I was right. She is pregnant! Perhaps it's just the relief of knowing. Setting Karis down on the floor, I ignore the tantrum she throws and walk over to Sonria, gathering her into my arms.

"It's a boy," she whispers against my lips as I lean down.

A boy.

Possibly an Alpha son!

My heart thumps wildly in my chest as I hold her close, drinking in the emotions flitting through her body. I can tell there's relief, and I finally understand why. Another girl means potentially another omega. She's convinced that we're nearly destitute, yet I get the medications filled regularly from The Purveyor in Sector One.

Because I'm an Alpha, I'm not followed. I'm not tracked. I go there enough times with Annora that no one questions my presence. They don't all agree with my desire to help those

less fortunate, but I've already established a routine that doesn't make me look suspicious.

In return, I help keep The Purveyor safe to do his other business. I turn a blind eye when our raids happen in his sector. Hell, I find ways to warn him so he can pack up and run if needed. His discount is what allows my daughters to be safe. I owe him my life for helping me protect my little girls.

And now, we will have a son. Someone who can help with protection. Alpha or not, he'll be one more person to help run interference, and since he'll be close in age with Karis, once he's in school with her, he can be an extra set of eyes that watches out for her.

Annora is already old enough that it won't matter to her, but Karis is much more delicate, much more easily swayed. Even though she's still a toddler, I can already see her personality shining through. She depends so much on the moods of her mother and me.

She's so easily crumpled by a look, no matter how innocent. Karis will need someone to protect her, to keep her from doing the wrong thing just to garner likes or sympathies. Even though Annora goes to school and does very well, I'm dreading sending Karis.

She's like a loose cannon that cannot be controlled. The tantrums alone could get her sent away to somewhere with tighter strictures, somewhere where we will not have full access, and that terrifies me. Once the High Echelon gets involved, her dynamic will become apparent, putting all of us, especially Annora, at risk.

Karis would be deemed too young to know or understand, but Annora wouldn't be given such clemency. We'd be lucky

if she were outright killed instead of sent to be a brothel omega.

I have to rein in these errant thoughts for my family's sake. I cannot let them see me get ruffled. As their leader, their head, it is my duty to make sure they never know the real dangers that lurk in the shadows. Not now. Not until they're fully aware of all the consequences that come with knowing. They're too young for this burden, but then, in my eyes, they'll always be too young.

"Dinner is almost ready, my love," I cajole her, hoping to tempt her into eating. "Annora made an amazing stew. All that's left is your fish."

Nodding, she pulls out of my grasp and walks over to Annora, sliding her hand down over our daughter's head before pulling the fish out of the cooling system. Sitting back down, I pick Karis back up and smile as she snuggles deep into my arms while I watch my family. Annora's serious eyes follow Sonria's every move, as if she'll be tested on the best way to make fish at a later date. The poor thing doesn't realize that there's so much more to worry about than a simple fish dinner.



I PUT AWAY THE REMAINING DISHES, MY EARS PRICKING AS I hear a soft song drifting out of Karis's room. Smiling, I set down the last plate and inch my way over, stopping just out of sight. Leaning against the wall, I close my eyes and drink in the throaty voice as she sings our youngest to sleep.

It's always the same song - a song of love, of hope, of better times. Certainly a song that defies the current environment. Holding in a deep sigh, I let the melody seep into my soul and mend the wounds inflicted by life. Some may say she's not the best singer, but to me, there will never be a voice as beautiful as Sonria's.

It's haunting, deep, and enchanting. The fact that she uses it to lull our daughter to sleep makes it even more precious. I wait, keeping vigilance by the door until she's done. Tiptoeing in, I join her at Karis's makeshift bed, the railings keeping her from falling out, but not much else.

If I came in before she was asleep, Karis would have cried for me, and we both know she never would have gone down. It would be one more story, one more song, one more something, until we all would want to collapse from sheer exhaustion. We learned early on it was better for Sonria to put her down and I come in to say my goodnights after.

My breath catches as I stare at her tiny form scrunched up around her favorite toy of this week. She's so small, so defenseless. Sonria feels it too. I can sense it in the uneasy way her fingers reach out for her, only to pull back so as not to awaken the sleeping toddler. Gathering Sonria in my arms, I drag her out of the room and towards our own.

I never got the chance to celebrate with her properly, and now that I know she's less tense, it will make the celebration all that more enjoyable. Dropping a soft kiss to her lips, I wait until we're just past the door frame before scooping her up into my arms and sliding my lips more firmly against hers.

Sonria's breath quickens as she wraps her arms about my neck, pressing her chest into mine. Her nipples are hard points as she grinds against me, relief making her just as desperate

for me as I am for her. Pulling away, I quicken my steps until we're inside our bedroom. Reaching out my foot, I push our door shut and toss Sonria onto the bed before turning on the small monitor that feeds into Karis's room.

Though part of me wants to shut off the mom part of her brain, I know she will never be able to - even when all of our children are grown and mated. I just have to accept it and accommodate it as best as possible. For Sonria, being able to look up and make sure Karis is okay is enough to let her relax and enjoy my touch.

Nimble fingers work at the buttons and zippers on my pants before she peels the thick material from my body, skimming her mouth against the bulge in my boxers. Groaning, I fist her hair into my hand and hold her there for just a moment. Sonria chuckles, then slides her fingers into the tight bands and pulls them down, freeing my erection.

Her breath is hot against my skin, and I want nothing more than to defile her mouth. With a soft sigh, she opens for me, and I don't hesitate. Angling her head the way I want it, I surge in, stopping just above my knot. As a beta, she can't take me the same way an omega can, but I don't care. Her mouth is addictive, a hot cavern that I can lose myself in.

Sonria groans as I force my tip into the back of her throat, and she reaches out her hands to massage my knot. Just because she's a beta doesn't mean she can't satisfy my needs. I let my head fall back as she works her magic, grunting as she bobs her head along my length.

I don't want to come down her throat. I want my seed deep in her pussy where it belongs. Pulling away, I ignore her little moue of disappointment, chuckling inwardly at the cute pout. Reaching down, I swipe my thumb along her bottom lip and

walk over to a small drawer on the other side of the bed to pull out a sexual device to help with tonight's proceedings.

Most Alphas don't care about a beta's pleasure. They use them just as they would an omega and don't give two shits about the physical consequences. But I'm not like them. I want my woman to writhe beneath me in pleasure as opposed to agony. True, I could just force my way into her tight body, but what is the purpose of causing her harm?

Sonria rises from the bed, her movements slow and sensual as she slides off her shirt, exposing her pert breasts to my hungry gaze. I palm the device and stride over, taking her place on the bed so I can watch her strip for me. It takes all my willpower not to grab her and throw her down next to me so I can devour her body.

Next are her pants. She turns around, showing me her ass as she shimmies them down to the floor. Unable to resist, I encircle my arms around her waist and pull her onto my lap, letting my cock rest in the crevice of her ass. Spreading my knees wide, I ease her legs apart until she's as spread as she can be.

Her moans are breathy and soft as I slide my free hand down to her pussy and rub the underwear against her sensitive flesh. Gods but she's gorgeous. I pull the thin fabric aside and rest the device against her clit, letting the coolness of the metal chill her heated flesh.

She squeals and grinds against me, attempting to get free, but I hold her in place, not allowing her to move. I continue to tease her, running the device up and down her lips, coating it in her arousal.

"Get on the bed, love. Face down and knees spread. Just how I like you."

Without wasting another second, she scrambles off my lap and clambers onto the bed, tilting her ass into the air. She's exquisite. I stand there for a moment and just stare at her, taking in her glistening lips as the fabric of her panties pulls tight, her arousal gleaming on her inner thighs. Like a man possessed, I slide underneath her and pull her body down so that she's sitting on me, yanking the soaked fabric to the side.

Her taste explodes on my tongue as I slide it up one side and down the other, pausing for a moment to dive inside her pussy as deep as my mouth will allow. I don't stop until her body quivers above mine and her moans turn into pleas. Only then do I insert the device and turn her over.

Soft whimpers assault my ears as it opens her up, stretching her in increments, preparing her for my knot. I know it's uncomfortable, but it's better than just ramming in there without taking any care for her body. I'd much rather her have mild discomfort over actual damage.

As the machine works inside of her, massaging her walls, I crawl up her body and latch onto one of her nipples while pinching the other. Having this bite of pain helps distract her from the other. Her moans fill the room, making my cock throb and leak precum.

Soon, I'll be deep inside her, filling her deeper than that machine ever could. I finish making my way up to her mouth and kiss her hard while dragging my fingers through her lower lips, barely brushing against her clit. Sonria whimpers and thrusts her hips up, silently begging for my touch where she so desperately needs it.

Chuckling, I make a slow circle around the hardened nub, drawing every gasp into my mouth as we breathe the same air. She's so close. Her body trembles as it strains against me.

Growling low in my throat, I let the vibrations wash across her body, adding to the sensations already flowing through her.

Then, just as her gasps turn to whimpers, I slide my thumb against her clit, the growling taking on a hardened edge as her body pulls taut underneath me. I continue to growl as her body shudders against mine, my lips curving over the scarred skin between her neck and shoulders.

She always comes so prettily, and I will never get enough. Reaching lower, I pull out the machine and toss it to the floor before lining up the head of my cock with her entrance. Even with the extra help, she'll be tight. Gritting my teeth, I ease myself in, my balls drawing up as her walls clamp down around the crown.

Each time, it's like this. It's like taking her virginity all over again. I have to be just as patient, just as careful. Her eyes screw shut as she regulates her breathing, forcing herself to be calm as I split her body in two. It hurts me to the core that sex is never easy. Though I never wish for her to be something she's not, I do wish our love making didn't cause her such pain.

The machine does the best it can. It stretches her out, relaxes her muscles, but it will never open her up as much as an omega pussy can. Her body isn't built for it, and it kills me a little inside each time. She tries to hide it, but I can see the wash of pain over her face. I hear the hitching of her breath. I know she's submitting to this just to please me, and it guts me. Every. Fucking. Time.

I hold her close, gathering her into my arms as I rock into her little by little, purring to keep her body pliant and willing. She's offered to let me go to the brothels, to slake my lust with an omega who can "give me what I need." But it's stupid. It's

foolishness. What I need is right here. Everything I could ever want is writhing underneath me, allowing me to use her body as a vessel for my sexual need.

Though I try to make this as quick as possible for her sake, I can't rush things. I have to enter her while my knot is still somewhat abated. If I force myself in with a full knot, it will be nothing but agony for her. She doesn't deserve that. She deserves a mate that will care for her body, no matter how it feels on my end. The main reason I fuck her is because she needs this. She craves the intimate closeness.

I've told her many times that I'm fine with her going down on me or using her hands, but she demands my body, and I'm helpless to refuse her. As uncomfortable as it is for her, there's still no place I'd rather be. Closing my eyes, I run through the names of the High Echelon Alphas, anything to deflate the bulbous knot starting to form.

I'm almost there. Almost home. Just a few more inches, and I'll be deep inside her. Her shrill whimpers claw at my heart, and it's these moments I'm grateful we don't have a full bond. I can barely stand feeling her distress. If I could feel it deep inside as well, tainting my very soul, we would never have sex ever again. We wouldn't have the beautiful children we do, the son growing in her womb. In that way, us not being able to bond is a small mercy.

Out of my internal anguish, my purr becomes nearly tangible, driving deep into her mind, turning her brain into mush. Once she's completely delirious, I force my way deep inside, holding still as her body acclimates to the intrusion. Despite my purring, tiny trembles vibrate up and down her body, shaking me as we stay locked together.

I hate this. Of all the things they want to change, this is something they should focus on fixing. I should be able to love my mate without pain, regardless of her dynamic. The High Echelon Alphas refuse to hear the pleas of other Alphas like me, the ones that don't get off on their pain. I've seen so many Alphas use and abuse betas, not giving two shits how much they damage them with the fierceness of their fucking.

But not me.

I can't ever bring myself to harm Sonria, even when things get rough, even when she likes the pain I can deliver. She's the other half of my soul. The breath that fills my lungs. She's my everything. Without her, without my little girls, and soon my son, I am nothing. An Alpha is nothing without a mate by their side. I do my best to instill this way of thinking in my fellow officers and in the ones I train, but I will never know if it sticks or not.

I can only pray to the goddess that she keeps all those under her care safe. Tears prick my eyes as I keep Sonria close, listening to the rapid staccato of her heart. Through my purring, I murmur into her ear, praising her for how well she's taking me, promising my undying love.

But I have to move. I can't just stay like this inside her. Taking a deep breath, I pull out as slow as I can and rock back in. Perhaps its hormones from the pregnancy that's making this harder. Her muscles ripple around me, gripping me as I try to move without damaging her. It's far more difficult this time. The harder I try to stay calm and not let the frenzy take over me, the harder it is to ignore the tightness of her body as it shudders around mine.

Forcing the breath out of my lungs, I inch back in, nearly crying out as Sonria grips my arms, her face screwing up in a

tight grimace. I can't do this. I can't force this on her. It's wrong. It's all wrong.

Easing up on my forearms, I try to pull out, but Sonria wraps her legs around my waist, forcing me to stay. I bury my face in her neck, gripping her body as I rock deep inside of her. She won't let me leave the soft, hot confines of her body, and I don't want to.

I want nothing more than to live in her, burrowed deep inside. No rules, no society, no higher powers forcing us into hiding.

Free.

That's what loving her means.

It's freedom.

It's life.

It's love.

It's my everything wrapped up in one adorable body that is Sonria. I would kill for her, die for her, walk the ends of the earth just to make her happy. Just for this moment. Tonight. Her carrying my child. Her body wrapped around mine as she forces pleasure from me with every stroke. Taking everything I give her and never complaining.

Gods, but I can't ever dream of a life where she's not in it. Slamming home, I clutch her body, wrapping her up in my arms as my purr intensifies. Blood surges up my shaft as my knot expands into her. Her fingers scrabble at my shoulder as she tries to move, tries to get away from the intense pressure I know is filling her body.

"Shhh, love. Breathe with me. Steady. In. That's my good girl. Out. Please love. Please breathe with me. It will be over

soon. That's my good girl."

It has to be the added hormones. She's never been this tight, this sensitive. Murderous oaths flow through my brain as I soothe her, running my fingers over her body as she quakes in my arms. I shouldn't have forced her into this. I should have come down her throat.

As much as I try to be a better Alpha, I still can't deny the tingles of pleasure as they ripple down my spine, sending shards of ecstasy bursting over my skin. The grip of her pussy around my knot shouldn't be this tantalizing, but it is. As much as I know it's causing her pain, it's flooding my body with endorphins, making me high, and I detest it.

There's got to be a better way.

Forcing my breathing to slow so she can match it, I lay there with her, keeping my weight off of her slim body as cum shoots deep inside, coating us both in life-giving fluid. Her eyes flutter closed as sleep finally overtakes her. I hold her close, my purr never faltering.

With us locked like we are, all I can do is think. My brain whirls as I stare down at my mate. A boy. She's bringing yet another life into this world. I'll have to procure a bigger house. We're only big enough for us four. Number five would be just too much.

Could we afford it? My lips slide into a firm line. I have no choice. We *will* afford it. And we will still gather the supplements needed for Karis and Annora. That will never change. Wrinkles gather on Sonria's forehead, and for a moment, I wonder if she can pick up on my thoughts.

But she can't. I know she can't. Leaning down, I lap at the mark on her shoulder, nuzzling her to bring some additional

comfort to her. If I could banish her nightmares, I would. But since we have no bond, I can't control what happens in her mind.

After what feels like an eternity, my knot abates, allowing me to pull out from between her thighs. Cum, arousal, and blood spill out from her, and again my gut churns as I watch the carnage of our love-making stain the sheets. It's not enough blood to worry me, but it is enough to cause some concern. She only bled like that for the first few months of mating. Once her body got used to me and the machine, she never bled.

What could this mean? Shaking my head, I reach down and pick up the device from the floor and stare at it as it pulses rhythmically and expands. It pulls back in and starts the sequence all over until it's spread wide, not quite as girthy as my cock, but close enough. It's the only reason she doesn't tear each time I slide into her.

This isn't fair to her. I forced her into my life. I begged her to be mine, even though I know it's a tough life for a beta. Most unions don't last that long. The fact that we've made it almost twelve years is a miracle. Soft hands slide up my back and I smile.

"I feel you thinking, love. Please. Don't shut me out. You do this every time, and it wounds me. I'm offering my body to you. Please don't dismiss it and blame yourself."

I turn and reach out to cup her face, sighing as she nuzzles into me. We both make sacrifices. I crave her so much. If I had my way about it, I'd be fucking her at least twice a day. Instead, I hold off, allowing her to set the pace. We make love about once a week, but that's still one time too many when it hurts her like it does.

If only I were a smarter man. If I had any sort of aptitude for science, maybe I could find a way to make Alpha and beta relationships work. But no. I'm just a man that's good at making war. I can compel people to obey. That's it. There's nothing great about me. I can't even make love to my mate without her body rebelling.

Leaning down, I skim my lips over hers before pulling her to her feet. Sonria tries to hide the wince of pain as it flashes across her face, but I see it. I always see it. Pain and tension hang between us as I lead her into the bathroom so I can wash away the proof of our difficult union.

Neither of us says a word as the hot water beats down upon us. With soft, reverent touches, I take the soap and suds up her body, taking care to wash every inch of her. Any time she tries to open her mouth, I shake my head. She doesn't have to say it. I know that face. I know that expression.

I swear to Elex if she asks me to go to the brothels again, I'll turn her around in this shower and spank that idea right out of her head. As it is, I'm weary. I'm just so tired. I want us to get clean so I can hold her close while we both sleep.

Turning off the water, I towel her down and set her on the closed toilet as I strip the bedding off and replace it. Some may think it's women's or beta's work, but the blood that glares up at me is my fault. I'm the one in charge. I could have resisted her, but I chose to engage. Giving her somewhere unsoiled to sleep is the least I can do.

Once everything is clean and settled, I drag her out of the bathroom and put her to bed, holding her close to me. I purr as I run my fingers through her hair, forcing any tension out of her body.

CHAPTER 4



Sonria

GROANING, I LIFT MY ARMS ABOVE ME AS I STRETCH. THOUGH there's a sharp twinge in between my thighs, I'm able to ignore it for the most part. The pain is proof that my Alpha loves me, desires me, wants me. I know it kills him to see me in discomfort, and though I mask it as well as I can, I can't always stop it from crossing my face.

A soft sigh slips through my lips as I look at the empty space next to me. No doubt he's seeing to the girls while he lets me sleep. Shaking my head, I roll over and glance at the monitor. There he is with Karis in his arms, her chubby fingers grabbing at his uniform.

Smiling, I run my finger down the glass before getting up and getting ready. I know he hates causing me pain, but last night was just what I needed to get my head on straight. It was reaffirming, allowing me to feel the discomfort so I can better enjoy the pleasure.

My heart flutters as I clutch my stomach, closing my eyes to savor the fact that I'm going to be a mom again. Though I'm happy with Karis and Annora, there's still that part of me

that hoped for a boy, and Ilaria heard my cry. Perhaps I should offer something up to her today?

Though the main altars no longer exist, I still keep a small shrine in the house, hidden away from both the girls and Gemhardt. Though I don't think he would disapprove of me worshiping at her feet, I realize now that this conversation has never come up.

I hear about him and the other Alphas talking about Elex and Jarosh, but I've never seen them offer anything in their name. Perhaps he would find me too superstitious, but I'm beyond caring. I'm so deliriously happy with my boy that I have to find some way to show her my thanks.

Pulling on a plain shirt and pants, I pad down to Karis's room and lean against the door frame, taking in the serious conversations she and Gemhardt are having. Seems there was some sort of fight between her dolls, and he's sitting in the role of peacemaker and judge.

Another smile turns up my lips as I watch her speak her childish language with such authority and gusto. He hangs on her every word, frowning as she lists the wrongdoing, taking her as seriously as he would an actual case brought before him.

Unable to resist, I wrap my arms about my waist, letting the warm glow infuse me and trickle down to our son. Whether beta or Alpha, he'll have the strongest, most patient and loving role model any son could ever wish for. Closing my eyes, I let my thoughts drift into the future, refusing to acknowledge the harrowing visions that fill my gut with dread any time I think about them.

Instead, I picture my son, tall and strong, with fierce eyes and an indomitable spirit. Fast-forwarding, I watch him grow

up, including taking a mate of his own. He will be just like his father. I know this as much as I know the suns are already climbing into the sky.

Gemhardt's deep voice thunders across the room as he announces his judgment. Each toy must receive no less than ten kisses and a moment alone to think about their actions. With a firm nod, Karis agrees and proceeds to kiss both of the toys soundly before tossing them into the crib.

Stifling a laugh, I look down at her in all seriousness as she replays the scene I just watched. I nod, taking in her earnest expression, all while smothering a grin. As I confirm her decision, I shoot Gemhardt a coy smile before scooping Karis up and taking her into the kitchen to start breakfast.

Annora is already there, dressed for classes, hunched over the stove. I know it's in her nature to serve, but seeing her there pricks my heart. I'm the mother. As such, I should be seeing to their needs. Yet here she is, already filling the plates with eggs, bread, and some cheese.

Karis digs in, her hands flying between the plate and her mouth while Annora sits and picks at hers. It's so unlike her to not eat in the mornings before school. I start to ask her about it when Gemhardt comes in and leans down to kiss her head. For the briefest of moments, I swear I saw her flinch.

Based on Gemhardt's pinched expression, he saw it too. He sits down and stabs his fork into the eggs, pointedly ignoring her small glare. Something happened between the two of them, but neither of them are saying a word. Tension hangs over the table like a pall, and I wish I could dissipate it with just a wave of my hand, but I know I can't.

Looking up at the clock, I note the time and slide away from the table to gather his things and place them by the door.

This allows him to finish and gives me an opportunity to talk to him away from the girls.

Once he's done, he strides over to me, sighing when he sees my face, but there's no stopping this line of inquiry. Bending low, he slides on his shoes and grabs his filtration system, shoving them into his nose.

“There was a fight in Sector One, and I had to growl. I didn't mean for it to affect Annora, but it did. There's nothing I can do about it, and she's having to stew. You know her. She's not the type to just bounce between emotions.”

He pauses and gathers me into his arms, his sigh ruffling my hair. I know he's correct. I just wish I could say something or do something that could help, but she's stubborn. Annora will harbor her feelings until she's good and ready to let them go. Leaning up, I kiss him goodbye and head back into the kitchen.

Annora is already clearing the table, and I let her. If this is her way to feel comfortable and safe, then so be it. She murmurs a soft goodbye, her hazel eyes regarding me with just a hint of distrust, before she grabs her bag and heads towards the door.



THE DOOR SLAMS OPEN, AND I GLANCE AT THE CLOCK. IT should be Annora coming home, but she's never that loud when she enters. Reaching over to the side counter, I grab the knife I set out to start snack time preparations and clutch the handle in my shaking grip.

“Mom!”

Placing a hand over my heart, I set the knife down and walk over to the door. Annora’s face is white, her eyes wide as she throws down her bag. Again, that shaft of fear slices into me, sending my heart into overdrive.

She doesn’t say another word. Instead, she motions for me to follow her out the door. When we reach the outside, my jaw drops, and my hand reaches up to cradle my throat. In a substance that looks like blood, the words “you’re next” grace the front door.

“Go inside. Grab Karis and go to your room. Please keep her busy and say nothing to your father.”

“Will he be mad?”

I pause for a moment and contemplate my next words. Though I shouldn’t use her fear of him to my advantage, I nod and look back at the door. Head ducked down, she races back inside. I follow close behind and grab a sponge and bucket, needing to rid this door of any evidence before Gemhardt comes home. I’m not sure who he’ll be more furious at, me for not telling him or the vandals that keep tormenting me.

The worst part is, I have no clue who’s doing it. All the Alphas and betas around us seem kind and cordial, never even giving a hint that they feel I don’t belong. It’s like swiping out into mist, convinced that you’ll connect with something and coming up with dense air.

As I work at the letters, the red drips down, like blood running across the door. Thankfully, it smells like paint; it’s the only way I’m able to ignore the sinister look and actually scrub them clean. After thirty minutes or so, the door looks as

good as new. Better even. I can't remember the last time I cleaned it.

But it's not a moment too soon. I still need to clean the house and get things ready for dinner. Dragging the bucket into the grassy area alongside the house, I dump the incriminating water out, watching as the crimson soaks into the dirt. It's good, but for how long? Once they know the door didn't get the reaction they wanted, what will they do next?

CHAPTER 5



Gemhardt

STIFLING HEAT CURLS AROUND THE NAPE OF MY NECK AS A higher-ranking Guardian Alpha goes over the status for Sector One. It's the same news. Nothing is different, but then, why would it be? Until the High Echelon sees the destruction it's causing by all this separation, things will never be right.

No one can go against the High Echelon Alphas. To do so would be more than treason.... It would be blasphemy. Adding that layer of fear and fervent religion made them practically untouchable. Shaking my head, I look down at the blank page in front of me and start to doodle at the edge. There's no new information I need to retain. No new mandates that make it necessary to take notes.

It's just more hot air - a pompous sharing of ideas that no one can dispute. They want volunteers to go to Sector One and police it, to have mandatory marches that remind them of their place. What place is that? The one that was forced onto the undesirable betas?

If I hadn't mated Sonria when I had, she might have been stuck there; hell, she would have died there. The living conditions are just abysmal. It's no wonder many don't go there by choice. All of Sonria's family are already dead. I'm the only family she has left.

A small niggle of concern wraps itself around my spine as all the eyes in the room swivel towards me. They can't possibly want me to head this up. It's a conflict of interest on so many levels. But the longer they stare, the longer I realize they want me to say something.

"You're... mate... is from Sector One, is she not?" The older Alpha sneers at me, his lips curling up to show off his sharp canines.

"Yes, she was. She's now in the higher levels with me."

He glances down at his notes. "Along with your two sickly daughters. Is that correct?"

Anger burns in my gut as I stare him down. I want to lash out, to demand he take his words back, but to do so would be to challenge him. I don't want to pick a fight that I have a chance of losing. Not when keeping my family safe is my number one prerogative, higher even than my Guardian Alpha duties.

"They're not sickly. They're of perfect health."

"Yes, but I have reports of them being small in stature. Not at all hardy like other worker betas. What function will they provide to society except for being a drain?"

Gritting my teeth, I lean back in my chair and affect a neutral expression. He's trying to get me to crack. I can feel it. "Well, little Annora is showing great aptitude in research and science. It is our hope that she pursues either of those fields

after her primary education. She will not need strength or stature to perform more academic pursuits.”

He nods and turns to the other Alphas. “Since Gemhardt here doesn’t seem to share in the need to control the less desirable populations, we will simply have to finish this meeting without him.”

After a moment, he turns back to me before continuing. “That is, unless I’ve misunderstood.”

“I don’t sanction the taking of lives where it is not required. Everyone knows this about me. I never made it a secret.”

“Yes. Well. I don’t need your radical ideas spreading to all the troops. You’re dismissed back to your post.”

Without giving me another glance, he addresses the other Alphas, forcing me to skulk away like a scared dog with my tail between my legs. Something is very wrong here. I’ve never been dismissed from a meeting before. Gripping my hands into fists, I leave the room, catching snippets of the conversations before the door slams shut behind me.

It’s not enough for me to know exactly what is planned, but I know it’s not good. And it’s not like I can even warn the citizens of Sector One about something happening. As an Alpha, they won’t listen to me. I’m somehow one of the most powerful yet powerless men in the universe right now.

Perhaps if I talk to Sonria, she can warn them? They might listen to her, but as my mate, they still might reject it. Either way, there is one person I know will hear me. Whether or not he helps the others, that will be on him and no longer my concern.

Though my post is near the Capitol City, I long to go to Sector One right away, but who knows if I'm being tracked? By going to The Purveyor right away, it will put both him and my daughters in danger. Fuck. Nothing is going right. Shoving my respirators back into my nose, I head towards the Capitol City. For some reason, they want me guarding the High Sanctum, watching over omegas who have nothing better to do than lounge around and wait to be given away.

I'm deluding myself. It's not for some unknown reason. No doubt they want me to spot an omega and want to claim her as my own. Thus, the respirators. I will never stray from Sonria, no matter how many omega pussies they throw my way. I made a vow to her. We are united until death separates us. Even then, I will never take another. Sonria is my mate until I die.

The thick, red carpet muffles the sound of my footsteps as I stride into the hallway to take my post. It's not that these omegas are endangered, but as the sacred property of the High Echelon Alphas, they are guarded as if they are worth all the precious stones and gold on the planet.

It makes sense though. If an Alpha goes into rut around them, it could be disastrous. I plant my feet and look straight ahead, ignoring the soft tittering of laughter as they study me, plotting to see how good of a match I would make. It's sickening on both sides of the dynamic.

Not that they have a choice with whom they're paired with, but they still talk and plan as if they have a choice. But with nothing else to pass their time, what else can they do? They're not allowed to pursue anything that expands their minds, because that would make them intelligent, dangerous.

Nothing is feared more than a woman who knows exactly what they want and how to achieve it.

Glancing down at my communicator, I count down the hours until I'm back at home, back in the sanctity of my house with my mate and children. The fact that they're shoving these women at me must mean that they're scared. They're worried about appearance, about how it looks for someone high-ranking like me to have a beta bride. They detest how it makes me look to the other Alphas and betas.

It's not a snub to the High Echelon Alphas, not exactly. It's simply that I found my forever, and I don't need an omega to make it work. I have a sinking suspicion that part of this is so they can create cleaner bloodlines, and that I will not stand for. There's nothing wrong with my Sonria, just like there's nothing wrong with being a beta.

I am no greater than them because of my genetics. There are a handful of Alphas that agree with me, but they are few and far between, and none of them want to go against the High Echelon Alphas. They have their families to think about and so do I. Everything I do is for the safety and protection of my family. Shaking my head, I lean back against the wall and look down the hallway. Still nothing. Just an hour to go on my shift and I can be out of this place.



THE GIRLS EAT THEIR FOOD WHILE I STARE ACROSS THE TABLE at Sonria. There's something wrong, but she doesn't reveal anything. Her eyes are dim and don't have that same sparkle

that's usually there. What's more, there are bags under her eyes that weren't there earlier.

Whenever she moves, she tries to conceal a wince, but I see it. I always see it. Last night was rough on her. Stabbing my food, I chew on it, but taste nothing. It's like ash in my mouth. There's got to be some other way. We haven't tried creams or any other pharmaceuticals that might help relax her, but then she hates the idea of being drugged.

The only way I got her to even consider the device is because I was the one putting it in her. I teased her with it, making it a part of foreplay. She's not convinced that I could do so well with creams or shots. And I will never bring up the illicit drugs that make betas go into a false heat. That would just be cruel.

Even though it might lessen the discomfort, she will always wonder if I prefer an omega over her, and that's a thought I never want in her head. It's bad enough I have to fight against the whole of society; I never want her to think she's less than in my eyes. Because she isn't. She's my entire world.

Once Karis and Annora are done, I stay behind and work at the dishes while Sonria tucks them both in. Soon, her soft voice makes its way back out to my ears, and a smile creeps up my face. All too soon, Karis will be too old and want her mother to stop. That tinge of sadness is quickly overridden by the fact that Sonria is expecting another. By the time Karis no longer wants her to sing, she'll be singing to our son.

As I dry the last dish, a silence descends over the house. Normally, this time after the children are asleep, things are quiet, comforting, but there's something in the air, something

that feels wrong. I can't place it, but my hand itches for my blaster.

Shaking it off, I meet Sonria in the living space and sit down, opening my arms for her to sit in my lap. I don't know what has her so distressed, but hopefully, my purr will put it to rights.

The moment I wrap my arms around her, she sinks down, giving me her weight. I lean down and skim my lips against her head, rocking her back and forth as her fingers worry the front of my shirt.

I open my mouth to ask her what was wrong when a loud rap at the door startles us both. She jumps, her body vibrating with fear. It pollutes the room, filling the space with an acrid scent. This isn't normal. There's something she's not telling me.

Setting her to the side, I stand up and make my way to the door. Once I open it, my heart plummets as bile rises up and threatens to choke me. Men in unrecognizable uniforms stand before me, their faces covered in masks that conceal their features.

By their size and scent, I can tell they're Alphas, but I've never seen them before. I don't recognize the clothing, the stance, anything. When they speak, their voices are digital, as if speaking through a filter that distorts the sound of their voices. But why? Why do they need to hide who they are?

Only criminals need to hide.

"Are you Guardian Alpha Gemhardt? Abiding with low-class, beta Sonria?"

"If you're referring to my mate, you better choose your words a bit carefully. She is not low-class. As my mate, she

has every right to be here in the high sectors.”

“Not according to this.” The leader flashes a screen that outlines the evacuation of everyone deemed unacceptable, and there, in bright, bold red, is Sonria’s name.

“This is a mistake. You can’t take my mate from me.”

“Guardian Alpha, your voice is elevated. I would hate for this ruckus to disturb your two children.” He glances back down. “Karis and Annora. Both beta born, both showing signs of underdevelopment.”

“You will not lay a finger on my children,” I seethe, my voice laced with a hint of hysteria.

I have to keep it together for my family’s sake, but these strangers are threatening everything I hold dear.

“We will do as we are commanded. Right now, that does not include your children since you, their father, are a Guardian Alpha.”

“And on whose authority are you attempting to take my mate?”

With a few swipes of his fingers, he holds up another screen, and my heart plummets. There, as if they were gods themselves, are the signatures of all the High Echelon Alphas that sit on the council. Just those signatures alone make the word law.

“No.” I stand up straighter, a low growl humming in my chest. Though I knew someday, I’d have to make a stand, I didn’t think it would be in my own home, so close to my two daughters.

“You cannot refuse. To do so would be to strip your title and property. Your feral children will then be taken into

custody and sent to wherever best suits them. Do think rationally. It's the beta you're harboring or both her and your children. Make no mistake, we will be getting her either way. It's your choice what the collateral damage will be."

Helpless, I stand in the middle of the doorway and look between the strange Alpha and my mate. *Elex, what can I do?* I cannot let them have her. To allow her to go back to Sector One would mean death.

CHAPTER 6



Sonria

MY BREATH COMES IN QUICK PANTS. I'M UNABLE TO TAKE IN enough to fill my lungs. It's happening. It's what the notes, the signs, everything foretold. They don't want me here. But how can I leave and not take my children? They won't thrive in Sector One. Leaving them here with Gemhardt is the only way I'll know they're having a good life.

He's sacrificed so much for me. It's time I sacrificed myself for him. Walking towards the door, I ignore his angry, heated stare. It's not aimed at me. It's aimed at the men who showed up in the middle of the night to tear me away.

Head hung low, I squeeze past Gemhardt, ignoring the searing pain as his hand reaches out to grip my arm. This is what has to happen. I have to keep my family safe. Besides, I'm sure he'll think of a way to get me out of this situation, but he can't if he's dead.

With a tremulous grip, I pry his hand away and bring it low to rest on my belly. Tears stream down my face as he leans down to rest his forehead against mine, his fingers clutching at my shirt as he rubs the space where our son is growing.

“Please, love,” I croak out, not able to form the words. Instead, I grip his fingers in a pathetic attempt to convey what’s in my heart.

When the strangers grab me, I go willingly, not wanting to start a fight. Not here. Not so close to my precious daughters. Reaching up, I resist long enough to slide my hand against Gemhardt’s cheek, feeling the scruff as it abrades my hand. These are the things I’ll hold dear as I wait for him to rescue me. It will get me through the chilly nights.

It is enough.

“Sonr-.”

I move my finger so that it rests against his lips. His face blurs as my eyes fill with tears. I can no longer see him clearly, and that breaks my heart even more. I just want to see him again. One last time. I need to see him.

“Let go of my mate.”

His growl is devastating, turning my insides into mush. My legs quiver as my body sinks to the ground, but they don’t let me. The men must have something blocking his command.

“Mate. How can you call this,” he pauses to shake me, “your mate?”

“He marked me. I am his mate. Please. Let me go.” Even to my ears, my voice is thin, barely audible.

The stranger cackles, his robotic voice searing into my brain. It’s so unnerving, so false. Without saying another word, he tears at my shirt, ripping it from my body so that it hangs in tatters, exposing both the mark and my chest to the gathering crowd.

Shame heats my cheeks as I curl in on myself in an attempt to block the prying eyes from my half-naked form. He reaches up and runs a gloved finger over my mark, touching that which I hold sacred. Nausea crawls up my throat, burning a path from my gut to my mouth.

“You gave something so sacred to this? Tell me, how does the bond feel? If she’s your mate, then you must have a bond, no?”

My head hangs once more as guilt gnaws at my insides. There is no bond. That’s one fundamental thing that’s missing, but that doesn’t make me any less valid in Gemhardt’s eyes.

“The way I know my mate needs no bond. I know everything. I see everything. I feel everything.”

“Then that means you know about the threatening notes, the letters, the epithets left on your door?” In just that one, unemotional query, my world shatters before my eyes.

Gemhardt looks at me, his eyes wide as my hidden secrets come to light. Now more than ever, I wish I had said something and not just chalked it up to children playing a prank.

“That’s what I thought. What you two have is an abomination. It isn’t a bond.”

Once more, the stranger jerks me forward, hard enough that I nearly stumble. The cry leaves my lips before I can stop it, and Gemhardt springs into action. The neighbors stand by, each of them clutching their mates as they watch, horrified, but doing nothing.

As he storms forward, they swarm in, three of them holding him back as the other drags me away. His loud bellow echoes in my ears and I long to cover them, to shut out the

pain and anguish ripping through the night. Somehow, he breaks free, tossing them off of him as if they were nothing, and that's when the sound of blasters and the acrid smell of smoke surrounds me, choking me.

Pain. Hot, searing agony explodes over my body, and I fall to the ground, my bare skin skidding along the roughened road. I'm sure to have marks tomorrow, abrasions that will take days to heal. Looking down, I watch, transfixed, as red spreads out from my stomach to stain the clothes that are still on.

My baby!

Oh gods!

Reaching down, I staunch the bleeding as best as I can; despite that, it wells up, seeping through my fingers. Weakness pervades my limbs as I lie there, my eyes focusing and unfocusing on Gemhardt. He has to win. He has to beat them. But soon, his body falls, broken on the ground next to me.

Tears once more cloud my vision as one of them comes over and nudges me with his foot. This time, I'm unable to cry out. It's as if I'm no longer inside my body. Snaking out my tongue, I lap at my parched lips, keeping my eyes trained on Gemhardt. If I'm to die here tonight, I want him to be the last thing I see. The first one guiding me to my new eternity.

Blinking away the tears, my body freezes as another vision washes over my body. Again, Annora fills my mind's eye. She's so strong. So brave. She stands with a man, an Alpha, proud and strong. She's so happy. So loved. It's everything I've ever wanted for her. She smiles despite the blood dripping from her hands.

As soon as that vision plays out, another, with a girl that looks so much like my Karis, flashes through my brain. Her sun-spun hair glows in the heat of the zenith. She smiles, her gray eyes twinkling with mischief. She seems happy. They will be okay. I know now that the original vision foresaw Gemhardt's and my death.

That's why we are no longer there. My girls must now make their own way, navigating a world that despises them. I ache for them. I worry about them. Despite the vision, I'm afraid their life will be hard despite the fortunate outcome. I will not be there for them.

I'll never see the women they become.

I'll never hold my grandchildren.

I'll never live to see them thrive on this planet.

It takes me a moment to realize that the vision is just the two girls. There isn't a boy or man in sight. That means we're going to lose him, too. I haven't any strength left in my body, or I would curl up around my midsection, giving him just a bit more safety.

My son doesn't even have a name. I have no way of finding him once I pass on. He has to have a name! Spasms rack my body, pulling everything towards my center. Blood, bile, and vomit rise up my throat, choking me until I'm able to muster enough strength to cough it up.

He doesn't have a name.

I cannot lose my child without a name.

Odium. Named after the god of peace, Odenium. A soft sigh slips through my lips as I lie there, slipping my limp arms around to my womb. Odium. I wonder what he will look like? Even if he's not an Alpha, he'll be tall and broad like

Gemhardt. Closing my eyes, I picture my little boy, letting him soothe my ravaged soul.

Coldness climbs up my limbs, arresting my breath. I always thought death would be much further away, while I'm warm in bed, wrapped up in the arms of my love. Not like this. Not on the streets like a rabid animal being put to death.

My eyelids flutter closed as a whimper escapes my lips. I don't want to shut my eyes. I don't want to miss one moment of looking at Gemhardt. Even as he lies silent beside me, just him being there gives me strength. It gives me the will to die with dignity.

Just one more look.

One more glance.

One more time to see his beloved face.

CHAPTER 7



Gemhardt

PAIN EXPLODES THROUGH MY BODY AS I SHIFT ABOUT. I HAVE no concept of where I am. I'm outside, but why? Then it all comes flooding back.

Sonria!

I turn my head and see her lying there, her face ashen and pale. The crimson that pours from her body in a sluggish drizzle is a fatal wound. I know this. I've seen it many times in battle.

No. No no no no.

I crawl forward, ignoring the pain wracking my body. Since I am still in my work uniform, the damage is not that bad. I'm more than likely bruised and broken, but no major blood loss, unlike my mate. The only thing that matters is dragging Sonria into my arms.

Pulling her into my lap, I rock back and forth as tears stream from my eyes to splash down on her face. I lay my hand against the wound in her stomach, as if somehow I can

will the bleeding to stop. But even if I do, she's lost so much, and no one will help me.

Her eyes flutter open for the briefest of moments, and I see all the pain in their depths. She wants to leave. She needs to leave. I can no longer keep her here with me. Her fingers twitch, and I grab her hand, bringing it to my face. The soft smile on her lips guts me to the core.

“Odium. His name is Odium.” Each syllable is laced with pain as she tells me the name of our son that will never be born.

Leaning over, I lay a finger to her lips, silencing her for a moment. Talking pains her, and I cannot allow her to cause herself any more discomfort. I hold her close, brushing away the dried bits of blood coating her lips and jawline, keeping my emotions in check the best way I can.

She needs me to be strong for her. I cannot let her see me flounder.

As much as she's able to, she keeps eye contact with me, never faltering. Clutching her close, I purr. I drive out any lingering pain, allowing her to cross over in peace. With one last blink, her eyes close. Her body slumps against mine as life leaves her. Unable to restrain myself, I howl into the sky, filling the air with my displeasure.

I scream myself ragged, only taking in enough breath to bellow some more. Luckily, it only takes a few earth-shattering yells before I'm unable to do any more. The longer I cause a commotion, the easier it will be for the strange Alphas to know that I'm still alive and very much a threat.

Sonria and I sit there for hours in silence, unmoving in the dark. I have to leave but am unwilling to face the fact that my

mate is not going on this journey with me. Soft sounds of the night surround us, wrapping us in a cocoon.

How I wish I could go with her. But then, my daughters would be left vulnerable. Glancing back at the house, my lips tip down. I can't be here. To stay or even go back like things were normal would put my daughters at risk.

The few pieces of my heart that remain, split as I wrestle with the decision to leave them unprotected. Logically, I know the High Echelon Alphas will see to their needs until they're of age to work, but that doesn't mean anyone will care for them.

Who will put them to bed? Brush away errant tears that fall? Who will love them? More tears drip from my eyes as I pull Sonria up into my arms and stare at the place that used to be our haven. It's tainted now, and Annora will have to live with that. Karis will be fine. She's young enough that she will bounce back, but Annora....

Worry gnaws at my gut as I recall her serious frown. She's already felt far more grown up than she should. Now, she'll be forced into that role. At least she has her base dynamic to help guide her. She'll be a better mother than the High Echelon anyhow. Though I can't stay here, I'll still help her from the shadows, put people in her path to keep her safe.

I'll be a phantom, a wisp of sand as it blows across the desert. In this way, I'll give her the most protection I can - my assumed death. Until I'm far away from her, they will never be given a chance. I can only pray to the gods that their dynamic is never discovered.

Giving the house one last glance, I hug Sonria's body tighter as I leave the higher levels and make my way out to the Dead Lands. Even if the stranger Alphas are following me,

they won't go there. No one of importance passes the barrier between the gates of Stanlion and the Dead Lands.

Only killers go there, mercenaries, those dealing in things so illicit that to get caught would mean certain death. By living, I'm the worst kind of Alpha. I'm unmated, a rogue, a piece the High Echelon Alphas can't move around on their chessboard. In this way, the Dead Lands are the perfect refuge for someone like me.

From deep in the bowels of the rotting desert, I'll build my army. I will take back Stanlion and return it to the city-state it once was. My heart cries out as I shuffle across the broken land. Behind me, betas follow, their hands and arms covered in blood. Mine wasn't the only loss tonight. The High Echelon Alphas said they didn't want a war, but with their actions tonight, they declared one.

We don't have the numbers yet, or the firepower, but one day, one day, we will fight back. We all move as one, a silent mass of death as we climb into the aged transport rail and head out towards our new home.

The dirt is soft and hot beneath our feet, still warmed by the suns. Even though True Night is upon us, the air is stifling and thick. Soon, my respirators won't do the trick. Ripping them out of my nose, I drop them into the sand as we make our way towards an outcropping of broken buildings, the shards of shattered glass as sharp as the ones in my heart.

Every breath hurts, and it's not just from breathing in the air unimpeded. With each step away from Stanlion, my body grows heavy, weary. We will need to find shelter soon.

As we approach a building that doesn't look too torn down, I lay Sonria in the dirt, her body illuminated by moons that hang above the sky. She looks so serene, so calm. In those

last moments, I was there for her in a way that no one else could.

Dragging over some rotted wood, I cover her up, looking at the night sky for a moment before pulling out a knife.

“By Elex, I will have my war. By Jarosh, you will be avenged. I will not stop until I am dead, or the world is changed. That is my vow to you, my love, my mate, my son, my flesh.”

The sharp burn as the knife skims through the flesh of my palm is barely noticeable. It's nothing compared to the clawing ache that burns my throat. I squeeze my hand, dropping blood over the wood, sealing my vow. One of the beta's that followed me hands me a lit torch, understanding what needs to be done.

Once more, I look up at the sky, unable to bear the thought of seeing my mate in flames. I toss it down and back away, watching from a distance so I don't have to see her face. I lost my half tonight and both of my children. Though some may think this move is pure selfishness, it's all for them.

The government will take care of them, and Annora is bright enough to know about the pills and contacts. She'll guide Karis. Looking up, I watch as The Purveyor walks forward, his face thrown into sharp relief by the flames. He nods once and touches the tip of his hat.

The last vestiges of fear leaks from my body. He'll make sure they're safe, at least for however long he can. Dropping my head into my hands, I sob, letting the pain, anger, and terror flow out of me. I have to mourn. I have to do this now. We have a revolution to plan, and I need to be at the top of my game. I can't do this while still chained to the ghosts of my past.

EPILOGUE



*A*nnora

DEATHLY SILENCE FILLS THE HOUSE AS I SIT IN KARIS'S DOOR frame. Though I should have been asleep, I could not stay away. Visions of my parents falling under the gunfire replay in my brain every time I close my eyes. Will I ever sleep again? Unable to look outside, I go over to my bathroom and shut the door.

Whenever things were just too much, I'd run to the sanctuary of my tub. Even now, as I hear the water splashing into the steel basin, my brain slows down so that I'm able to think. Nothing will ever be the same. I'm the one in charge now. Slipping into the warm water, I let the tears escape, splashing as they fall.

Though I'm now able to hide myself as I've been taught, I need to teach Karis. I need to train her to mask her dynamic too. But how? She's already so headstrong, and without Mother and Father to guide her, we will be discovered for sure.

I lay there, floating in the water as my brain goes in circles. So many things will be different. I'm no longer

allowed to be the little girl going off and playing at school. The dreams I once had are no more. I have to be here for Karis. I have to be her rock, her guide.

No more school for me. If the government sends someone to watch her, then our secret will be out. I can't let that happen. I -. My brain stops for a moment as my parents' death replays itself in my brain. It's branded in my mind for eternity. I'll never forget the stillness, the look of death as it rushed over them.

Pulling myself out, I dry off and walk into the living area, aimless. Unable to help myself, I walk over to the window, needing one more look. Perhaps they were just injured. But their bodies are no longer there. Just blood in the street. They didn't help them. No one helped my family. No one cared.

Anger seethes beneath my skin as I walk back into the living area, stopping short as a small bottle that wasn't there earlier stands out to me. It's more pills. Picking it up, I spot the small note underneath.

When you need more, I'm in Sector One. Ask the woman you buy food from for The Purveyor. She will get you to me.

One person cares. Grabbing the bottle and note, I hurry back to my bathroom and pull the loose tile up, stuffing everything in there with all my other treasures. At least for now, our secret will be safe.

Just as I close the tile back over, a loud scream pierces the night. *Karis*. Picking my way over to her, I turn on the dim light and stare at her blotchy face. She must have had another nightmare. Usually Mother is here for her, soothing her back to sleep, but now it's my turn.

Urging her to lie back down, I reach through the bars and run my hand over her back, my mother's song burning into my brain. Closing my eyes, I hum the slow haunting tune, but that's not enough. Karis squirms, unable to settle.

Tears once more fill my eyes as the words come to my lips, broken, and warbled.

My love, my love, don't cry.

Let the suns guide you.

Let the moons shield you.

My love, my love don't cry.

Shelter is found in the morning.

In the burning suns that warm your skin,

In the haunting moon as it guides your path,

All along the dusty road.

My love, my love, don't cry.

Salvation comes on the wing of the yungrins,

On the horns and hooves of the springbok

On the scales of the crounterads.

My love, my love, don't cry.

My face will see you in the dawn,

In the rising of the suns,

In the shifting of the moons.

My love, my love, don't cry.

I will forever be with you,

By your side,

For all eternity,

Until Ilaria guides you home.

The End: For Now

Thanks for reading Prelude to a Revolution - so many readers asked for the origin story after reading Dark Revolution that I felt I had to oblige! If you haven't read Dark Revolution yet, click here [Dark Revolution](#) to grab your copy and get an Omegaverse Happily-Ever-After romance along with a well deserved revolution!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm a massage therapist by day and a sassy romance writer by night. My books feature elements of power exchange and yummy alpha males. I like to try out everything I'm putting my heroines through, so the phrase "for science" is used in my house a lot!



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